Kojo Touvalou Houénou: An Assessment

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Six years ago, one of my graduate students showed me a short article from the New York Times, in August 1923, reporting that D. W. Griffith’s highly racist film The Birth of a Nation had been banned in Paris on the direct orders of Prime Minister Raymond Poincaré. I was then working on a book about Birth of a Nation, and put the story of the French suppression of the film aside as a separate project for later investigation. When I did finally get around to researching the ban in French archives, I learned a lot about clashing French and American ideas on race in the summer of 1923, together with a good deal about French politics, the legacy of the First World War, French colonial policy, and the simmering tensions between the U.S. and France over the lingering question of war debts. I also encountered for the first time the fascinating and exotic figure of Kojo Touvalou Houénou, “Prince” of Dahomey, who was a major character in the story. It was Houénou’s being thrown out of a nightclub in Montmartre on 3 August 1923, at the request of a party of racist American tourists, that started the chain of events that eventually led to the French Government’s ban on The Birth of a Nation. I have analysed the 1923 suppression of Birth of a Nation in another article.¹ What I propose to do here is to have a closer look at the career and outlook of Kojo Touvalou Houénou.

Kojo Houénou was born in 1887 at Porto-Novo, Dahomey. He came from a well-established family which boasted several “princes.” His mother was the sister of Béhanzin, the last king of Dahomey before it became a French colony, making Kojo himself the king’s nephew. His father, a wealthy local businessman, had come to believe in the intrinsic superiority of French civilization. In 1900, when he travelled to France for the Universal Paris Exposition, he enrolled Kojo and his half-brother in a Catholic-run school in Bordeaux. Eight years later, Kojo graduated in law at the University of Bordeaux and became a barrister. He had also registered as a medical student and, when war broke out in August 1914, volunteered to serve as an army doctor. In late 1915, he was wounded and was honorably discharged from the army with a pension.² He now established himself in Paris. Also in 1915, almost certainly as recognition of his war service, he was awarded French citizenship by decree (his first application, in 1911, had been rejected). Before the
war, Kojo Houénou had probably ultimately intended to follow a career as a French colonial administrator. But in February 1918, he was admitted to the bar in Paris. Personable and engaging, he moved easily within the capital’s overlapping circles of law, literature, and politics. Newspaper gossip columns reported his amorous exploits – one of his relationships was with Cécile Sorel of the Comédie Française. But Houénou also had a serious side. In March 1921, he published a long, scientific reflection on linguistics and phonetics.

Also in 1921, for the first time in more than twenty years, he returned to Dahomey where talking to former tirailleurs opened his eyes to the poor conditions in that exploited colony. Although back in France by this point, he criticized the colonial authorities for their “administrative errors” over the handling of the Porto-Novo incidents in February 1923, when attempts to make native inhabitants of Dahomey pay heavier taxes coincided with several other local disputes, provoking a number of riots. This was a characteristic stance for Houénou at this point: if anything was wrong in the French Empire, he blamed colonial administrators and “colons” rather than France herself.

The experience of being thrown out of the Montmartre nightclub – El Garòn at 45, rue Fontaine, close to the Place Blanche – appears to have been a crucial event in the life of Kojo Houénou. “[I]t was so odd,” he told Jamaican poet and writer Claude McKay in an interview; “I had all my modern education here in Paris [something which was actually untrue] ... [I] have been in all circles and never met that sort of thing before.” Houénou’s first direct contact with racism—in this case the racism of Americans—seems to have been a catalyst for his later career. In 1924, he founded the Ligue Universelle pour la Défense de la Race Noire and, together with René Marin, its journal, Les Continents. In 1924, he also travelled to New York to attend the convention of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Returning to Dahomey in December 1925, he was treated as a subversive by the French authorities. He was arrested in Dakar, Senegal, in December 1927. On his release, he campaigned in the Senegalese elections of 1928 and 1932. He died in Dakar in July 1936.

To Claude McKay, Houénou’s expulsion from El Garòn remained a prime example of American racism and French opposition to it. In his 1929 novel, Banjo, one of the characters, a Senegalese boxer, observed that:

> It’s just about two years [ago] ... that some Americans caused a black prince to be thrown out of a cabaret in Montmartre, and [Prime Minister] Poincaré made a declaration against it. He said Americans cannot treat Negroes in France the way they do in America.

American writer-reporter Roi Ottley saw Houénou in exactly the opposite way: as a black man who had been radicalized through his meetings with American blacks in 1924, and who then became a victim of French racism. Ottley described Kojo Houénou in his book, No Green Pastures (1952) as the darling of ultra-chic Parisian circles in the 1920s. His friends included titled personages, officers of the army and navy, actors and actresses, painters and singers. As a prince of Dahomey, sophisticated and suave, the French regarded him as something approaching a rare piece of primitive sculpture, and smart circles spoiled him outrageously.

While in Paris, Prince Kogo [sic] had the good taste not to mix politics and racialism with smart bohemianism. This fact alone cemented his universal popularity. But Kogo made a long visit to Harlem, where he was feted and somehow became involved with fiercely race-conscious Negroes, who urged him to strike a blow for his black countrymen. He returned to Paris with notions of liberating Dahomey. His
racial awakening unfortunately dovetailed with country-wide strikes among the natives of French West Africa, which caused hardship to coupon-clipping Parisians. Before long he was publicly humiliated. Paris newspapers attacked his personal affairs. He was declared a faker and swindler. He was “exposed” as a bogus prince, who had borrowed large sums of money and never repaid. He became persona non grata, and was quickly driven into obscurity. The Negro had committed the unpardonable sin of talking about freedom for colonial blacks in Parisian circles dependent upon income from Africa.10

In much the same way as McKay and Ottley, later scholars have disagreed, often profoundly, in their perception of Houénou. According to Christopher L. Miller, he was “an enigmatic figure, to say the least; he is variously described as a prince and a poseur.” More seriously, Miller constructs him as a predecessor of the negritude movement of the late 1930s—a man who formed “part of a fractious vanguard of black intellectuals” in 1920s Paris who had begun “the process of resisting and rethinking French colonialism”. To Harvey Levenstein, he was “the most prominent leader of the Pan-African movement in Paris.” Babacar M’Baye also writes of his “key role” in Pan-Africanism”. Michel Fabre saw him as “the most celebrated” of the followers of Marcus Garvey in Europe—and at the same time a man who “was the talk of the town in Paris high society”. Brent Hayes Edwards (who used a photograph of Houénou, wearing a white suit, standing next to Marcus Garvey as the frontispiece of his book) described him as “the Dahomean philosopher, lawyer, and brazen social climber”. To Philippe Dewitte, he was “a person known to ‘Tout-Paris’ ... [a] ‘Prince’ worldly and a little megalomaniac”.

One of Houénou’s most recent biographers, Emile Derlin Zinsou, was a former foreign minister and later President of Dahomey (now Bénin): his book had multiple agendas—to reconstruct Pan-negrism as an African as well as American phenomenon, to present Kojo Houénou as a symbol of urban modernity and, at the same time, to make him appear an early Dahomeyan nationalist. To J. S. Spiegler, who devoted a chapter of his 1968 Oxford doctoral thesis on nationalism in French West Africa to Houénou, however, he was “less a nationalist than a perplexed but still hopeful Franco-Dahomeyan patriot.”11

Nearly twenty years ago, John D. Hargreaves, reviewing a book on French sub-Saharan Africa, remarked that Kojo Houénou was clearly an “underrated figure”12. This is less true today. He is increasingly emerging as a prominent member of the transatlantic black community of the post-First World War period that Michel Fabre did so much to illuminate. His founding of the Ligue Universelle pour la Defense de La Race Noire and its periodical Les Continents in 1924, his correspondence with well-known African Americans, and his visit to the UNIA conference in New York in 1924 mark him out as a major contributor to what Paul Gilroy refers to as the “webbed network” of “the black Atlantic world”13.

It is worth emphasizing that Houénou made himself into a public figure by what today would be recognised as “hype”. He traded on his service in the First World War to advance his acceptance in Paris society. He also insisted on his (highly arguable) claim to be addressed as a “Prince”. He played on both his own exoticism and the fascination for the “primitive” felt by many French people, in part as a response to the violent collapse of “civilisation” during the war. His “celebrity” was achieved with the help of sympathetic newspaper coverage. Houénou did not follow the same pathway as France’s pioneering black politicians, including Blaise Diagne from Senegal, who became the first coloured man to become a member of the French government, or Gratien Candace, the deputy from Guadeloupe. Instead, he tried to turn himself into a writer and,
subsequently, into a public intellectual. There were few, if any, precedents to guide him. Only a tiny number of black writers had so far published books in French (they included Senegalese Ahmadou Mapaté Diagne, whose *Le Trois Volontés de Malic* was first published in 1920, and Martinican René Maran, whose *Bataoula* had been awarded the prestigious Goncourt Prize in 1921).

Houénou’s publicity, especially in the wake of the El Garòn incident of 1923, stressed his ability to move easily between two cultures: the native, material, spoken-word only culture of Dahomey and the literary world of the west. His bedroom, Claude McKay noted in his interview for *The Crisis*, “holds half-a-dozen gold-worked figures—the finest specimens of African Art, excepting Egyptian, I have ever seen.” Hanging on a peg in the bedroom were also Houénou’s “colourful native robes,” which he claimed he was obliged to wear whenever he went to Dahomey, as well as speaking “the native tongue,” otherwise “my people would disown me.” But if Houénou cherished his Dahomeyan roots, he was also at ease in the white western literary culture. His study, McKay observed: groans with books: the French Classics, Pascal, Montaigne, Racine, Molière, Voltaire; the moderns, Balzac, Renan, Victor Hugo, Dumas, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Huysmans, great German writers and English books among which I took special note of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” and James Weldon Johnson’s “American Negro Poetry.”

Plainly, McKay was positioning Houénou as a figure combining easily in his own character an African and a western identity. He seemed comfortable in both worlds. McKay was also, in all probability, emphasizing the contrast a number of French newspapers had brought out between the ignorance of the white American racists who had persecuted Houénou and the latter’s own position as a highly literate black man who had already written and published a treatise on literature and philosophy. *Le Temps*, for example, attacked the ignorant and racist American tourists involved in the incident at El Garòn. Themselves having no pretensions to being either “thinkers or refined intellectuals,” they had encouraged the management to throw out “a kind of colored Pascal”.

The reference in Claude McKay’s article to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and James Weldon Johnson’s *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922) also suggests that Houénou was familiar with both the best-known white account of slavery and contemporary African American writing. This may have been correct. Certainly, Houénou’s journal *Les Continents* – as Michel Fabre pointed out – published an article (1 September 1924) by Alaine Locke discussing the “New African American Poetry” of Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Jean Toomer. This article appeared six months before “the celebrated ‘New Negro’ special issue of *The Survey Graphic*,” effectively announcing the beginnings of the Harlem Renaissance.

Despite Houénou’s involvement with both the African American and black Francophone avant-garde, what seems most compelling about his career and outlook at least until 1924 is the strength of his commitment to his country-by-adoption. Although his application for citizenship had been turned down three years earlier by the French state, he still volunteered to serve in the First World War. “My sympathy, my affection, my love for France knew no doubt,” he later wrote, “seeing that in the critical hours of 1914, without any exterior force, spontaneously, I affirmed the duty of all citizens, and I risked my life like all the French.” After becoming aware, during the early 1920s, of the problems and abuses in the black French empire, he campaigned for reform. In the early summer of
1923, for example, he formed the association Amitié Franco-Dahoméenne. As he explained the role of this organisation to Claude McKay:

> Our chief aim ... is to give wide publicity in France to every act of aggression or lawless exploitation that the French Colonials may commit against the natives. By doing this we will keep a constant check on the Colonial administrations and thus we hope to prevent the worst abuses in the French colonies that are the common features of European rule in Africa. ... Our business is to watch and prevent.\(^{18}\)

With considerable naivety, Houénou invited Albert Sarraut, Minister for the Colonies, and Jules Carde, Governor-General of the Afrique occidentale française (AOF—French West Africa) to associate themselves with his new scheme. Both, distrusting any agitation that might destabilize the French Empire, refused\(^{19}\).

Houénou’s essential position on French colonialism was to endorse the idea of a “civilising mission.” He believed that colonial possessions should be turned into miniatures of a France he understood on the basis of the egalitarian rhetoric of the French Revolution. In this sense, he was a total assimilationist: he insisted that all inhabitants of the colonies should be entitled to French citizenship. This had its personal dangers: as J. S. Spiegler pointed out, to push too hard for French citizenship for oneself or others at this time risked being labelled “subversive” or “anti-French” by the official mind of French colonialism\(^{20}\). It also meant carving out a firm position in the ongoing debate between advocates of “assimilation” and those of “association.” The latter, championed by spokesmen such as former colonial administrator turned ethnographer Maurice Delafosse, was based on a greater appreciation of the culture and customs of native peoples. It abandoned the dream of total assimilation in favour of permitting natives to evolve along their own lines, keeping their indigenous habits and customs. France would rule the colonies concerned in association with local elites. Houénou’s passionate opposition to association led him to set out another alternative to assimilation, if the latter proved impossible. “We have shed,” he wrote:

> [...] our blood for France as our mother country; now, at peace, voluntarily or involuntarily, we continue to fulfil the citizen’s supreme duty of military service. Why do we not enjoy the rights of citizenship? We demand to be citizens, whatever the country, and that is why, if France rejects us, we call for autonomy; or, if she welcomes us, then for a total assimilation and integration. Enough of lies and hypocrisy! “Association” under present terms is but thinly disguised slavery.\(^{21}\)

Houénou’s comments on autonomy may have represented his frustration with the lack of progress towards assimilation. But they also made him a pioneer. According to J. S. Spiegler, he “stands as the first among French-speaking West African opponents of the indigenat [the system of French laws imposing an inferior status on colonial subjects] to propose African home-rule as the only acceptable alternative to immediate and full political assimilation”\(^{22}\). The same sense of frustration that fuelled his support for African autonomy may also have encouraged his dalliance with Marcus Garvey. Houénou was broadly sympathetic to some of the aims of the UNIA, as outlined in its “Declaration of the Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World” in August 1920. He agreed with general protests at discrimination against blacks and criticisms of the efforts of European nations to exploit Africa for their own economic benefit. In his speech at Carnegie Hall on 31 August 1924, he commended Garvey’s “back to Africa” project for settling Liberia (in the process complimenting the members of the UNIA as “the elite of this race of ours” who would bring to Africa “your Western civilization ... the arts and industries of the world in which you are living; ...all the education and morality and all that you have learned”\(^{23}\).
Houénou was here probably saying what he thought his hosts wanted to hear. He does seem to have been moved by a vague sentiment of Pan-Africanism. In *Opportunity* for October 1924, for example, he drew a parallel between the struggle for civil and human rights of Africans in French colonies and that of African Americans in the United States. Yet the focus of his own efforts continued to be directed towards gaining a French identity and citizenship for West African blacks. He even suggested to the UNIA that Paris was “the heart of the Black Race” because of the lack of racial prejudice there. France, he declared, “will never tolerate the prejudices of color. She considers her black and yellow children the equal of her white children. We wish our place in the sun, we wish to work for the redemption of Africa.” Unlike the criticism of the United States offered by Garvey and members of the UNIA, Houénou offered only praise for France. Whatever his personal doubts by this stage concerning the practicability of assimilation, he was unwilling to criticise his adopted country publicly from abroad.

Whatever the moderation of the stance taken by Houénou himself at the UNIA meetings in 1924, it set in motion the train of events though which—as Iris Schmeisser notes—“he was forced to leave France and only allowed to return to Dahomey upon denouncing any filiations with Garveyism”. In the immediate aftermath of Houénou’s return from the United States, he was plainly regarded by official France—however mistakenly—as a dangerous radical. He was suspected of Garveyism and it was anticipated that he would attempt to spread its ideas across French Africa. He was also, at various times, regarded as a communist—something he vehemently denied. Houénou became a focus of attention for the “Service de contrôle et d’assistance des indigènes” (CAI), established in December 1923 by Minister of the Colonies Albert Sarraut as an instrument of surveillance and repression over those who were deemed a threat to the French colonial empire. In their biography, Zinzou and Zouménou show that the authorities of Senegal and Dahomey were intensely concerned by the possible dangers posed by Houénou’s journal *Les Continents* to “l’influence européenne aux Colonies”. The CAI was also behind a ministerial note of June 1924 that pointed to the foundation of the LUDNR, Houenou’s activities generally, and *Les Continents* “as initiatives relevant to a Garveyiste enterprise in France”.

However false such suspicions were, it is likely (though evidence on the point is lacking) that they helped create the climate in French political circles that led to the downfall of the two main institutions with which Houénou was connected. In the 15 October 1924 issue of *Les Continents*, René Maran accused Senegalese deputy Blaise Diagne of being paid a commission by Prime Minister Clemenceau for each black soldier he recruited during World War I. Diagne, incensed, sued the editor of the journal, white liberal Jean Fangeat, and Maran himself for libel. Most of the political establishment supported Diagne and, after a swift trial, Fangeat and Maran were found guilty. Both were sentenced to a term of imprisonment, which was suspended, and a two thousand franc fine. The fine effectively bankrupted *Les Continents*: its last issue appeared on 15 December 1924. From the time of the trial, the LUDNR also “came under increasingly close surveillance and harassment.” Forced to go underground, it rapidly dissolved.

From 1925, Houénon’s role in France was greatly reduced. His attention switched to the black colonies of French Africa, where he would endure years of official persecution. His health declined – perhaps a lingering consequence of his wounds during the First World War. Houénou had passionately believed in an idea of “France” which he associated with the tradition of social equality stretching back to the French Revolution and the
Declaration of the Rights of Man. In 1923, his faith was seemingly upheld when the Poincaré government supported the rights of French blacks against attempts by some white American tourists to introduce a “color line” in Paris. Thereafter, in part because of his flirtation with Garveyism, he quickly became both an outcast in France and a victim of continuous harassment by colonial authorities intent on preserving France’s black African empire. Since detailed evidence on his later career is scanty, we simply do not know if his faith in “France” as an egalitarian ideal endured in the face of his persecution by French officialdom. In the circumstances, it appears unlikely.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE


NOTES


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16. Michel Fabre, “René Maran, The New Negro and Negritude,” *Phylon*, vol. 36, no. 3 (3rd quarter, 1975), p. 344. Fabre suggested that the appearance of Locke’s article was due to the influence of René Maran, who was co-founder of *Les Continents* with Houénou. It may be, however, (evidence on the point is lacking) that the latter was also involved.


27. Imprisoned in Cotonou, the largest city of Dahomey, in the summer of 1926, Houénou wrote a letter appealing to the French Ministry of Justice in which he declared that: “I have the reputation of being a communist. I have never associated with the communists.” Houénou to Monsieur le Garde des Sceaux, 1 September 1926, printed in Zinsou and Zouménou, *Houénou*, p. 225.


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