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## Representing Social Hierarchy

Administrators-Ethnographers in the French Sudan:  
Delafosse, Monteil, and Labouret\*

‘Les yeux d’un étranger sont grand ouvert  
mais il ne voit que ce qu’il sait.’  
(West African Proverb.<sup>1</sup>)

In a recent article Maria Grosz-Ngaté (1988) analyses how European travellers like Mungo Park and René Caillié, and the French colonial administrators Maurice Delafosse and Charles Monteil, have represented the social reality of Mande societies. Although its methodology tends to hamper a more general understanding of their works, it is a stimulating article and to some extent it has inspired the following analysis.

The analysis is shaped in a so-called ‘postmodern’ fashion, of which the main representatives, and particularly James Clifford, advocate ethnography as an enunciation of a ‘complex cultural experience by an *individual*’.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, one may object to this perspective rendering the danger that ethnographic representations are conceived as reflections of individuals styles, affections and presumptions, thereby more-or-less neglecting problems of social theory of Western epistemology in general (Sandgren 1988), which I want to clarify.<sup>3</sup>

In the analysis of the works of Monteil and Delafosse, Grosz-Ngaté pinpoints to some significant themes which dominate the discourse of representation. The ‘silent’ interaction with the local informants, their

\* I wish to thank the members of the Cognitive anthropology and structural anthropology (CASA)—team (University of Leiden) for their comments on a previous version of this paper.

1. Collected by Jane Rouch, cited in NIJLAND 1989.

2. CLIFFORD 1988. Italics are mine E.V.H.

3. The emphasis on ‘egocentrism’ (the ethnographer as individual) is most bluntly revealed in CLIFFORD’S claim (1988: 68) to relate Griaule’s ‘panoptic viewpoint’ in the practice of his fieldwork among the Dogon to his former job as an aerial spotter and navigator in the French air force. On the contrary, this ‘panoptism’ seems more a significant feature of sociological discourse in general, than a particular ‘enunciation’ of an individual.

use of authority to obtain information, and the process of essentialization of culture, all seem to be the basic features of their ethnographic inquiries. But when it comes to understanding Monteil-the-individual, as a representative of Western Culture and of its ideological premisses, the analysis tends to be too brief in its explanation. It will be noticed that their representations are imbued with individualistic assertions, which can hardly be interpreted as a 'subjective' reflection of the observer. This point is extremely important for a good understanding of the ideological stances of the colonial administrators-ethnographers. How this individualistic conception of social reality dominates their representation of West African societies will be the line of argument which I shall pursue.

Grosz-Ngaté (1988: 496-501) asserts quite rightly that Monteil's portrayal of *the* African in terms of physical traits and mental characteristics, is grounded in the nineteenth-century anthropology. However, the fact that *the* Bambara, *the* Bozo, *the* Fulbe are represented in terms of 'personal' capacities (mentality, physical appearance, attitude, etc.) implies an epistemological stance which *equates* the individual, as a moral construct, to society; it is claimed that a portrayal of *the* Bambara is an exhaustive representation of the Bambara society. But the idea of the individual *representing* the society is of course a key feature of the Western ideology (Dumont 1983). A quote by Monteil, cited by Grosz-Ngaté (*ibid.*: 500), shows how the notion of the individual and all that it stands for (e.g. an internalized rationality) dominates the representation of the African: '... d'une manière générale, il convient de remarquer que le Bambara ne s'ingénie pas à chercher le pourquoi et le comment des choses, en dehors de ce qu'il voit ou connaît : la réalité le presse et le détermine...'

In the course of my discussion and in further treating the question of reflexivity, I will show that a methodology is needed to lay bare the roots of these epistemological stances, instead of individualizing its representation, which in itself is a projection of Western ideology.

Why should we focus the analysis on their representation of social hierarchy? Grosz-Ngaté mentions the peculiar use of the notion of time in their ethnographic works. Part of their frame of reference was the idea that the representation of native life should be conceived as an 'image of the past'. Obviously, the ethnographer determines what is 'past' and what is 'present', which meant that the use of time was clearly an epistemological consideration rather than an account of an actual sequence of events (Fabian 1983). However, while reading their ethnographic works, one gets the impression that the social phenomena which were supposed to contradict Western values were subsequently represented in terms of the past; condemned, as it were, to a former evolutionary stage that preceded modern civilization. One of the phenomena which were subjected to this evolutionary projections, was the existence of social hierarchy in the French Sudan; aristocracy, castes, slaves, etc. It was

assumed that the hierarchical nature of the Mande societies strongly contradicted Western ideology, and individualism in particular. On the level of colonial politics, this presupposed Otherness of the Mande societies supported the notion of assimilation, and the imposition of a legal constitution based on natural law (*droit naturel*), the 'dictate' of individualism. Both notions were closely linked to an overall evolutionary frame of reference. In the first part of this discussion I will explain these notions, and how they were conceived in a different manner during the course of colonialization of the French Sudan. On the level of epistemology, the contradiction to modern values was to be proven on the bases of a set of scientific propositions, part of a sociological discourse that was about to develop from Comte's positive philosophy, stressing a fundamental distinction between fact and value statements. These and other propositions shall be discussed in the second part of the analysis. One way or the other, the joint enterprise of colonialism and ethnographic inquiry endeavoured to create an image of social reality, molded in a perfect re-make of the French revolution, i.e. the beginning of civilized mankind.<sup>4</sup>

### Colonial Administrators in the French Sudan

Delafosse, Monteil, and Labouret were first of all colonial administrators in the French Sudan. They combined their administrative duties with ethnographic activities which resulted in a considerable amount of literature on the people in the French Sudan. After they had shown their good faith and courage in colonial administration, they educated new administrators in their courses on law, customs, and Sudanese languages at the *École coloniale* and the *Institut des langues orientales* in Paris (Grosz-*Ngaté* 1988).

Maurice Delafosse, after having dropped his medical studies in Paris, took courses in Arabic at the *École des langues orientales*. After a five-month stay in Algeria, and a year in the French army, he continued his linguistic studies in Paris. In August 1894, he took off to the Western Sudan, where he served in various locations (Ivory Coast, Liberia). In 1909 he was transferred to Bamako. He left the capital of Haut-Sénégal-Niger after only five months and returned to France to receive an appointment at the *École des langues orientales* and the *École coloniale* (*ibid.*). At the beginning of this century, Maurice Delafosse was an important figure in the Parisian scientific circle. Together with Mauss,

4. Men like Delafosse, Monteil, and Labouret inspired a whole generation of ethnographers, and with their courses on ethnography, languages and history of the French Sudan, partially shaped French ethnography in West Africa. As such, a general reflexivity on their works raises questions which are also relevant for more recent interpretations of social hierarchy in West Africa, e.g. the use of the term 'caste' (VAN HOVEN 1990).

Lévy-Bruhl and Rivet he founded the Institut d'ethnologie; the 'trendsetter' in French ethnographic research which, inspired by Mauss and Delafosse, stimulated ethnographers to conduct fieldwork (Clifford 1988: 61). Delafosse wrote the preface of Charles Monteil's *Les Bambara du Ségou et du Kaarta* which was published in 1924.

Like Delafosse, Monteil gave lectures at the *École des langues orientales*. After five years (1904-1909), his appointment was not renewed, and preference was given to Delafosse. Monteil began his colonial career in 1893, when he headed a post in Toumodi (Ivory Coast). Like most colonial administrators in those days, he did not stay very long at one particular place. From 1897 till 1899 he was appointed as 'chef de poste' in Médine (French Sudan), and as the administrator of Djénné from 1900 till 1903. In 1903 he published at his own expense *Une cité soudanaise, Djénné*, the first out of four monographs (Grosz-Ngaté 1988).

By the end of World War I, only a limited number of students attended the *École coloniale*. In 1920, only two students followed the courses of Delafosse. One of them was 'captain' Labouret. As a military officer, Henri Labouret had served in the French army in Ivory Coast. Later, he was appointed as colonial administrator. And after Delafosse's death in 1927, he was to succeed him at the *École coloniale* and the Institut des langues orientales. Labouret, as a popular teacher, instructed a whole generation of colonial officers to conduct ethnographic research. He was also an influential personality, not just at the university. In 1937 he participated in a committee that informed the French parliament about the needs and aspirations of the people in the colonies (Cohen 1971a). Although Labouret strongly advocated the assimilation policy, he stressed the use of local 'representatives' for the good administration of the colonies. According to Labouret (1952), assimilation should lead to 'identification', and in the end to 'emancipation' of the colonized people.

## The Assumption of Evolution, Assimilation and Natural Law

As Karady (1982) has pointed out, in the early days of French ethnography, an evolutionary frame of reference was attractive because of its claim to represent a universal model of ranking wherein all 'ethnic diversity' could be reduced to (universal) social forms. Evolution provided a framework for explaining and justifying inequality in the animal kingdom as well as in the social world (Béteille 1986). Naturally, Western civilization set its standards and thus affirming—implicitly or explicitly—its superiority. The idea was that civilization was the 'peculiar achievement of certain races', implying that 'race' had a mixed bio-cultural character (Stocking 1968). Indeed, the paradigm of evolution formed the central focus in the ethnographic works of Delafosse, Monteil, and Labouret. All three firmly believed in the inevitable transformation of the West African



societies into the Western civilization. As Monteil wrote in his introduction of *Une cité soudanaise, Djénné* (1971: xv) published for the first time in 1903: 'Nous espérons donc que l'exposé qui suit permettra au lecteur d'apercevoir comment un coin de notre domaine africain se trouve contraint, sous notre domination, d'évoluer vers un avenir très différent du long passé auquel il est jusqu'à présent demeuré fidèle'.

Stocking (1987) has pointed out that evolutionary writings offered a strong ideological support for the whole colonial enterprise in the late nineteenth century. The idea of evolution seemed to be in accordance with the French colonial policy of assimilation, aiming at the gradual transformation of 'native customs and institutions into the dominant civilization of France. Paul Dislère, who was the president of the administrative council of the *École coloniale* until 1931, believed that the colonies should be endowed with institutions which were identical to those in France. Therefore, the 'natives' should be transformed into full-fledged French citizens. Even during the later period of French colonial rule in West Africa, assimilation was strongly advocated. However, especially after World War I, there was a slight change of this perspective; philanthropic intentions coupled with political and administrative considerations resulted in an increase of respect for local institution (Cohen 1971a: 77, Lombard 1967: 15).

Naturally, assimilation did not imply equality. On the contrary, it presupposed the inequality of 'races', as it was explicitly stated by Labouret (1937: 23): 'Chaque fois que deux civilisations inégales se trouvent en contact, celle qui est inférieure imite la supérieure pour s'élever à son niveau'.

But this led to embarrassing situations. In 1890, at the *École coloniale*, many colonial officers no longer favoured to educate the elite of the colonial population in the manner of the French way.<sup>5</sup> The sociologist Gustave Le Bon reported that the students from the colonies had become so absorbed into the stream of French life that they had 'abandoned their native costumes and were wearing European clothes'. Le Bon thought that it was dangerous when young men from the colonies would acquire 'sentiments which, if spread to a larger number of natives, might create a hindrance of our domination' (cited in Cohen 1971a: 40-41).

Even in later works of Labouret, the idea of assimilation maintained its dominance within the general frame of the analysis.<sup>6</sup> In 1941,

5. Originally, the *École coloniale* was intended to give young students from Indo-China a French education. They were taught not only the French language but also French education. It was assumed that, once returned to their home country, this would bring them 'an admiration that certainly would turn to our advantage' (cited in COHEN 1971a: 38). Gradually, the 'École' was transformed into an institution for training overseas administrators, and with the outbreak of war the 'native section' was discontinued (*ibid.*).
6. CROWDER (1978) has demonstrated that although assimilation as an official policy was abandoned after the early experiment in Senegal, it continued to be an important inspiration both for the *politique d'association*, and for the colonial administrator charged with carrying it out.

Labouret published his *Paysans d'Afrique occidentale*. In tune with the changing colonial policy, Labouret stressed the need for ethnographic research: '...pour développer les exportations et les importations une connaissance exacte de l'indigène fournisseur, client et contribuable, est nécessaire'.<sup>7</sup> Labouret referred to the colonial policy in the United Kingdom, in ('successfully') engaging the so-called 'anthropologist' to solve 'certain problems' raised by the colonial administration. To solve these problems, Labouret proposed a 'logical division' of duties between the 'African' and the 'European'. The duties of the former, which for centuries was accustomed to agricultural labour, should be restricted to the exploitation of the natural resources. The latter should take care of the industrialization of the products, the mining-industry and the trade.

These propositions of Labouret were strongly influenced by the ideas of Robert Delavignette who, in 1937, was appointed director of the École nationale de la France d'Outre-Mer (ENFOM), the former École coloniale (Cohen 1971a: 98). Delavignette's *Les Paysans noirs* (1931) is in many ways a transfer to the African scene of the peasantry in France (Cohen 1971a). Delavignette (1950: 19) emphasized the similarities between the 'peasant existence' of the Africans and that of the rural population in France: 'His little society in the colony has for the colonial the charm of a home in the provinces. It is chiefly made up of provincial elements from the home country'. [...] Such a society reflects France and its provinces in a very special way. It is a miniature, synthetic France...'. Did the French peasants not have their own local customs, habits, and superstitions? (Cohen 1971a: 101).

The ideas of Labouret and Delavignette are essentially similar. Their works clearly represent a change of perspective. From now on the dichotomy between Africa and the West seems to be conceived in terms of an urban/rural opposition. Since the interaction, though still threatening in terms of control and dominance, the 'denial of coevalness' loses its ground for explanation. The supremacy of the West is no longer expressed in terms of a projection in time, as it was implied in strict evolutionary 'opposed' value-systems between urban and rural constellations. Moreover, as Amselle (1985) has pointed out, the notions of 'tribalism', 'ethnicity', and 'regionalism' are closely related, in the sense that they presuppose a unified image of African as well as European rural life. This urban imaginary projection (*projection citadine*) tends to underestimate its 'heterogeneous and hierarchical' character, in favour of a static picture of 'past and homogeneous' rural reality.

The assumptions of evolution and assimilation were intimately linked with the idea of the universal applicability of natural law (*droit*

7. LABOURET 1941: 9. Subsequently, the appointment of Georges Hardy as director of the École coloniale brought with it profound change. He introduced courses on economic development and, in 1929, appointed Henri Labouret at the École coloniale (COHEN 1971a: 94).

*naturel*). At the École coloniale, the study of law formed the main focus of the training program for the future colonial officials. Why? First of all, since one of their main tasks was to enforce the law in the colonies, they had to know the law. Secondly, it was assumed that the legal studies would transform the overseas functionaries into good civil servants who would respect government regulations and bureaucratic hierarchy.<sup>8</sup>

On a more general level it was assumed that natural law had universal validity and that its basic principles could be applied everywhere. Leveillé (cited in Cohen 1971a: 45), teaching colonial law at the École coloniale, stated that: 'law is... a universal language [...]. For example, marriage, sales, borrowing, and salaries are not a question of [local] customs but are, rather, basic to life'.

Delafosse, Monteil, and Labouret propagated these assumptions in the way they represented social practice in the French Sudan. In terms of methodology it determined Delafosse's composition of his monumental *Haut-Sénégal-Niger* (1972). In 1909, Governor Clozel ordered Delafosse to update the documentation on customary law in the French Sudan. The questionnaire which were sent out by Delafosse to the colonial administrators (commandant de cercle) included questions concerning local custom, morality, marriage rules, etc. Supplemented by other sources, Arabic texts, missionary and colonial reports, and combined with his own personal experience in the area, he wrote three of the five volumes of *Haut-Sénégal-Niger: Le pays, les peuples, les langues; L'Histoire; and Les Civilisations* (Grosz-Ngaté 1988: 503).

In ideological terms, natural law legitimized the imposition of colonial rule, although in a somewhat controversial manner. Of course, the colonial administration was aware of the fact that Western law was ill-fitted for the West African societies. In a decree of 1903, the incompatibility between 'native custom' and '*nos doctrines juridiques métropolitaines*' was frankly admitted (decree of 1903, in Delafosse 1972). Is this '*coexistence contradictoire*' simply a matter of separating theory (human rights) from praxis (customary law), as Amselle (1990) seems to imply?

In colonial theory it was argued that domination/exploitation of the colonies was legitimate in the name of a universal principle: natural law, the jural-philosophical justification of a universal order of humanity, which transcends the specific civil and legal conventions of societies (Dumont 1983). It is this claim to a more encompassing order that legitimized, at least in ideological terms, colonial intervention. 'How can we tolerate

8. COHEN 1971b: 190. In those days, problems concerning the law—for instance, the legal status of newly formed groups (e.g. trade unions) and legal reforms—were heatedly debated in the press and political discourse. In science, this vogue undoubtedly stimulated interests in law studies. Accordingly, during the last decennia of the nineteenth century there was much discussion about the 'proper place' of a new discipline, called 'sociology'; whether it should be part of the Faculty of Arts or of that of Law. Furthermore, a good amount of sociology was indeed taught in the Faculty of Law; influential jurists like Hauriou and Duguit gave courses on something approximating sociology (VOGT 1983).

certain native customs which are contradictory to the fundamental principles of natural law, “*source première de toutes les législations*” (decree of 1903, in Delafosse 1972). The idea was that colonized territory did not belong to the people who lived there but belonged to ‘humanity in general’ (Labouret 1952), leaving to ‘superior’ societies the right to take possession of the land of ‘inferior’ societies, who were considered to be incapable of valuating it. Notice that in this respect, the notion of ‘humanity’ refers to the ‘property’ of the individual, i.e. his labour and his ability to exploit—and to ‘value’—the natural sources. And so, the enlightened thinkers put forward the idea that acquisition of property was legitimate as long as it was the product of individual labour, instead of accumulation of wealth in terms of pre-revolutionary ‘estate’ (Luning 1990). This brings me to discussing the relation between individualism and equality.

### Individualism and Hierarchy

In those days, hierarchy which was conceived as the extreme opposite of individualism (Kapferer 1988)—was considered as the root of all stupidity and irrationality, oppressing the individual, and denying humanity in general. In this manner it affected the epistemological considerations of the early French ethnographers in many ways. For instance, Robert Delavignette stated: ‘There is nothing that favours individualism less than tribal life’ (Crowder 1978: 21). On the other hand, the claim to individualism undoubtedly legitimized colonial intervention and therefore justified the imposition of colonial administration.

How colonial policy was dominated by Western ideas on individualism was openly stated by gouverneur-général Ponty<sup>9</sup> in his plea to raise the amount of tax-income from the colonies: ‘The more intermediaries there are between the taxpayers and the taxcollector, the more chance there is that the money will be lost on the way. The notions of *individualism*, of *personal* obligation and rights, must be spread among the Africans’.

Also, the recruitment policy for colonial administrators was intertwined with French liberal values. As stated in a memorandum of the naval ministry: ‘Who then is the intelligent man with good education and liberal ideas [...] who would consent to exile himself [...] with ten black soldiers under his orders and a village of a hundred huts to survey...’ (Cohen 1971a: 14). Cohen has demonstrated that most French administrators were ideologically hostile to the local aristocracy. Filled with ideas of individualism and liberty, they had an inherent suspicion of ‘feudal’ and ‘tribal’ institutions. Many French officers saw it as their mission to free the local population from their ‘feudal’ rulers. In a speech to the French

9. Cited in COHEN 1971a: 76, italics are mine. E.V.H.

parliament in 1894, the need was expressed to free the colonial masses and 'substitute the beneficial unity of the French genius for the many violent tyrannies of the kings...' (*ibid.*: 74-75). The idea of the 'tyrannizing' and 'feudal' lords, as expressed by Ponty and Gallieni, was to a large extent based upon their experience with Muslim leaders/warriors El Hadj Omar and Samori in the French Sudan during the second half of the nineteenth-century (*ibid.*).

The notion of slavery was in particular useful to proclaim Western superiority and subsequently to justify colonial intervention. Delafosse expressed a life-long antipathy towards slavery. In 1890 he gave up his medical studies in Paris, and left to go to Algeria where he joined the Institut des frères armés du Soudan to fight against the slave-trade (Grosz-Ngaté 1988). In 1913 he became member of the Commission antiesclavage de France, and eleven years later—by then one of the most stimulating figures in French ethnography—he was appointed the representative of France to participate in a research-committee investigating slavery (Delafosse 1976: 386). Denise Bouche (1968) has brilliantly demonstrated how this anti-slavery movement served colonial purposes, i.e. the foundation of the so-called '*villages de liberté*'. Originally, these villages were intended for gathering 'liberated' slaves together. However, situated in the vicinity of the colonial posts, these villages served in fact as a depot of labour forces for colonial purposes (road building, construction works, etc.). In general, the creation of these villages was closely related to the political annexation of the French Sudan. One could say that the 'cry for freedom' paralleled the need for labour-force in the colonies. The idea of the *village de liberté* was put forward by cardinal Lavigerie, whose Société antiesclavagiste de France created, between 1897 and 1910, thirty *villages de liberté* in the French Sudan. It was Lavigerie who inspired Delafosse to undertake his first trip to Africa as a member of the Institut des frères armés du Soudan (Benoist 1987).

Delafosse (1972, III : 114) believed that by abolishing internal war and slave-trade, the West was imposing equality in the French Sudan: '... par le fait même que nous avons mis fin aux guerres et aux razzias, nous avons tari la source d'où provenaient les esclaves, et, une fois tous les esclaves existant actuellement morts ou affranchis, il n'y aurait plus eu un seul esclave en A.O.F.'. He immediately added that in the eyes of the French, all 'natives' are considered equal (*'statut unique'*), notwithstanding their 'traditional' status. Analysing native forms of slavery, Delafosse stated that the distinction of 'personal' status should be considered as '*l'ancienne doctrine indigène*' (*ibid.*: 111), as opposed to the equality of the French: modern, European, and (thus) superior. Moreover, Delafosse seems to imply that this hierarchy/equality dichotomy was also valid on a more general level: Africa versus the West. Delafosse himself was not quite explicit as to the question of how equal the 'natives' were. He only spoke in general terms of equality,

more or less denying, or at least overlooking, the relationships between the French and the local population.

Labouret, on the other hand, expressed more specific ideas on individualism and liberty. In his *Paysans d'Afrique occidentale* (1941) he asserted that the so-called 'West African farmer' was chained by the 'absolute' power and authority of the 'traditional' patriarch, being the priest, judge, and chief at the same time. He argued that local traditions 'proved' that prior to the French intervention his power was nearly absolute; ultimately, the local chief decided on the life and death of his subjects. Of course, Labouret willingly accepts this image of the tyrannizing patriarch, in order to legitimize the imposition of colonial administration, based on 'justice and 'equality'. He concluded that the people happily embraced the principle of self-determination (*disposition de soi-même*) to free themselves from the constraints of tradition (*ibid.*: 286-287).

In his *Les Manding et leur langue*, Labouret (1934) stated that because of the introduction of the principles of the free market, and the dismantlement of the authority of the local chief, the individual was liberated from the constraints of the community. Therefore, he insisted, a marriage is no longer a bond between two family groups, but a 'contract' between two individuals. Furthermore, Labouret believed that the idea of 'closed' communities was intimately related to the state of violence between those communities. Indeed, he argued that as peace and safety in a certain area was guaranteed—because of Western intervention—the closed community will be 'opened like a flower'; free movement will be possible, and (small) nuclear families will replace the old, collective unities.

Labouret seems to imply that although the hierarchical Mande societies strongly contradict Western individualism, at least they exhibit some form of social organization, and in this respect they were closer to Western civilization, i.e. pre-revolutionary France. In his *Les Tribus du rameau Lobi*, Labouret (1931) seems to project 'his' African to an even more 'uncivilized' state. He mentioned that 'above the family level there is hardly any structured political organization'. Therefore, it was the duty of the colonial administrator to impose a '*hiérarchie à deux degrés*'; on the village level, and on the level of the canton. Labouret informs the reader that on the village level this policy has been successful. On the level of the canton there are still a few problems. The solution of Labouret is simple: let us take a 'Dioula'—one who, because he belongs to the Mande-people (known for their 'caste' societies), is accustomed to hierarchy and authority—and appoint him as head of the canton. After a while, the Lobi will get used to authority and hierarchy, and will be able to take over 'native' administration of the canton (*ibid.*: 495).

It is clear that in this context the 'similarity' is emphasized between the ideas of hierarchy of the Mande societies, and the notion of hierarchy in terms of authority and domination of the colonial powers. In daily



life, however, this 'native' sense of hierarchy caused all sorts of confusion and frustration. Colonial administrators accused the local rulers of inadequate administration, nepotism, and corruption (Bouche 1968).

With regard to individualism, Labouret (1931: 215) stressed that a close examination of Lobi society reveals that the Western notions of 'individualism' do not exist: man is caught by the law of nature, and the people themselves—so brutal and cruel—show hardly any respect for human life (*ibid.*: 393). Labouret saw a 'native' sense of 'equality' particularly expressed in their relation with the colonial administrators: 'Ceux-ci s'adressent sans aucun émoi au commandant de cercle et même au gouverneur [. . .] s'emplissent la bouche de tabac crachent devant eux, interrompent l'entretien brusquement en annonçant qu'ils vont uriner' (*ibid.*: 388).

Labouret's statement raises two important issues. Firstly, he suggests that the Lobi lack a sense of 'individualism'; they are caught by the laws of nature, family, and tradition, which impede them to act as free, autonomous, and self-determined (Western) individuals. Here 'individualism' seems to refer to freedom of choice, movement, and personal autonomy. Secondly, Labouret assumes that they lack a sense of inequality; they have no respect for authority, especially with regard to colonial administration. Therefore, hierarchy should be imposed.

In this respect, these two considerations (individualism and inequality) are by no means mutually exclusive; individualism and inequality can co-operate perfectly, as Simmel has already demonstrated with regard to its potentialities in Western society; after the individual was liberated from the constraints of guild, estate, and church, the stress shifted from what is common to all individuals to what is unique to each individual. Once the difference was acknowledged, and postulated and legitimized in terms of natural differences (sex, talent, capacity, etc.), the next step was inequality between individuals. Of course, it was assumed that inequality was more marked between two individuals belonging to different 'races', in terms of social science 'proved' by postulations on evolution, so much ingrained in epistemology at the beginning of this century.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, Labouret's propositions must be seen in the context of the changing colonial policy in France. After the incorporation of indirect rule, there was the need to emphasize the hierarchy of authority between the colonial administrators and the representatives of the local population. In the heyday of assimilation policy, when Delafosse wrote his *Haut-Sénégal-Niger*, there was no need for such a proposition, since there was (officially) no indirect rule.

10. Cf. BÉTEILLE 1986. For a detailed discussion on individualism and equality, see DUMONT 1983, KAPFERER 1988.

## Representations and Social Theory

In the present state of the analysis, it is difficult to give full weight to the historic context of the intellectual influences that inspired the ethnography of the colonial officials. The more since they did not explicitly stated their preferences for specific sociological approaches. Nonetheless, I will put forward some of the assumptions which were relevant in French intellectual life in those days.

Delafosse was confronted with the question of how to deal with the great variety in the ranking system in the French Sudan. In *Haut-Sénégal-Niger* he proposed (1972, III: 114) three concepts in order to deal with the difficulty of hierarchy: status, classes, and castes. He analyzed these concepts in three different paragraphs without worrying about their mutual relations, although he seemed to consider the individual status, which includes 'profession, individual value, hazards of war, and wealth', as one of the elements that constitutes the economic classes. Delafosse assumed that differentiation of castes was '*plus réelle et plus précise*', although he considered only the category of 'artists' and 'craftsmen' as castes in the strict sense of the word (*ibid.*: 117): '... ces professions sont celles qui constituent réellement des métiers et dont l'exercice nécessite soit des connaissances techniques spéciales, soit un apprentissage préalable et une certaine habilité manuelle'.

By constantly avoiding the use of local concepts of status categories, Delafosse was, of course, faced with problems of definition. This is evident in his ethnographic writings where the representation of status classification shifted significantly. In *Haut-Sénégal-Niger*, he distinguished three categories of castes in the French Sudan. He argued that the first category, out of necessity defined in negative terms, did not constitute a strict caste, since these occupations did not require the craftsmanship of specialists. Agriculture, stock-raising, hunting, etc. were all considered 'noble' occupations. The second category consisted of occupations related to trade—traders, weavers, tailors, etc.—and religion—Muslim or animistic priests or (Koran) school teachers. Because of their specialized functions, the third category constituted the actual '*castes*': artisan groups, griots, magicians/sorcerers. Although Delafosse's views were susceptible of change and variation, it did not prevent him from representing the '*caste*' as being 'universelle chez les populations soudanaises de race noire' (*ibid.*). In *Les civilisations négro-africaines* (1925), this perspective is even more generalized; he argued that 'les civilisations négro-africaines' are divided into two parts: on top are those who do not belong to a professional caste, and at the bottom there is the group of artists and artisans (Delafosse 1925: 72).

The scientific standpoints of Monteil require further examination. A close reading of his letters—posthumously published by his son Vincent Monteil—shows that he had little interest in general theoretical

interpretations. Monteil preferred a solid ethnography which was in his opinion much more useful than those 'fashionable generalizations'. Deduction, he thought, was a very hazardous undertaking: '... l'abstraire du milieu indigène, c'est procéder à une amputation qui le stérilise (Monteil 1968: 618).

Monteil stressed that the colonial administrator should conduct his ethnographic research very carefully, and support his insights with detailed descriptions as much as possible. In 1909, he told a fellow administrator (*ibid.*: 620): 'Faites [...] un livre, si modeste soit-il, mais clair, précis sans vaines prétentions à des théories...'

Unlike Delafosse and Labouret, Monteil avoided the use of concepts like 'landlords', 'bourgeoisie', etc. He was suspicious of the use and applicability of these concepts. In his monograph on the Khassonké (1915) and the Bambara (1924) no reference is made to 'scientific analysis' in terms of status or class. Although he used the term 'caste' in the description of the *nyamakala* (artisanal groups), his aim was not to compose a general comparative framework. In *Les Bambara du Ségou...* (1977: 161) he makes a clear division into three categories: the freeborn (*woro-u*), the caste groups (*nyamakala*), and the slaves (*dyon-u*). Moreover, Monteil to a large extent used Bambara terms in his analysis. Although his description is quite normative, he expressed a sensibility to the change of status and the internal dynamics of ranking (Monteil 1915: 343). Monteil's aversion to theoretical consideration is, of course, somewhat naive. Although it is true that he attempted to free his ethnographic writings from general sociological constraints, it, by no means, resulted in a 'value-free' description.

As Dumont (1983) has pointed out, it is particularly with regard to 'fact' versus 'value' dichotomies—the unbridgeable chasm between what 'is' and what 'ought to be'—that we become aware of the ill-fittedness of Western concepts (and ideas) in anthropological studies. Matters of fact (*fait*) on the one hand, and matters of value (*droit*) on the other are thought to be basically different in kind; the latter cannot be reduced to the former, and *vice versa*. In those days it was generally asserted that law, belief, and morality should be considered as independent and separated from the domain of facts. As Vogt (1983) has pointed out, the term *droit* could properly be translated as 'law' or 'right'. In general, however, it seems to cover multiple meanings, also referring to 'morality', 'habits', or 'custom'. In short: the formal, normative representations of social life, sharply separated from the domain of facts (*fait*), which in case of the Durkheimians signified 'that which exists or occurs is real' (Lukes 1973).

In the late nineteenth century in France, this enlightened perspective dominated in sociological thought. Strongly advocated by Comte and further promoted by Spencer, scientific positivism excited French intellectual life, 'brilliantly represented by two "leading lights", Taine

and Renan' (Lukes 1973). They claimed that positivism guided human thought, and the positivists methods replaced mysticism, and imaginary beliefs, though in France it was still present in the works of Barrès, Bergson, and others. Although Durkheim objected against the 'positivist metaphysics' of Comte and Spencer, in which he denied any kind of dogmatic scientism, he certainly shared the rationalism of the positivist approach. He stated for instance that science is not merely a grade of knowledge, '... it is the highest grade, and nothing else beyond it' (Durkheim cited in Lukes 1973). He shared with Taine the idea that science should be concerned with concrete phenomena, since the sensible world is the real one. Although it is not clear if Delafosse, Monteil, and Labouret sympathized with this epistemological stances, it certainly inspired their rationalist approach in the study of West African societies, as well as their 'scientific' representation of the 'sensible' social reality with which they were confronted.

Their writings were intertwined with fact (*fait*) versus value (*droit*) dichotomies. Both Delafosse and Labouret advocated this idea in the way they analyzed social hierarchy in the French Sudan. On the one hand social categories were classified in terms of *classes du droit* (Delafosse), or *état du droit* (Labouret), implying that by birth one becomes member of a social category which determines the life-long status of the individual. On the other hand, ranking in terms of economic criteria generates *classes du fait* (Delafosse), or *état du fait* (Labouret); shifting and instable categories primarily based on wealth (slaves, women, cattle, etc.) (Delafosse 1972, III: 114).

Delafosse saw *classes du fait* as a typical Western phenomenon. He assumed that the emergence of *classes du fait* in the French Sudan was the result of Western intervention: abolishment of slavery and the economic development of the colonies. Thus, *classes du droit* would gradually be transformed into *classes du fait*. Therefore, the representation of *classes du fait* deserved as it were a 'sharing of coevalness', in contrast with *classes du droit*, consequently described in the past tense. However, considering the relatively recent European intervention in the French Sudan and the persistency of native status distinctions Delafosse argued that, at least, hierarchy had to be taken into account.

Delafosse's distinction between *droit* and *fait* is pushed much further in Labouret's *Paysans d'Afrique occidentale* (1941). Labouret argued that castes (*état du droit*) are strictly hereditary, while classes are instable, changeable, and not constituted by the inherited status position of its members. Putting the element of heredity aside, Labouret assumed that castes and classes have basic characteristics in common, i.e. they are endogamous and permanent groups which are at once specialized, hierarchized in relation to each other, and separated from each other (*ibid.*: 127).

This class/caste distinction echoed Weber's classic distinction between class and stand, 'estate' or 'status group' in the sense of pre-revolutionary

France. Therefore, Weber advocated an absolute distinction in analytical terms (i.e. ideal-typical). It should be remarked that although, he tended to speak of 'class' and 'status groups' as antithetical phenomena, on a deeper level, he implied that both were part of the same process of monopolization. Weber argued that when the conditions for economic acquisition are stable, stratification of status is favoured, but gives way to the naked class situations in times of technical and economic change (Collins 1986).

This evolutionary perspective served Labouret's representation of social hierarchy since it supported his idea of transformation of native society with a sound, scientific set of propositions. It confirmed in terms of social theory Labouret's idea that through Western intervention, *état du droit* (caste) would gradually evolve into *état du fait* (class), as it was already stated by Labouret's predecessor, Maurice Delafosse.

By the end of the nineteenth century the dominant idea was that the inherited status secured the continuation of caste systems. This proposition was clearly inspired by the experience with castes in India, which in those days already deserved extensive study in Western sociology.<sup>11</sup> It was generally assumed that a caste reality could effectively be described in terms of a set of features. Its methodology implied a 'catalogue-of-traits' approach; social reality portrayed in term of 'ideal types', respective manifesting 'stronger' and 'weaker' forms of its 'ideal'. Indeed, this frame of reference supported Delafosse and Labouret in their proposition that castes in India were more rigid, clear-cut, and less vague than castes in the French Sudan; the latter were conceived as only being a weak form of the former.

Why did Labouret and Delafosse stressed so much this principle of heredity. After all, they were both aware of the fact that native status positions in the French Sudan were not always determined by heredity. They mentioned several examples of cases which contradicted this assumption.

First of all, it is clear that according to Delafosse and Labouret Western forms of inequality (*classes du fait*) could not be constituted on the basis of inherited status positions, since this idea would contradict, in terms of values, Western 'egalitarian' ideology. How could the Western society permit inequality, promotion or privileges of certain groups, legalized by customary law, habits, and tradition; in other words: inequality by law (*droit*)?

Secondly, this whole idea of inherited status, wealth, and property was a dominant theme in French post-revolutionary sociological discourse. The idea was that inherited property and wealth was the root of social injustice and inequality. Society had to renounce from this 'feudal' evil; social problems should be solved by way of economic progress,

11. See, for example BOUGLÉ 1935, initially published in 1908.

focussing on the ideal of Saint-Simon's industrial society, based on an entirely new kind of organization of human relations, one that is called *associated*; this in contrast with a society based on competition, conflict, and coercion of the military, feudal society of pre-revolutionary France.

These propositions strongly influenced Labouret's epistemology, as well as his view on colonialism. Progress and industrialization would transform the world, and thus the colonies; 'jealousy' and 'antagonism' between castes, classes and people will disappear and at the end this will lead to well-being and happiness for all (Labouret 1952: 35-36). It is obvious that in this perspective inherited inequality—the mark of feudal/military society—had to give way to association which liberated the individual from the chains of birth-right, family and tradition in order to participate in the universal order of humanity. Evidently, Labouret's ethnographic writings had to 'prove' this unilinear transformation of native society; a representation so strongly modelled on the presupposed development of Western society, i.e. that of France. Colonialism, coupled with the scientific support of its own representatives abroad, is almost a perfect re-make of the French revolution, that is, the very beginning of civilized mankind and its development. It is obvious that Labouret's interpretation of social hierarchy in the French Sudan is firmly ingrained in this general frame of reference.

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One is often inclined to forget that men like Delafosse, Monteil and Labouret were not only concerned with social theory. Being formally connected with colonialism, they had to react to the dominant opinions in their times. As Delavignette remarked (cited in Cohen 1971a: 49): '[while] Seignobos at the Sorbonne was declaring that the blacks were mere children and had never formed nations... Delafosse at the École coloniale was teaching his students that they were men and in precolonial times had even founded empires'. Together with Delavignette, Labouret proposed far-reaching measurements for a better administration of the colonies. Practically on their own these two men were able to break loose from the traditional doctrines. Labouret, while wishing to see the end of the authoritarian colonial structure, proposed to give the colonial populations full political and legal rights within their own countries. Unfortunately, their opinions were not seriously considered (*ibid.*).

The relevance of a reflection of their position in France is evident since the theme I evoked above did not only concern the relations with the colonies. The socio-political situation in France at the end of the nineteenth century often called for reflection and re-definition of the basic



tenets of post-revolutionary discourse. Finkelkraut (1987) has demonstrated how the ideological stances of influential intellectuals underwent considerable change after France was humiliated during the Prussian war of 1870. Ernest Renan, a positivist philosopher, who tried to make science into a kind of religion, though limited to an elite of 'superior minds', changes his ideas considerably after the incorporation of Alsace-Lorraine by Germany. Before the war, his stances were strikingly similar to the one's proclaimed by the German intelligentsia (Amselle 1990). Renan's first reaction on the defeat was that it proved the weakness of the revolutionary 'idolization' of the 'nation'. Soon, however, he realized his intellectual failure when the representatives of Alsace-Lorraine declared their commitment to France, in spite of their German, 'ethnic' origins. The fact that 'ethnographic' features like 'race', 'language', and 'culture' proved to be irrelevant for their loyalty to France, forced Renan to reconsider his assertions; instead of proclaiming his adherence to the notion of *volksgeist*, which he shared so vividly with his German colleagues, he stressed the idea of the 'nation'; a collection of individuals, wherein 'cultural' features are subordinated to the will, reason, and morality of each individual member. The nation represented the ultimate realization, ideal, and final end of human evolution (Lukes 1973).

With his emphasis on the coming of reason and the reign on truth, Renan undoubtedly made science into a kind of surrogate theology, paramount in a 'rational' world in which Kant introduced the fundamental split between fact and value judgements. I noticed that this idea lies at the core of the sociological representations of West-African societies, representations which are located within the Western culture (Dumont 1983), and chained by its constraints, its inner logic and its incompatibilities.

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