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Colonial Administration and the Ethnography of the Family in the French Soudan*

During the first decades of this century, French colonial administrators throughout Afrique occidentale française (AOF) conducted a significant amount of ethnographic research on the customs and traditions of the colonized peoples of the West African savanna regions. In recent years this body of scholarship has been critically examined by a number of authors who have illuminated many previously little understood aspects of this important colonial activity (Amselle 1990, Grosz-Ngaté 1988, Robinson 1992 and Van Hoven 1990). In an attempt to accent these studies I focus attention in this paper on several issues which have not received sufficient attention to date, the origins of the colonial ethnographic tradition in the AOF and its treatment of the family and domestic organization.

In the first part of the paper I examine important changes in French colonial policy which occurred at the end of the nineteenth century. These changes made way for sustained ethnographic investigation in the AOF and originated in a context of debate regarding the nature of human diversity which had been discussed for over one hundred years. After tracing the development of French colonial policy and the emergence of the ethnographic tradition in the AOF, I turn to an exam-

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ination of a particular focus of the colonial ethnographic corpus, the study of the family and domestic organization.

At the end of the nineteenth century France had, by and large, resolved to administer its African colonies according to local or "native" custom, rather than extend French citizenship and civil law to all of its colonial subjects (Betts 1961, Crowder 1962). In order to carry out such an administrative policy a great deal of information had to be amassed on the traditions and customs of the colonies. It was into this role that colonial officials in the field were thrust beginning in the early years of this century. In the context of their administrative duties, the organization of the family and domestic affairs were topics of significant interest. Early administrators often served as judges in the native courts and in the tumultuous early colonial period, family politics and domestic relations were key elements in the ever-important legal domain.

In the second part of this paper, I examine works written by Maurice Delafosse, Charles Monteil, Henri Labouret and two lesser-known French administrators-ethnographers on the nature of family and domestic organization in the French Soudan. I do this in order to gain both an historical perspective on current research interests in the social history and anthropology of the family or household in Africa, and to highlight important differences in evolutionary thinking between these administrators-ethnographers and those vocal proponents of the innate limitations of black Africans, the very men whose positions helped to give rise to the colonial ethnographic tradition.

The difficulties of definition and delimitation which current researchers face when studying domestic organization were also confronted in the early years of this century by many colonial administrators-ethnographers. Therefore an examination of their contributions should offer some helpful insights for today's endeavors. By examining the ethnographic descriptions of the family offered by these administrators-ethnographers we also stand to gain a more precise understanding of the diversity of evolutionary thinking that informed various stages of the colonial period in Africa.

The period in which the first colonial ethnographic accounts were published, between 1900 and 1940, was one which followed significant debate and flux in French colonial policy and the first portion of the paper is dedicated to placing these accounts within their wider historical and ideological context.

The Development of French Colonial Policy in West Africa

While scattered pockets of resistance remained well into the twentieth century, France's colonial presence on the West African savanna was assured when French soldiers reached the Niger River in the late nine-

teenth century. Under Commandant Borgnis-Desbordes French soldiers began building a frontier outpost at Bamako in 1883 (Cohen 1974) and thereby marked the beginning of a complex and ideologically charged colonial encounter in this region. At the same time, scholars in France were constructing visions of humanity in racial terms and were poised to offer council to administrators and theorists in the "métropole" who were struggling to devise an appropriate administrative policy for their African colonies, colonies populated by black Africans.

At the end of the nineteenth century the work at hand was to govern the vast expanse which was now under French control and, ultimately, to ensure that the new colonies would be worthwhile to the "métropole". The colonial administration was confronted with a socially, culturally, politically and, as was soon to be argued, racially diverse territory. The colonial administration in France was compelled to develop an appropriate strategy and to do so quickly in order to avoid the risk of fragmentation of their possessions.

Colonial Policy Debates

The historiography of French colonial policy is awash with such terms as assimilation, association, direct rule, indirect rule, "politique de races", and "mise en valeur".¹ All of these terms bear witness to the diversity of positions on French colonial administration. In the course of the development of colonial ethnography, and therefore in the context of this paper, distinctions made between assimilation and association are most important. According to Betts (1961: 8-9), assimilation, in the French context, implied that the African colonies would be administered under the same policies and laws as those found in the métropole. He points out that this position held sway only at the beginning of the colonial encounter. He argues that at the outset of this century the assimilationist position had been replaced by one in which the colonies would be administered in keeping with native institutions and norms, a policy of association. Likewise, Crowder (1968: 166-167), in his comparative review of administrative strategies utilized by the major colonial powers in West Africa states that assimilationist policies stressed common identities while associationist strategies accepted differences and did not seek to carry out identical administrative policies between the mother country and her colonies. Rather, associationist or paternalistic policies would endeavor to follow local customs or norms to the extent that they were morally acceptable to the "métropole". As France proceeded in colonizing West Africa, support for assimilation declined and association

1. See KNIGHT 1933, S. H. ROBERTS 1929, HARDY 1929, DESCHAMPS 1953, CROWDER 1962, 1968, 1978, SURET-CANALE 1971, BETTS 1961, and COHEN 1971, 1980.

came to be the major current in the stream of theoretical debate and necessitated the accumulation of such local customs and traditions throughout the colonies.

In their attempts to initiate an appropriate administrative policy colonial planners received council from the French scientific community and looked to their compatriots in the colonial encounter, the Dutch and the British, for relevant administrative models. While such models supported an indirect administrative posture, it was the scientific community in France which grounded them with their perspective on the immutability of race and cultural achievement (Betts 1961). At the close of the nineteenth century, a relationship between the colonies and the "métropole" which stressed a sort of partnership emerged, a partnership which was not, however, an equal one.

As we shall see below, proponents of racist thought in France were among those who argued against assimilation and had practical advice for colonial administrators and planners who were continuously grappling with the appropriate future for their colonial subjects. The philosophic and scientific debates which had occupied the minds of some of the most influential French thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries regarding the nature of human diversity (see Cohen 1980, Stocking 1968) now had an arena for practical political import. In the end, the dialogue that ensued helped to initiate French studies of local West African institutions and to put an end to wide-scale support for assimilation of colonial populations into the citizenry of France. The late nineteenth century French discourses on race, hierarchy, equality and progress, all conceived of in the dominant biological and evolutionary terms of the day, held great sway over the development of colonial theory, particularly of the associationist variety (Cohen 1980).

Racism and the Politics of Association

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Europeans became increasingly aware of the great diversity of humankind across the globe as ships sailed to Africa, Asia and other remote corners of the earth. This experience, added to the growing concern with difference within the European context, resulted in a good deal of speculation on the nature of human variability. In the early years of the eighteenth century there was a strong religious component to the understanding of this diversity. The environment was the most significant factor in explaining the social and cultural differences between Europe and other parts of the world. There was also a belief that the social and cultural status of a race could be ameliorated and that such change could be effected by the paramount civilization of Europe on behalf of less fortunate groups.

In the eighteenth century there were two schools of thought on the

diversity of humanity. Monogenists held that all living people had a common ancestor. This position was in keeping with the religious atmosphere of the time and was dominant. Polygenists, on the other hand, felt that the range of races observed in the world resulted from separate acts of creation. While the differences between these two camps were certainly important there was, at base, a common ground; the variety which was observed could also be ranked.

During the eighteenth and into the early part of the nineteenth century the monogenist vision of shared humanity united the philosophical and scientific community. As Cohen (1980) has noted, this vision did not necessarily assume equality between the various segments of humanity though it did see them as parts of the same whole. "The eighteenth century evolutionary view, which lasted in some cases into the nineteenth century, was a convenient way to account for the humanity of non-Europeans and yet to explain their differences. Africans were viewed as living in an era similar to that of the European Middle Ages. Just as Europe had made progress since then, Africa too would evolve" (*ibid.*: 210). This social evolutionary position underscored the universal nature of humanity and, after an important interlude, it is encountered again in the accounts rendered by the colonial administrators-ethnographers whose work is treated below.

In the nineteenth century the emphasis shifted from attributing racial difference to environment and climate to underscoring its biological determinants. The racism of the eighteenth century, in which there was an underlying potential for social and cultural transformation, gave way to a more static and immutable understanding of such difference. This new understanding was closely related to the polygenist evolutionary position which was quite strong in France at the time (Stocking 1968) and was deeply committed to building a scientific basis from which racial and cultural difference could be objectively established. The polygenists held that cultural development and racial types were concomitant and that some races were better endowed than others and, finally, that this was a "true" or static relationship. The strength of the polygenist stance from the middle to the latter half of the nineteenth century in France had direct implications for the eventual favoring of associationist colonial policies.

The "scientific racist" argument was accented by a growing concern among French colonial administrators with comparative colonial policy (Betts 1961). Betts argues that the conjunction of racial arguments which drew on scientific principles and the appreciation for British and Dutch colonial orientations lead to the growth of associationist policy in France. Both the British and the Dutch had developed a colonial posture which worked with and through native institutions while simultaneously treating them as different and less civilized. It was thought that the best approach to these populations was to direct, but not to assimilate.

In the later years of the nineteenth century, French scholars such as

Alfred Fouillée, Gustave Le Bon and Léopold de Saussure were important racist voices bringing the scientific racism of several early French physical anthropologists like Paul Broca and Paul Topinard into the debates regarding the development of colonial policy (*ibid.*: 59-89). These individuals held strong positions on the innate hierarchy of races and were quite explicit about the type of relationship France should foster with her colonies. They argued that France should not extend metropolitan rights and laws to the black Africans on the grounds that their race did not provide them with the means to fully participate in such a system. These individuals played an important role in the development of the colonial policy of association as opposed to assimilation at the turn of the century. This change represented a considerable shift in colonial theory.²

It was at the International Colonial Congress of 1889 that Gustave Le Bon, a prominent polygenist, offered the option which the French administration soon adopted. "In short, one must consider as dangerous chimeras all our ideas of assimilating or Frenchifying any inferior people. Leave to the natives their customs, their institutions, their laws" (cited in Betts 1961: 68). The merging of biology and culture are strikingly apparent in this proclamation. The polygenists had succeeded in making racial distinctions part of the foundation of a separate and unequal colonial system.

Le Bon's position was brought further into the thick of the colonial theory debates by Léopold de Saussure (*ibid.*: 69). Saussure, who had served as a naval officer in the Far East, published his *La psychologie de la colonisation française dans ses rapports avec les sociétés indigènes* in 1899. And in keeping with the separate but unequal polygenist viewpoints of the day, Saussure stressed the impracticality of considering colonial populations as potential citizens of France, rather he supported a policy based on direction of the colonial subjects by the French in the hopes of improving existing native institutions (*ibid.*: 70-73).

As attested to in a "résumé" offered in *L'Année coloniale 1900* (Mourey & Brunel 1900: 82-92), the resolve to give priority to associationist policy was affirmed in that year at the congress of colonial sociology in Paris. The stage was thus set for a burst of ethnographically-oriented field research in the French West African colonies and elsewhere. "La connaissance des institutions juridiques des indigènes présentant, tant au point de vue politique qu'au point de vue scientifique, un intérêt considérable, il est à désirer que les gouvernements provoquent et encouragent l'étude de ces institutions par des hommes compétents" (cited in *ibid.*:

2. DESCHAMPS 1953, BETTS 1961, COHEN 1971, COOKE 1973. It is important to keep in mind, however, that throughout the French colonial engagement in West Africa, as well as in other colonial territories, both association and assimilation enjoyed their share of believers. It was never a completely supported transformation.

84-85). To achieve just treatment of the colonial populations would require investigation and delineation of the native systems. "Colonial practice was to be based on empirical evidence. Observation, investigation, analysis became the key words used" (Betts 1961).

These ideas are clearly reflected in ensuing colonial policy in West Africa and come into sharp relief in a "circulaire" sent in 1909 by F. J. Clozel, then Lieutenant-Governor of the colony of Haut-Sénégal-Niger, to his subordinates in which he instructs them to amass information on the indigenous customs of their respective locales, particularly in regard to legal systems.

"Le décret du 10 novembre 1903, portant réorganisation du Service de la Justice dans les Colonies du Gouvernement général de l'Afrique occidentale française, a eu pour but essentiel d'unifier l'Administration de la Justice soumise autrefois à des régimes variant avec les divisions administratives de notre grande possession ouest-africaine et de garantir aux indigènes sous notre contrôle et notre direction, en tout ce qui n'est pas contraire à nos principes essentiels d'humanité et de civilisation, le maintien de leurs coutumes, fondement d'un droit privé approprié à leur mentalité et à leur état social" (Delafosse 1972, I: 18).

While this position left room for pursuit of a paramount "civilization", it kept the fundamental difference between Africans and Frenchmen in the foreground. So long as there was no grave affront to French sensibilities, native custom was to be tolerated and the colonized were to be left to evolve according to their "état".

In effect, there would be two parallel legal systems in AOF; "one for French citizens and those exercising French civil and legal rights, and the other for African subjects" (Mann & Roberts 1991: 16). The latter were by far the vast majority. The distinction between the natives and the colonizers was clear and was influenced by the racist thinking of men such as Le Bon and Saussure. The policy by which the governing of the French West African colonies would proceed was now confirmed, at least for the time being.

It is clear that Stocking's open-ended question (1987: 237) as to "whether or not evolutionary writings provided specific guidelines for colonial administrators and missionaries . . ." was certainly true in the case of the French colonial debates of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was however one variant of evolutionary thought which influenced the French debates most effectively. The polygenists' vision of evolution made its mark on the future of colonial administration in the AOF.³

Whereas in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries monogenist

3. While not the only or perhaps key factor in shifting the colonial debates (for example, republicanism, socialism, and free-masonry could be argued to have influenced such a change), these writings and viewpoints were certainly influential and have not received sufficient attention to date.

evolutionary thought had allowed for assimilation of those peoples outside of the Western sphere of civilization, the late nineteenth century polygenist and racist thought of many French scholars and writers supported a notion of separate but unequal. The ideas of such Enlightenment “philosophes” as Voltaire and Rousseau were quickly forgotten. In the late nineteenth century context it was thought that the West Africans under the direction of the French should develop on their own terms and should be “spared” the difficulties of confronting the French system. Because of racial difference they were not expected to proceed towards the Western standard of civilization, rather they had their own trajectories.

While this posture was founded, in large part, on racist polygenist evolutionary ideas, there existed a strain of relativism within it—a strain which would be accented in subsequent years as administrators in the field began to study native institutions and customs first-hand. There was room in this viewpoint for the respect of native institutions and the advancement of native populations. In what follows we shall have the opportunity to see how a series of administrators-ethnographers conceived of the future of their colonial subjects in the case of their studies of the family in the French Soudan. Differences between these individual administrators-ethnographers did undoubtedly exist, but at one level they were all quite unlike the figures reviewed above. While sharing a viewpoint which gave priority to difference, they added or developed another dimension—a dimension which allowed for advancement and development of the colonized peoples and which is directly linked to the Enlightenment vision of humanity. This addition made for a model of the future which combined difference and progress and could be argued to reflect a more social evolutionary viewpoint, a revised assimilationist posture.

At the close of the nineteenth century, the boundaries of evolutionary thought were widened considerably, ideas about the unilinear social development of humanity and comparative studies of societies were gaining momentum (Stocking 1968). Social scientists were increasingly interested in mental and cultural evolution, racial typing and ranking was no longer the “raison d’être” for studies of peoples and cultures around the world. In considering the following developments in the colonial ethnographic tradition, we should not fail to realize that the broader intellectual climate was changing as well.

The Growth of Colonial Ethnography in the AOF

By the first decade of this century there emerged a corpus of information which the French colonial administration felt should be amassed regarding the colonies. Not surprisingly, it focused on one of the most pressing

arenas of colonial control—the legal domain. This domain was one in which the colonial administrators participated actively as judges in the native courts. Of the issues and institutions which were to receive sustained ethnographic attention were such things as marriage, divorce, inheritance strategies and the family. The latter will be used below as an example of how a set of colonial administrators-ethnographers viewed the future of the colonial populations and in order to draw attention to recurring problems in the study of domestic organization in Africa.

These issues fall under the category of colonial legal policy which has recently been the subject of an insightful collection of works by historians and anthropologists (Mann & Roberts 1991, see also Robinson 1992). In their introduction to the collection, the editors call attention to the significance of the domain of law in the overall colonial administration of Africa. It appears that the rigorous study of native institutions proposed by the colonial administrators at the Congress of 1900 was picked up across the continent by a range of colonial powers intent on achieving a comprehensive legal system in their colonies. The issues addressed had very practical implications for those administrators who were to act as judges in the colonies.

Colonial Ethnography and the Family

In the “résumé” provided in *L'Année coloniale 1900*, referred to above, the family is identified as one of the important domains which should be studied. Under the heading “Condition des indigènes au point de vue de la législation civile et criminelle et de la distribution de la justice”, the second point on “droit privé” states, “en ce qui concerne l'organisation de la famille et de la propriété, il est désirable de laisser aux indigènes le bénéfice de leurs coutumes, toutes les fois que ces coutumes ne sont pas incompatibles avec le respect dû à la vie et à la liberté humaines” (Mourey & Brunel 1900: 85). The family was clearly identified as an important realm to be studied and as an institution which should be respected. The other positions outlined in the “résumé” supported the need to delineate a given area's customs in order to provide its colonial administrators with a body of jurisprudence from which to conduct their affairs.

“As the French [...] in Africa were to discover, the difficulty in administering native law was to find out what was customary [...] Indirect rule took as a fundamental principle that customary law should be upheld among locals, unless it failed the repugnancy test or contravened local statutes. Historians and anthropologists have recently come to understand, however, that what colonial officials treated as immutable customary law was itself the product of historical struggles unfolding during the colonial period” (Roberts & Mann 1991: 21).

The codification of native custom in French West Africa, as in other colonial empires, was driven by the need to administer a policy of separate and unequal justice which was in keeping with the “état” of the indigenous society. “En organisant la collecte et la codification des coutumes indigènes et en les faisant appliquer, l’administration coloniale s’est révélée soucieuse non pas de l’assimilation des populations mais du respect de leurs différences ethniques et culturelles, ce qui infirme l’idée que l’on se fait généralement de la politique française en Afrique” (Amselle 1990: 238). Considering that the region was in the midst of a considerable amount of turmoil and transformation, it might seem as if a rigid set of customs would not be readily accessible. This did not prevent the colonialists from trying. After all, the French colonial administration, like the other colonial powers in Africa, had larger plans in store for the colony and they required an order from which to begin their work, even if that order had to be invented in some cases (see Ranger 1981, Amselle 1990).

According to Amselle (*ibid.*: 238), it was Lieutenant-Governor Trentinian who first required his staff in the Soudan to respond to a questionnaire on indigenous custom. This request was made in 1897 and the format appears to have originated at the Berlin conference. This was the first in a series of calls for the consolidation of local customary law in the French Soudan using this questionnaire as a guideline. In 1905, Governor-General Roume, in a letter written to his subordinates in the field, once again informed each of them of the importance of the collection and compilation of indigenous customs in the colonies (Delafosse 1972, I: 19). The questionnaire’s model was followed quite closely by the administrators-ethnographers whose work is reviewed below.⁴

The questionnaire was subsequently reissued by Clozel in January 1909 in an attempt to further the advancement of the native justice system. At that point, the actual questionnaire was structured in two parts, “droit civil” and “droit criminel”. The first section of the “droit civil” is specifically addressed to the family (*ibid.*: 20). Its text is reproduced here in full because of the importance it carries in the remainder of this paper.

The questionnaire set forth a model which was direct and explicit, a model which shaped subsequent colonial investigations into family and domestic organization in profound ways. The final points call attention to processes of change and it is in these areas where we can see how the administrators conceived of the future of their subjects, of their possibilities. In the accounts which follow it is apparent that several of the points highlighted in this passage were less than easily addressed in practice.

4. The questionnaire’s model was followed by other administrators as well. See ROBERTY 1929 for example.

QUESTIONNAIRE

PREMIÈRE PARTIE

DROIT CIVIL

SECTION I. — DE LA FAMILLE

Organisation de la famille. — Cette organisation est-elle basée sur les principes admis par les peuples civilisés ? Définition de la parenté : s'établit-elle par tige paternelle, par tige maternelle ou par les deux ? De l'alliance. Des degrés de parenté et d'alliance au point de vue de leurs effets, notamment en ce qui concerne : 1° les droits de tutelle et en particulier les apports d'oncle à neveu ; 2° les empêchements au mariage.

Note sur l'organisation de la tribu et sur ses rapports avec l'institution analogue qu'on remarque, à l'origine des civilisations (genos, gens, clan, horde, etc.). Eléments constitutifs de la tribu. Droits et devoirs de ses membres. Organisation politique et administrative des groupes indigènes avant notre occupation. Etat actuel. Evolution en cours. Modifications à apporter.

Confusion over boundaries, obligations, responsibilities and meanings surrounding the family in colonial territory of present day Mali become readily apparent in the ethnographic materials produced using this guideline. These problems and their solutions share a great deal with contemporary discussions of family and domestic organization across the globe, a point I will return to at the end of this paper.

As the study of native custom progressed, the ideology which gave rise to the policy of association and the scientific study of indigenous custom, the racial ideology of the late nineteenth century, was transformed. As it did throughout the social sciences at this point (Stocking 1968), the social evolutionary viewpoint of the eighteenth century returned, albeit in a new context, in the works of such figures as Delafosse, Monteil, Labouret and Aubert.

These field administrators, responsible for the cataloguing of indigenous customs, tended to represent the colonized populations in ways that did not necessarily coincide with the profoundly racist viewpoints which gave rise to their ethnographic enterprises. Their representations of family and domestic organization and their editorial comments in these works demonstrate how a different, perhaps more humanitarian, ideolog-

ical position came into focus. This development had to do with the combination of the changing nature of the colonial encounter, the appearance of social and cultural evolutionary models which were influenced by Darwinian thought, and the viewpoints of the individual men in the field.⁵

In addition, economic development in the colonies of the AOF took on added significance at this point (Suret-Canale 1971) and there were new ways of conceptualizing the future of the colonial subjects. If the indigenous populations were never to become Frenchmen, perhaps they might become members of a more civilized world and benefit from the colonial encounter as well. The nineteenth century adherence to racist ideology was on the wane and the idea of a unilinear process of social evolution was on the rise. The colonized peoples began to be seen as occupying a lower rung on the ladder of civilization, but there was once again the belief that there could be progression or social evolution.

The administrators-ethnographers whose work is addressed below stressed the importance of assuring that as economic development occurred the native populations would derive some benefit. These men could be considered among those Suret-Canale identifies as reformers who sought after “‘good’ colonization.” (*ibid.*: 316). The figures addressed below responded to the calls for documentation which were required by a policy of association.

The Administrators-Ethnographers

The colonial administrators in the AOF at the turn of the century were a varied lot. There were military men with a great deal of experience in the region, civil servants who had not ventured out of the colonial towns, and trained administrators from the services and ministries of Paris—some with knowledge of the West African scene and others with little understanding of the territory (Cohen 1971). The higher level administrators, such as the Governor-General and the Governors of the individual colonies of the AOF, required that the local administrators submit historical and ethnographic reports for each administrative unit down to the “cercle” level. The idea being that eventually there would be a monograph for each “cercle” and that ultimately a comprehensive understanding of the customs and traditions of the territory could be gained (Suret-Canale 1971: 313). It was hoped that this consolidation project

5. The rich, multi-layered nature of this particular combination is brought out by a reading of both GROSZ-NGATÉ 1988 and VAN HOVEN 1990. In a sense their pieces illuminate different strands of the same process.

would allow the French to direct the affairs of the indigenous populations in accordance with their given "états", physical and cultural. The response to the directives was uneven and often contradictory probably due as much to the wide-ranging profiles of the authors as to the diversity of customs they were describing.

In the first years of this century, most administrative figures were not officially trained in the ethnography of the region or in the indigenous languages spoken there, a few of them did however dedicate themselves to gaining an understanding of such things. Figures such as Maurice Delafosse, Charles Monteil and Henri Labouret, all men who had served in military campaigns in the AOF, went on to distinguish themselves with their historical and ethnographic works. Back in France, after their service, they also made their mark on future administrators who would serve in the AOF. They taught at such institutions as the *École coloniale*, and they published not only scholarly books but also magazine articles and newspaper stories on the lifeways and histories of the colonized peoples of the savanna regions of West Africa. Their courses were taught in the context of a growing curriculum geared towards the policy of association (Cohen 1971). These men all had extensive experience in the remote areas of the AOF, and their perspectives on the nature of the Africans they encountered in the course of their daily lives differ in concrete ways from those of the racist thinkers discussed above. In fact, their extensive experience in particular regions became somewhat of an anomaly as the colonial period progressed. After this first generation of officials, the frequent transfer of bush administrators became the rule (*ibid.*).

These administrators-ethnographers were evolutionary thinkers, but they were clearly not the same type of evolutionary thinkers as such men as Paul Broca, Gustave Le Bon or Léopold de Saussure. They, like many other early twentieth century social evolutionists, were more in keeping with late eighteenth century evolutionary thought wherein the unity of humanity was stressed. As we will see below in their works on the family, they viewed the African populations as entirely capable of evolving along lines similar to those which previous European societies had progressed. The turn of the century was a period increasingly marked by the idea that stages of social development defined the human career.

Maurice Delafosse was born on December 20, 1870 in the rural countryside of the left bank of the Loire River. Because of his important position in the development of ethnographic studies in France, his intellectual profile is perhaps the most complete of the figures addressed in this paper. Delafosse's interest in the social and cultural life of Africa began while he was a student of medicine in Paris in 1890. He passed over his training in medicine in order to follow studies in Arabic with Octave Houdas (who became his close friend and subsequently, his

father-in-law) at the École des langues orientales.⁶ His affinity for languages is well-documented by the vast array of manuals and publications on African languages included in his bibliography.

According to his daughter, Louise Delafosse, in her biography, *Maurice Delafosse: le Berrichon conquis par l'Afrique* (1976), the young Delafosse was eager to see Africa and was one of the few people who joined a society of French monk-soldiers set up in Algeria by Cardinal Lavignerie and then with the French army in Algeria for a year. He returned to France in late 1892 after a period of illness and began to prepare for another encounter with the African continent. In addition to his studies at l'École des langues orientales he also studied at the Muséum d'histoire naturelle. His daughter suggests that after his experience in Algeria, which she argues was by and large quite uneventful, he was more interested in an active and adventurous experience in Africa. "C'est d'ailleurs probablement dans cet esprit qu'il va chercher au Muséum une formation d'explorateur scientifique" (*ibid.*: 92).

Delafosse's attendance at the Muséum d'histoire naturelle during these years is all the more interesting in light of the fact that Armand de Quatrefages had built up the Muséum as one of the few places in France where one could study anthropology and more significantly, an anthropology distinct from that of the famous polygenist Paul Broca. "Quatrefages was Broca's chief rival for leadership among French anthropologists, and he opposed Broca's views on the most controversial questions in the field. He adroitly defended the monogenist theory of the origin of races" (Williams 1985: 342). Delafosse was clearly associated with the early movement towards ethnography and ethnology in France.

During the years 1893-1894 he continued his studies and sought out possibilities for returning to Africa. In 1894, the famous explorer and Governor of Côte d'Ivoire, Louis Binger, requested to have Delafosse assigned to his colony (L. Delafosse 1976: 95). This was exactly what Delafosse had hoped for, he was appointed to the Affaires indigènes de 3^e classe. After 1894, he went on to serve at various posts in Côte d'Ivoire. At Toumodi he made the acquaintance of another administrator-ethnographer, Charles Monteil. Their friendship would endure throughout Delafosse's lifetime. During these early years, French military campaigns in northern Côte d'Ivoire were being conducted and their effects were close at hand—Delafosse's hut was burned down in September 1899 by an African chief and he regretted the loss of a great deal of ethnographic material (*ibid.*: 162). From Côte d'Ivoire, he went on to serve the colonial administration across West Africa over the next several

6. During his career, Delafosse translated important Arabic materials dealing with the early history of what is now Mali and the surrounding area. The bibliography included in the 1972 reprint of *Haut-Sénégal-Niger* contains references to these materials.

years. During this time Delafosse actively pursued information regarding the history and customs of the peoples he encountered.

After these African experiences he took up a teaching position at the *École coloniale* and the *École des langues orientales* in Paris and subsequently returned to Africa on several occasions to undertake various projects. Delafosse became a prominent and widely respected intellectual and vital participant in ensuing colonial debates until his death in November 1926.

In Marcel Mauss' review (1913) of the current state of ethnography throughout the world, he calls attention to Delafosse's work as one of the few examples of quality research conducted by French scholars. Over the years, his reports and books proclaimed the dignity and humanity of Africans and spoke to those in positions of power as well as to the French masses (Delafosse 1931). He represents a school of revised assimilationist bent and should clearly be associated with a trend towards more refined and focused ethnographic research. His dedication to making the colonized benefactors of the colonial enterprise and to the scientific study of peoples and cultures are echoed in the works of the other figures as well.

As we have seen above, Charles Monteil was also an administrator in Côte d'Ivoire during the early 1890s and he later served in the French Soudan, at Médine from 1897 through 1899, and then at Djénné from 1900 to 1903. He, like Delafosse, spent a considerable amount of time in the pursuit of historical and ethnographic accounts of the populations of the AOF and drew upon many *jeliw* (Bambara) or bards in order to fill-out the picture of indigenous society and history. He also became an instructor at the *École des langues orientales*, and published many articles and four monographs on the peoples of French West Africa. According to his son, Vincent Monteil, in his preface to the reprinted edition of *Les Bambara du Ségou et du Kaarta* (1977), his father's works possessed a seriousness and objectivity which has not diminished over time.⁷

Henri Labouret was a figure from much the same mold as his predecessors. He was an administrator in West Africa and later taught at the *École coloniale* where he influenced a great many administrative officers. According to Cohen (1971), Labouret did a great deal to expand the ethnographic training of several generations of colonial administrators. Later in the colonial period, his positions became influential in the transformation of colonial policy. As his later work shows, he was committed to a "mise en valeur" or policy of economic development in the colonies, but demanded that the Africans benefit from the schemes (see for example, Labouret 1941).

The last two figures, Jean Ortoli and Alfred Aubert, were administra-

7. See GROSZ-NGATÉ 1988 and VAN HOVEN 1990 for important critical insights into this dimension of Monteil's work.

tors who submitted reports on the customs of their “cercles” (Bamako and Bougouni respectively), but did not come to play a major role in the colonial ethnography of the French Soudan or, to my knowledge, in the colonial debates in France.

All of these officials were simultaneously ethnographic observers and administrators and should be viewed as contributors to the growth of French ethnography in the twentieth century. Their positions in the ethnographic encounter were clearly situated in a context of power (Leclerc 1972, Grosz-Ngaté 1988). They conducted ethnographic research under the umbrella of colonial authority. Each one of these men used his position in the administration as a means to gather information, which was perceived to be of vital importance to the maintenance of order and hierarchy in the federation and in each colony. Jean-Loup Amselle, in the conclusion to his *Logiques métisses: anthropologie de l'identité en Afrique et ailleurs*, has noted (1990: 235) that however closely linked power and knowledge were in the colonial context, “il est abusif de disqualifier la totalité du savoir colonial au nom de cet engagement”. Approached with appropriate caution, the ethnographic work which was produced by these administrators-ethnographers can offer insights into both the dynamics of social life on the savanna and help demonstrate how different threads of evolutionary thought emerged in the historical development of colonialism in the AOF. For this reason, a closer look at their portraits of family should be instructive.

A Social Evolutionary Perspective on Domestic Organization⁸

Delafosse's description of family organization in *Haut-Sénégal-Niger* (1972) was one of the first sustained examinations of this dimension of social organization and has influenced most subsequent analyses of domestic institutions in the Soudan. At the request of Governor Clozel, Delafosse was commissioned to integrate various cercle-level reports on custom and tradition mentioned above, into a comprehensive work (Cornevin in Delafosse 1972, I). This work was to serve as a guide for those colonial officials who were administering justice to the native populations. Delafosse, who had worked at numerous posts in West Africa and published many ethnographic pieces based on his experiences, offered an

8. I have chosen to examine a group of ethnographic accounts which share a spatial and, arguably, a social or cultural frame of reference. Delafosse, Monteil, Labouret, Ortolí and Aubert, in creating a literature on the peoples of the savanna region of what is now Mali, used a range of group names, including the Bambara or Banmana, the Manding, or more generally “les divers peuples Mande”. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the complex development of these identifiers. There is, however, a vital and provocative literature on the subject. See BAZIN 1985 and AMSELLE 1990.

informative treatment of the family among the colonial subjects of the French Soudan in the third volume of his work (*ibid.*, III: 93). In the chapter "Société," he begins by stating:

"À la base de la société indigène du Soudan français se place la famille. Mais il convient tout d'abord de bien s'entendre sur le sens donné à ce mot: il existe en effet, chez les indigènes de l'Afrique Occidentale et Centrale, deux groupements fort différents l'un de l'autre, mais que l'état de notre vocabulaire nous oblige à désigner tous les deux par le même mot de famille".

He elaborates on this idea by suggesting that the addition of a qualifier should be made to the term "famille." The "famille réduite" and the "famille globale" are then outlined. The reduced family consists of a husband and wife and their children,

"... c'est évidemment le premier groupement de toute société dans l'ordre historique: un homme s'est établi quelque part, a pris femme, a eu des enfants, voilà une famille réduite constituée; ce peut n'être qu'un accident dans la vie d'un peuple, ce peut être aussi le berceau de ce peuple, mais, chez les indigènes du Soudan, cette famille réduite n'a qu'une importance secondaire au point de vue social et, chez les peuples qui n'admettent que la parenté de ligne utérine, ainsi que nous l'avons vu, cette famille n'existe pour ainsi dire pas en soi" (*ibid.*).

He then refers to the "mandingue" terms *gba* or *goua* as representing the global family.

"[Groupement] plus élevé et plus solide que le précédent, il n'a pas de correspondant exact dans notre société européenne actuelle; il tend en effet à se désagréger à mesure que s'affermissent les théories individualistes qui régissent les sociétés de civilisation occidentale. Au contraire, dans la plupart des civilisations primitives, et notamment dans la société noire, c'est la famille globale qui constitue le seul groupement social bien caractérisé et souvent aussi la seule unité politique réellement existante; en tout cas, elle est la base de tout État indigène ayant évolué normalement" (*ibid.*: 94).

Delafosse gives the impression that although there was no referent for the global family in then contemporary Europe, there had been such things in the past. He appears to be reflecting a social evolutionary view of society and culture in stating/implying that the African global family is merely historically, and not fundamentally different from the French experience. He made clear reference to the problems with using a term from the French language without qualification. Delafosse appears to have taken the unity of humanity into account, but inside of a chronological framework. Africans were not an absolutely inferior "race", but rather had the potential to rise.

In Delafosse's time, studies of lineage and descent dynamics, widely discussed in the English-speaking world following Morgan, were only beginning to have much impact on the French intellectual community. He described African social organization in the most accessible way, by adapting terms from their knowledge base and also by utilizing indige-

nous terms, an approach which has its share of strong proponents today (see Schneider 1984). Over the years since Delafosse addressed this problem it has become increasingly apparent in the social sciences that the “family” is never quite as simple a set of relations, structures or ideas as we might wish to portray them to be. Moreover, as Flandrin (1979) has shown, the actual definition of “famille” in the French context has shifted considerably over time, further complicating the comparison of historically distinct domestic formations. Viewed in this light, Delafosse’s demarcation of “famille réduite” and “famille globale” was an early attempt to accurately describe a complex social and political entity, a problem we continue to struggle with today.

Delafosse’s global family was meant to encompass all of the relationships and constituents of the main social unit on the West African savanna, including captives. This is an important point. The inclusion of captives in a description of a family of any sort—reduced or global—is indicative of a broader trend, to refer to non-genealogical relations as family relations. This inclusive strategy is particularly significant when we know that a very large percentage of “family members” in some areas of the Soudan at around that time were slaves or captives (estimates put this figure at close to 53 % [Roberts 1987: 119]).

Delafosse goes on to detail the individual roles and responsibilities within the global family setting and highlights the role of the male head. In sum, the global family is a patriarchal organization, and domestic activities and relations stem from this principle. The members of the group, the sons or brothers of the head and their wives and children, all have obligations to the head who administers the collectivity and in turn is obliged to provide for the group’s sustenance. The patrimony is inherited in totality by the next eldest male, brother or son. The domain of power and authority which the head controls becomes the subject of substantial discussions in some of the subsequent ethnographic descriptions as the emphasis on the importance of the individual becomes more salient in the colonial project.

In 1924, Charles Monteil provided another portrait of rural social organization in his *Les Bambara du Ségou et du Kaarta*. His description of the family in the chapter on “communautés” is more task-oriented than Delafosse’s, and highlights the inclusive nature of domestic institutions and relations. Monteil (1977: 157) notes that: “La société indigène n’est pas simple et, dans l’étude de ces pays, l’Européen a fait usage de vocables qui, faute d’être définis, ont brouillé la réalité”. He goes on to call attention to the difficulty of using terms such as “royaume”, and “empire” to describe the social reality of French West Africa. He argues that these are not appropriate translations for the political entities encountered on the savanna. He suggests that an examination of the family may help to clarify indigenous social life. “Dans la langue des Bambara, il n’y a pas de termes proprement équivalent à notre mot famille, entendu

au sens juridique (1). La collectivité placée sous l'autorité d'un même *fa* (2) est désignée sous des appellations qui diffèrent selon que l'on envisage la collectivité elle-même, ou bien le lien que cette collectivité occupe" (*ibid.*: 158).

In stating that in the Bambara language there is not a word for the French "famille", understood or legal, he is implicitly calling attention to Delafosse's use of *goua* as a stand-in for "famille". It is interesting that he makes his observations in reverse from those of Delafosse. Whereas Delafosse stated that there was no European linguistic counterpart for the global family, Monteil states that there is no Bambara referent for the French "famille".

According to Monteil, there are great difficulties to be encountered when trying to find terms to express the main social unit known in Western society. As mentioned in a footnote, marked (1) above, he notes that he prefers "communauté" which is more readily applicable to the diversity of relations encountered in the domestic sphere, a community or joint estate (*ibid.*). He is careful, as was Delafosse before him, to point out the significance of the head of the group, the *fa*, and the roles and obligations which are engendered in the "communauté". He prefers to stay away from the term "famille" in either the reduced or global form.

Monteil examines a range of Bambara terms which address collectivity, from *ton* to *gwa*. According to him, the term *gwa* cannot be used for family because there are people in the *gwa* group who are not, *stricto sensu*, family as understood in French. "*Gwa* ne signifie donc famille que par une déviation et il est bien difficile d'accorder au mot famille, ainsi entendu, une signification précise, car le *gwa* contient des gens qui n'appartiennent pas à la famille et, par contre, ne renferme pas tous les membres de la famille" (*ibid.*: 159). In particular, people like slaves and non-related individuals would create a problem in this context. He appears to be arguing for a more task-oriented collectivity by calling attention to the imprecision of using "famille"—which he apparently understood as a genealogical term—to describe a type of functional group. To Monteil the term *gwa*, which he equates with an enclosure, should include the animals living there as well as the people!

"En résumé, il n'y a pas de terme propre pour désigner expressément et exclusivement une collectivité pareille à celle que notre droit définit 'famille'. En fait, les quatre termes susvisés: *ton*, *ba-denya*, *gwa* et *so* sont usités à cette fin; c'est l'intention qui leur donne une compréhension déterminée et chacun a, selon les localités, une valeur précisée par l'usage" (*ibid.*: 160).

While Monteil's treatment of the domestic sphere focuses on the linguistic problems surrounding discussions of this sphere he is less concerned with generalizing about the future of the "communautés" he identifies. As Van Hoven (1990) has pointed out, the fact is that most of Monteil's work is explicitly descriptive and not overtly theoretic.

cal. Aside from this fact, the way in which he makes his point still reflects the difference between the social worlds of France and West Africa. In stating that there are no Bambara words for the concept of "famille" he is addressing difference.

In 1923, while colonial ethnographic research was progressing in the AOF, Albert Sarraut published *La mise en valeur des colonies françaises*, a work which marked a new stage in the colonial engagement, a concentrated focus on economic development. His message was not entirely new nor was his emphasis on the importance of developing the human resources in this pursuit (Betts 1961, Suret-Canale 1971). After the first World War, however, conditions demanded productivity and benefit for the "métropole", and Sarraut's plan offered a way forward, although it was not followed to any large degree, his general message was well heard in the AOF (see Suret-Canale 1971 for details of the plan). As in the other colonies, there was a movement afoot to increase production in the AOF and, as we shall see below, factors such as security and freedom from tyrants, like those "all powerful" family heads described by Delafosse and Monteil, became important points in the ethnographic accounts of family which followed.

In 1931, in their zeal to further codify indigenous law and customs, administrators in French West Africa were charged once more with carrying out studies documenting customs throughout the colonies and producing a collection useful in the legal administration of the indigenous population (Mann & Roberts 1991). This call for further study was now part of the emerging colonial policy of "mise en valeur". This charge was met by administrators at the cercle level and, again, there was to be an account from each cercle in the colonies.

In 1939, a three-volume set of these reports was published as *Coutumiers juridiques de l'AOF*. The "famille", as in the earlier accounts from the first decades of the century, was again a key topic. In volume II, Jean Ortoli and Alfred Aubert provide descriptions of Bambara customs for the cercles of Bamako and Bougouni. The same basic format, originating from the Berlin questionnaire and suggested in 1909 by Clozel, was followed.

Ortoli (1939, researched 1935), begins his report by stating that the "famille" in the cercle of Bamako is a patriarchal community composed of the individuals descendant from a common ancestor and who live together under the authority of a common head. The image given is of a well-defined and unified entity. From this description we can potentially view a very large unit. He mentions briefly the possibility for each member to maintain a personal economy, a point which is addressed more substantially in a later account by Labouret. He ends up his report by calling attention to the lack of "personnalité" distinct from "personnalité collective de la famille ou du village" in regards to the responsibility for damages incurred in the village. "La personnalité n'existe pas; seule existe la personnalité collective de la famille ou du village" (Ortoli 1939: 158).

Throughout the report, he points to the authority of the head as paramount and his responsibility for the members of the collectivity. This description reinforces the unity and closeness of the group under the authority of the head. Ortoli's piece does not highlight the complexity and uncertainty of "la famille" in action, points which Monteil's work clearly identified.

By contrast, Aubert's contribution (1939, researched 1932) on the customs of the cercle of Bougouni is much more enlightening on the topics of complexity and uncertainty within the realm of domestic organization. In the preface, he offers direct insights into the process of identifying and constructing the "famille". He states that Bambara society is changing under the impact of the colonial government. The elimination of regional warfare, the introduction of French currency and the freedom to circulate are identified as prime-movers in this process of change (Aubert 1939: 5). Aubert is careful to note though that customs die hard and that their being derived from morals makes this so. He opens his discussion of the "famille" with: "La famille se transforme. Elle était une puissante organisation basée sur l'autorité du père de famille, du chef de carré, qui était détenteur de pouvoirs que nous n'imaginons pas; il avait le droit de tuer ou de vendre celui qui s'était rendu coupable d'infraction grave [...] L'évolution se poursuit et le nombre de femmes d'un même mari diminue" (*ibid.*: 43-44).

Aubert states that the family, again using the problematic *gwa* as a referent, is a patriarchal community, composed of the descendants of a common ancestor, obey a common head, cultivate the same land and store their produce together. This definition is based on biology, authority, work and consumption—kinship and activity more generally speaking. This broad definition may account for the large size of the family in his report, around 150 people and up to 300. While all of these features are deemed important the most distinctive is the work in common. To Aubert, collective work is the family's defining feature.

He also mentions the central role of the patriarchal group's head or *fa* repeatedly. The *fa* is the exclusive holder of the indivisible patrimony. Without independent access to status in the group other than through the "pécule", the family's size may grow very large. These personal economies, "pécules", are sub-sets of the overall "communauté" economy and are worked by individuals or smaller sub-units within the context of the larger community, perhaps the reduced family.

"Le pécule (*mago mesen*) représente la fortune personnelle des individus composant le carré.

Il a toujours existé et subsiste.

Il peut même arriver que le pécule d'une famille réduite soit supérieur au patrimoine commun. Ils n'ont pas les mêmes charges: le pécule peut s'accroître sans avoir à faire face à toutes les obligations du patrimoine commun.

[...] Il a été dit plus haut que le pécule est quelquefois supérieur au patrimoine commun; c'est devenu une règle presque générale, due à l'individualisme croissant" (*ibid.*: 56).

In the eyes of the colonialists, this progression would yield a more autonomous, free individual: "... the individual was liberated from the constraints of the community" (Labouret cited in Van Hoven 1990: 188). Labouret went a step further in understanding the family in the colonial period. In *Les Manding et leur langue*, he states (1934: 50-51) that social phenomena have not received the kind of attention that regional history had:

"En particulier, des phénomènes sociaux aussi importants que la vie et la transformation de la famille ont été négligés [...] La question mérite pourtant d'être examinée avec soin, car la famille apparaît de plus en plus comme l'élément principal sur lequel doit et peut s'appuyer le progrès dans les territoires africains. Or, pour en comprendre l'organisation et le fonctionnement, il ne semble pas nécessaire de remonter jusqu'à l'antiquité classique. Un parallèle s'impose entre la collectivité soudanaise et le communauté tacite ou taisible — c'est-à-dire constituée, en général, sans convention écrite — qu'a connue notre moyen-âge. Héritière du manse et chaînon intermédiaire entre ce dernier et le simple ménage, cette forme d'organisation familiale nous fournit très à propos toutes les comparaisons désirables; son histoire éclaire et illustre les phases d'une évolution commencée en Afrique tropicale il y a trente ans et dont le terme, facile à prévoir, n'est plus très éloigné".

Labouret writing, in the third decade of this century, was rooted firmly within an expanding field of ethnography and ethnology in France. He is explicitly comparative and makes use of a wide-range of source material from Marc Bloch's work on social groups in rural France to scholarship on *zadruga* organization in Eastern Europe. *Les Manding et leur langue* was written, in part, for use at the École coloniale, which was then under the leadership of George Hardy, and was dedicated to a richly ethnographic tradition (Cohen 1971).

In *Les Manding et leur langue*, Labouret underscores the importance of the interlocking and overarching dimensions of rural social organization, an important observation. In his description, "ménages" or households are very important features in the domestic sphere. Furthermore, he identifies fissures within the existing social organization, such as those between "ménages" and "communautés", and claims that these represent lines along which fragmentation of the large family are likely to occur, especially in the colonial context where new stresses are placed on these structures.

According to Labouret, the very same process of disintegration which domestic groups on the West African savanna were said to be encountering had already been observed in Europe. Again, as was the case with Delafosse's analysis, the process was not fundamentally different, rather it was chronologically discrete. The future which Labouret envisioned for domestic groups in French Soudan was that which had occurred over the last hundred years in the European context. The colonial subjects were sharing a common social evolutionary trajectory. They were in fact mov-

ing down the same road as their peasant counterparts throughout Europe had done. Labouret (1934: 63-64) envisioned the arrival of more individualistic family units, smaller units with more autonomy.

Evolutionary Thought and the Colonial Encounter

When we compare the views espoused by the vocal polygenists of the late nineteenth century and those offered by Labouret in 1934, it is not difficult to see a major transformation of thought, notably evolutionary thought. The separatist and racist models of the last decades of the nineteenth century had been replaced in Labouret's writings by a social evolutionary model which included West African populations in a common, albeit chronologically different, chain of progression.

Labouret's contribution marks an important point in a trend that was first visible in Delafosse's work and which runs throughout the other works discussed above. Labouret and the others clearly shared a vision of a "natural" progression in the process of civilization and this was apparent in their portraits of family life in the French Soudan. Their ethnographic contributions reflect the diminishing significance of the late nineteenth century racist viewpoints which had acted as a catalyst for their work.

Throughout the period in which these works were conducted another powerful framework was emerging in the social sciences. Anthropology in France was becoming much more than the quest for racial typologies which occupied the bulk of the anthropological community in nineteenth century France. With the founding, in 1925, of the Institut d'ethnologie in Paris, ethnology and ethnography gained a foothold in the tenuous French academic environment (Williams 1985). The Institut's appearance marked success with regard to Mauss's statement (1913) on the poverty of French ethnography and the need for enduring institutions dedicated to ethnographic endeavors. In his review, Mauss made clear that those contributing the most to the expansion of the science were the colonial field administrators, men such as those discussed above. These figures represented a current in the emerging stream of French social anthropology, as distinct from the "groupe Broca."

Implications for Contemporary Research on Family and Domestic Organization

As numerous studies and debates in anthropology and history have shown over the last twenty years, the family is never an easily defined or an absolutely universally comparable entity or set of relations (see Yanagisako 1979, Hansen & Strobel 1985). The difficulties encountered by colonial

officials, such as Delafosse and Monteil, have not been resolved, but have been subjected to new interpretations. Nowhere is this more important than in the study of family history in Africa where such factors as kinship and descent can be quite complicated matters.

From the turn of the century to the present day, observers have had difficulty pinning down and understanding "the family" and its relations. This is perhaps due more to our own imprecision and flawed conceptions than to the mysterious nature of African domestic organization. Goody (1972: 101) puts it best when he states that:

"The main problem for the evolution of the family is to understand just what is evolving. The English term 'family' is a polysemic word used to describe a conjugal pair and their young ('starting a family'), the members of a household ('one of the family'), a range of bilateral kin ('relatives'), or a patronymic group, usually associated with a title ('The Churchill family'). And there are wider semantic usages, extending to the human ('the family of man') and the non-human ('the family of sweet peas') species".

Simply put, it is not so much the peas or the Churchills that matter, it is what is going on with social relationships in these contexts. Goody stresses the vagueness of the daily uses of the term family, and compels researchers to identify more precisely what transformations or issues are under analysis in any given piece of research. Similarly, others have argued that part of our trouble in addressing continuity and change in domestic organization arises from an approach which stresses morphology to the detriment of activity and practice (Netting *et al.* 1984). A point Monteil raised in 1924 in *Les Bambara du Ségou et du Kaarta*.

Furthermore, it has been argued that researchers are so heavily influenced by their ethnocentric constructs of family that these may dominate their investigations to such a degree that their results are too far removed from their cultural context to be of much interest (Schneider 1968, Yanagisako 1985). These authors suggest paying close attention to "native models" of social organization and stress that analysis should seek to explicate the specific symbolic and cultural dimensions of such relations or institutions.

All of the above points should sound familiar. The colonial administrators-ethnographers whose work was reviewed in this paper grappled with many of these same issues and we have seen the ways in which they tried to resolve their problems. Considering the many perils associated with a study of transformation in the realm of social organization, then or now, it would be difficult to argue whether or not the colonial administrator-ethnographer's accounts on the evolution of the family in the French Soudan were historically trustworthy. Instead, and more importantly, we can continue to look to these documents in order to illuminate the contours of various domestic and kinship arrangements in the colonial era. The historian, Megan Vaughan in her article (1983: 281) states the predicament best.

“To sum up, both oral and written sources specifically concerned with the history of the family tend to emphasize the formal structures of kinship relations and it is difficult, if not impossible, to know how these relate to the facts of social and economic organization. At best they can provide us with an indication of cultural conceptions of kinship and family”.

The examination of records such as those explored above can tell us a great deal about their authors and the contexts in which they were written. I have demonstrated how those accounts articulated with and reacted to racist ideologies and colonial policy, while at the same time furthering our understanding of West African domestic relations in the past. The ethnographic material produced by French colonial administrators-ethnographers during the early half of this century should offer a point of reference for a comparative perspective on contemporary investigations of family relations and domestic organization in this region, but should be approached with sufficient caution. As a social/cultural anthropologist studying contemporary transformation in rural Mali I continue to find such accounts engaging and thought-provoking. The fact is that old questions can always benefit from fresh approaches. By exploring these works we can determine just how fresh or just how old our approaches might be.

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