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“Try to Make a Fresh Start”: Dahomean Politicians Rethinking Oil Palm Development in the Late Colonial Period (1957–1960)

Giovanni Tonolo 

Department of History, European University Institute, Florence, Italy
Email: giovanni.tonolo@eui.eu

Abstract

This article looks at the final years of French colonial rule in Dahomey through the lens of development policies concerning the territory’s main resource: the oil palm tree. It examines how the Dahomean leaders dealt with the issue of development once the *Loi Cadre* allowed them to have a say in the matter. I argue that the Dahomeans were crucial in finding new development strategies even before formal independence. It also tries to assess the extent to which these solutions followed or departed from previous colonial attempts. The article therefore first describes the main features of colonial oil palm development in Dahomey since the end of the Second World War. Second, it depicts how Dahomean leaders rethought the development approach and why they found in the “syndicate association” the institutional tool to implement it. Finally, it argues that this solution, which combined features of Soviet and Israeli cooperatives with approaches specific to African socialism, was different from any other option previously considered by the colonial administration. By analysing late colonialism from a non-French perspective, this article argues that the Africans were no less crucial actors than the Europeans in the making of the late colonial state.

Keywords: cooperatives; Dahomey; development; late colonialism; *Loi Cadre*

Introduction

This article examines how Dahomean politicians dealt with the issue of oil palm development during the final years of French colonial rule. In doing so, it looks at late colonialism from a different perspective than the usual European one. Rather than focusing on how French officials handled this delicate phase, it investigates what the Dahomeans did. Indeed, under the new administrative framework established by the so-called *Loi Cadre* (adopted in 1956 but implemented the following year), the territorial governments of the French colonies became responsible for their internal affairs, including the design and implementation of rural and agricultural policies. Drawing on a number of hitherto neglected sources held in French and Beninese archives, this article looks at the decisions taken by the Dahomean government in a situation of semi-autonomy. These new sources also allow us to refine the view that agricultural reform in Dahomey was initially left to the remaining French officials. By arguing that the Dahomean experts came up with original solutions that had not been previously formulated by the French, this article aims to counterbalance

the general tendency in historiography to overemphasise the role of the former colonial powers in postcolonial development.¹

The late colonial state is usually seen as the multifaceted and overambitious project through which the Europeans responded to the challenges of local societies, namely nationalism and anticolonialism.² In this sense, historiography has been anchored in a European perspective. John Darwin's pioneering attempt to define the late colonial state considered the "metropole" and the "officialdom on the spot" as the main protagonists of the late colonial states. In contrast, he saw "chiefs, commoners, indigenous clerics" as "allies" sought by Europeans to serve their interests.³ It is now useful to turn our attention to the role played by the Africans, also because under late colonialism African politicians and planners had the opportunity to begin to steer rural development and to choose which paths to take and which experts to rely on. This opportunity did not automatically lead to a complete break with the colonial period – this would have to be tested on a case-by-case basis. However, acknowledging the centrality of indigenous actors in the late colonial state is also crucial to better understand why certain policies were implemented at independence.

Dahomey (present-day Benin) had been a French colony since 1894. Its conquest was encouraged by Marseille merchants who had been trading in Dahomean palm oil and kernels since the 1840s.⁴ For the French administrators, Dahomey was synonymous with the oil palm tree, which covered much of the southern part of the territory. Not only did the palm products account for 90% of the total value of Dahomean exports throughout the colonial period, but also Dahomey was by far the most important producer compared to the other French colonies in Africa. From the outset, the colonial administration sought to increase the production of Dahomean palm groves. As I show in the first part of this article, these efforts took on an unprecedented scale between the end of the Second World War and 1957. This section focuses on the French, with the aim of showing their agricultural development policies and the (limited) role played by the cooperatives in them: these two features are fundamental to a proper understanding of what followed.

The second section describes how Dahomean leaders approached the issue of oil palm development from 1957 onwards. From the very start, they gave prominence to the cooperative as a tool to discipline labour and to assemble sufficiently huge portions of land. The oil palm study commission set up in September 1958 by the then minister of agriculture, Alexandre Adandé, marked a break in this regard. An ethnologist by profession, Adandé was

¹ See for instance Joseph M. Hodge, "British Colonial Expertise, Post-Colonial Careerism and the Early History of International Development," *Journal of Modern European History* 8, no. 1 (2010): 24–46; Véronique Dimier, *The Invention of a European Development Aid Bureaucracy: Recycling Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). For an early contribution highlighting the breaks in development policy after independence, see Andrew Bowman, "Mass Production or Production by the Masses? Tractors, Cooperatives, and the Politics of Rural Development in Post-Independence Zambia," *Journal of African History* 52, no. 2 (2011): 201–21. For a more nuanced and open-ended account of postcolonial development, which both eliminated and embraced colonial structures according to political needs, see for example Corinna R. Unger, "The Decolonization of Development: Rural Development in India Before and After 1947," in *Internationalism, Imperialism and the Formation of Contemporary World*, ed. Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo and José Pedro Monteiro (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 253–78.

² See Martin Shipway, *Decolonization and Its Impact: A Comparative Approach to the End of the Colonial Empires* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2008), 116.

³ John Darwin, "What Was the Late Colonial State?," *Itinerario*: 23, no. 3–4 (1999): 75.

⁴ J.D. Hargreaves, "Towards a History of the Partition of Africa," *The Journal of African History* 1, no. 1 (1960): 102–5; Xavier Daumalin, "Récessions & attitudes coloniales: l'exemple des maisons de négoce marseillaises dans l'Ouest africain," in *Négoce blanc en Afrique noire. L'évolution du commerce à longue distance en Afrique noire du 18e au 20e siècles. Actes du colloque du Centre d'étude d'Afrique Noire, 23-25 septembre 1999* (Paris: Société française d'histoire d'outre-mer, 2001), 187–200.

a member of the *Union Démocratique Dahoméenne* (UDD), the first Dahomean party that did not represent a specific region of the colony but sought to establish a base in almost the entire territory by bringing together a heterogeneous patchwork of political groups. As a result of the commission's work, Adandé came up with a specific type of cooperative that would later characterise rural development policies: the so-called "syndicate association" (*association syndicale*).

The third and final section discusses the origins of this unique instrument. Adandé's political ideas were influenced by African socialism. In addition to the theory of the Africans' innate cooperative attitude, borrowed from Senegalese socialist leader Mamadou Dia, the syndicate associations also shared some elements with Soviet and Israeli cooperatives.⁵ Finally, I illustrate how syndicate associations, albeit under the different label of "compulsory cooperatives" (*coopératives obligatoires*), came to define post-independence development schemes.

Late colonial oil palm development in Dahomey and the problem of peasant participation

Development was one of the most striking aspects of the late colonial state that rose from the ashes of the Second World War. Given France's particular need for raw materials and the first disturbances in its colonial system in Asia, the reconstruction of the empire in Africa was of fundamental importance.⁶ A law, enacted on 30 April 1946, provided for a ten-year development programme for the French overseas territories, to be financed by the newly created *Fonds d'investissement pour le développement économique et social* (FIDES). FIDES, which channelled money from the metropole to the overseas territories, marked a break with the traditional policy of self-sufficiency for the colonies. Development became a political tool to legitimise the empire after a war won in the name of the right of self-determination, also thanks to the sacrifices of colonial subjects, and to counter the growing appeal of communism.⁷

Planners were particularly concerned about fat resources. As early as 1945, the planning bureau of the ministry of Overseas France began drawing up a plan for the production of fats, focusing on groundnuts, palm oil and kernels, and shea.⁸ A plan for the development of oleaginous products in West Africa was finally launched in 1947, as part of a wider five-year development plan financed by FIDES. It was prepared by the *Institut de*

⁵ This 'bricolage' of imported models and precolonial practices, resulting in original and alternative solutions, was also typical of other postcolonial African states: Priya Lal, *African Socialism in Postcolonial Tanzania: Between the Village and the World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 17; Kara Moskowicz, *Seeing like a Citizen: Decolonization, Development, and the Making of Kenya, 1945-1980* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019), 8. See also Daniel Speich, "The Kenyan Style of 'African Socialism: Developmental Knowledge Claims and the Explanatory Limits of the Cold War,'" *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 3 (2009): 449–66.

⁶ Frederick Cooper, "Reconstructing Empire in British and French Africa," *Past & Present* 210, no. 6 (2011): 196–210.

⁷ Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, *French West Africa* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1958), 252–58; Jean Suret-Canale, "From Colonization to Independence in French Tropical Africa: The Economic Background," in *The Transfer of Power in Africa: Decolonization 1940-1960*, ed. Prosser Gifford and W. M. Roger Louis (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), 450; Frederick Cooper, "Modernizing Bureaucrats, Backward Africans, and the Development Concept," in *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 70.

⁸ Archives Nationales d'Outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence (hereafter ANOM), 1 AFFECO 475, Comité directeur du FIDES, "Note sur la création d'usines d'huile de palme en Côte d'Ivoire, au Dahomey, au Togo, au Cameroun et en AEF," undated [1947].

recherche pour les huiles et oléagineux (IRHO), a private research institute founded in 1941.⁹ In Dahomey, the 1947 development plan called for the replanting of palm groves with selected high-yielding palms and the construction of four oil mills.¹⁰ In fact, not all of this was entirely new. From the late 1920s, the colonial administration had sponsored the planting of selected oil palms and the distribution of small machines to convert the fruit into oil.¹¹

After the Second World War, the main difference was therefore one of scale. The implementation of the projects was now vertically organised and directly controlled from Paris via the IRHO, which in January 1946 took over from the agricultural service of Dahomey the management of the Pobè research station producing high-yielding oil palms.¹² The money channelled through FIDES enabled the colonial administration to build four oil mills between 1949 and 1953, whereas until then the industrialisation of the sector had been left to private initiative, with ephemeral results. Moreover, in 1947, the French created the *Secteur de Rénovation de la Palmeraie* (SRP), an autonomous service responsible for the renewal of the palm groves. Thanks to FIDES funding, the SRP had a greater degree of autonomy than the agricultural service, and was able to use its own means of transport and agricultural machinery, as well as hiring wage labourers (before the Second World War, instead, the agricultural service had also resorted to various forms of forced labour).¹³ At the time of its creation, it consisted of two French agents (the sector head, engineer Lucien Tichit, and his assistant Réné Jégo), five Dahomean instructors (*moniteurs*), and a non-specialised workforce.¹⁴ In 1950, there were five Frenchmen and more than twenty instructors.¹⁵ The number of instructors continued to grow, reaching 38 in 1956.¹⁶ SRP staff distributed, staked and planted the oil palms selected at the Pobè station, as had been done before the war, but on a larger scale. The instructors' role was to demonstrate the usefulness of fertilisers, to show how to properly care for the palms and the undergrowth, and to check from time to time that the peasants were applying their advice. It soon became clear that the peasants did not want the selected palms or simply treated them like the more resistant sub-spontaneous palms. In the end, 70% of the 400,000 palms planted between 1947 and 1950 were lost.¹⁷

In 1953, with the launch of the second FIDES five-year plan, the SRP decided to concentrate the high-yielding palms in a number of blocs. Now that the oil mills had been built, efforts could be strategically placed close to them: the aim was to plant less, but better. Planting in bulk also made monitoring easier and reduced costs.¹⁸ The palms in

⁹ Christophe Bonneuil, "Mettre en ordre et discipliner les tropiques: Les sciences du végétal dans l'empire français, 1870-1940" (Thèse de Doctorat, Université de Paris VII, 1997), 497; René Tourte, *Histoire de la recherche agricole en Afrique tropicale francophone*, vol. V (Rome: FAO, 2005), 117-19.

¹⁰ Archives Nationales du Bénin, Porto-Novo (hereafter ANB), 1R16/9, Commissariat Général du plan, "Développement de la production de matières grasses d'origine végétale dans les territoires d'Outremer," undated [1946?], 20.

¹¹ Archives du Centre de Recherches Agricoles Plantes Pérennes, Pobè (hereafter ACRAPP), ARMO/1900/0062 "Palmer à huile - Aménagement, développement, amélioration," Antony Houard à Joseph-François Reste: Amélioration de la Palmeraie, 24 June 1929.

¹² ANOM, 14 MIOM 1870, Service de l'agriculture, "Rapport agricole de l'année 1946," 43.

¹³ ANOM, 14 MIOM 1882, Service de l'agriculture, "Rapport agricole de l'année 1947," 189-97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 179-82.

¹⁵ ANOM, 14 MIOM, 1905, Service de l'agriculture, "Rapport agricole de l'année 1950," 132.

¹⁶ ANOM, 14 MIOM 2033, Service de l'agriculture, "Rapport agricole de l'année 1956," 164-67.

¹⁷ ANOM, 14 MIOM 1887, Service de l'agriculture, "Rapport agricole annuel 1948," 106; ANOM, 14 MIOM 1923, Service de l'agriculture, "Rapport agricole de l'année 1950," 166-7; ANB, 1Q23/4, Cercle de Porto-Novo, "Rapport économique semestriel: I semestre 1951," 14; Albert Cognard, "La palmeraie du Dahomey," in *Comptes rendus de la Conférence Franco-Britannique sur le palmier à huile, 15-25 janvier 1956* (Nogent-sur-Marne: Centre technique d'agriculture tropicale, 1957), 94.

¹⁸ ANB, 1Q18/7, Sournies à Louis Jules Thibaut, 30 June 1953, 1-2; ACRAPP, ETAG/2014/0003.5, Bernard Joanny, "Rapport de mission au Dahomey, 7-23 Novembre 1957."

the new blocs were separated by a series of corridors to make room for other crops: the SRP hoped that by allowing peasants to grow food within the palm groves, they would be encouraged to look after the palms.¹⁹ This proved to be insufficient, and in September 1955 the SRP launched the “Action Paysannat” in the largest of its blocs, that of Gbada (1,500 hectares). The initiative provided for a French foreman, a Dahomean assistant, and a Dahomean agricultural instructor to manage the bloc for three years, rationalising the agricultural techniques and crop rotation, using mineral fertilisers and, above all, organising a “cooperative group” of peasants. The members were expected to look after certain plots of land, following the foremen’s instructions and selling the palm fruit to the Gbada mill, while also receiving income from the crops grown in the intercropping corridors. Maintenance work was to be carried out collectively.²⁰

The idea of encouraging the formation of cooperatives to improve the productivity of the Dahomean oil palm sector was not new.²¹ The first FIDES five-year development plan for French West Africa included cooperatives as an essential element on which agricultural production had to be based.²² The grouping of peasants was seen as the key to their participation in agricultural development programmes. This fascination with cooperatives was shared by the African leaders, but while for the French they served to increase efficiency, for the Africans they would contribute to the gradual elimination of the colonial presence.²³ However, cooperatives did not play the same important role as in late colonial British Africa and probably never became a movement “from below.”²⁴

In Dahomey, which in 1951 was considered the second territory in French West Africa in terms of the importance of the cooperative movement, the role of cooperatives in the development of palm oil production was almost irrelevant.²⁵ Since March 1951, the cooperatives of the territory had been grouped in the *Union des Coopératives du Dahomey* (Ucoda). The cooperatives usually grouped smallholders together and provided them with credit and machinery, while Ucoda was responsible for organising the collection, transport and sale of their products. Ucoda was supported by *Société de Courtage et de Commission J.L. Beaujolin* run by French businessman Gilbert Beaujolin, in turn backed by the Lehideux

¹⁹ ACRAP, ETAG/2014/0005.4, SRP, “Rapport annuel 1954,” February 1955, 13–14.

²⁰ ANOM, 14 MIOM 2014, Service de l’agriculture, “Rapport 1955,” 47–48; ANOM, 14 MIOM 2033, Service de l’agriculture, “Rapport 1956,” 34.

²¹ See for instance, Yves Henry and Antony Houard, *Étude et Projets d’amélioration de l’exploitation du Palmier à Huile: Stations Expérimentales* (Paris: Emile Larose, 1922), 5–6. On cooperatives and rural development, see Nikolay Kamenov, “Pooling Resources in the European Countryside: Cooperative Models, Rural Capitalism, and Beyond,” in *Living with the Land: Rural and Agricultural Actors in Twentieth-Century Europe - A Handbook*, ed. Liesbeth van de Grift, Dietmar Müller, and Corinna R. Unger (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2022), 109–32.

²² ANOM, 1 AFFECO 567, Gilbert Beaujolin à Louis-Paul Aujoulat, 13 October 1951, 1.

²³ Monica M. Van Beusekom, “Individualism, Community, and Cooperatives in the Development Thinking of the Union Soudanaise-RDA, 1946–1960,” *African Studies Review* 51, no. 2 (2008): especially 13–15. In 1949, Sorou-Migan Apithy authored a law proposing the creation of an African bank of cooperatives: Sorou-Migan Apithy, *Au service de mon pays, 1946–1956* (Montrouge: Dalex, 1957), 79.

²⁴ On cooperatives in colonial British Africa, see Aaron Windel, *Cooperative Rule: Community Development in Britain’s Late Empire* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022); Mo Moulton, “Les coopératives et la décolonisation dans l’Empire britannique,” in *L’utopie au jour le jour: Une histoire des expériences coopératives (XIXe–XXe siècle)*, ed. Alexia Blin et al. (Nancy: Arbre bleu, 2020), 281–90. On late colonial cooperatives in Tanganyika as being a movement “from below,” see Gero Erdmann, *Jenseits des Mythos: Genossenschaften zwischen Mittelklasse und Staatsverwaltung in Tanzania und Kenia* (Freiburg i. Br.: Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institut, 1996), 156; Andreas Eckert, “Useful Instruments of Participation? Local Government and Cooperatives in Tanzania, 1940s to 1970s,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 40, no. 1 (2007): 102.

²⁵ ANOM, 1 AFFECO 567, “Note succincte sur le Mouvement Coopératif en AOF,” 8 November 1951, 4.

and Vernes banks.²⁶ In 1952, Ucodea brought together 13 cooperatives with 6,625 members and traded 5,318 tonnes of agricultural produce, or 8.7% of Dahomey's total agricultural exports.²⁷

In the same year, Governor General Bernard Cornut-Gentille warned the Minister of Overseas France that the cooperative movement in French West Africa was “a screen behind which a new method of exploiting producers is hidden” and that Ucodea “never distributed a single cent in rebates to its members.”²⁸ The newly built oil mills enabled Dahomey to export highly refined industrial palm oil, which could be sold at higher prices than the ‘hard oil’ produced by the smallholders, thus weakening the companies trading artisanal palm oil, supplied by Ucodea. To the contrary, Ucodea represented a development model based on smallholders and small processing units at the village level. It was well known that Ucodea helped to spread discontent against the oil mills and lobbied for the possibility of setting up smaller cooperative factories.²⁹ It was no coincidence that Ucodea was liquidated in 1954, when France introduced a protocol granting overseas producers of low-acid vegetable oils an import price much higher than the world price. This measure gave a future to the oil mills in which France had invested heavily, while putting an end to the export of ‘hard oil,’ and with it the ‘traditional’ structures of the trade economy (*économie de traite*).³⁰ Apparently, the cooperative movement did not have a good reputation among the peasants after the experience of Ucodea.³¹ Nor did the cooperatives help to solve the problem of peasant participation in the projects. In the end, the “Action Paysannat” operation was met with “almost general indifference,” also according to the Dahomean politicians who took office after the *Loi Cadre*.³²

The new development approach of very late colonial Dahomey

All SRP interventions ceased in 1957 with the end of the second FIDES five-year development plan. The remaining funds were mainly used to repair and maintain existing palm blocs, but it was during these years that the issue of oil palm development was fully and for the first time re-examined by the Dahomeans themselves. This was made possible by the so-called *Loi Cadre*, adopted on 23 June 1956 and implemented in the territory in 1957. Presented by the Socialist Minister for Overseas France Gaston Defferre, it was in fact the result of an attempt to reform the French empire first envisaged in 1953. France's ruinous loss of Indochina and the outbreak of the Algerian rebellion, both in 1954, catalysed the need for reform. To avoid another anticolonial war, France met the main demands of the

²⁶ ANOM, 1 AFFPOL 2306, Mazodier, “Rapport sur le mouvement coopératif au Dahomey,” 28 May 1952, 1. On Beaujolin, see Catherine Hodeir, “Parcours parallèles mais singuliers: Jacques Foccart et Gilbert Beaujolin,” *Les Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques* 30 (2002).

²⁷ Alfred Mondjannagni, *Campagnes et villes au sud de la République Populaire du Bénin* (Paris: Mouton, 1977), 475.

²⁸ ANOM, 1 AFFECO 567, Bernard Cornut-Gentille à Pierre Pflimlin, 8 October 1952.

²⁹ ANB, 1Q23/4, R. Gouriou à Claude Valluy, 2 March 1951, 5.

³⁰ Henry Didier, “Le marché des oléagineux concrets,” *Nouvelle revue française d'outre-mer* 47 (1955): 464; Yves Péhaut, *Les oléagineux dans les pays d'Afrique occidentale associés au Marché commun: la production, le commerce et la transformation des produits* (Paris: H. Champion, 1976), 837–43.

³¹ Jean Serreau, “Le développement à la base au Dahomey et au Sénégal” (Thèse pour le doctorat ès-sciences économiques, Université de Paris, 1966), 277. On the negative image of late colonial cooperatives in independent Dahomey, see also Alexander Keese, “Just Like in Colonial Times? Administrative Practice and Local Reflections on ‘Grassroots Neocolonialism’ in Autonomous and Postcolonial Dahomey, 1958–65,” *Journal of African History* 60, no. 2 (2019): 270.

³² ACRAPP, ETAG/2014/0003.5, Ministère de l'Agriculture et du Paysannat, “Travaux de la sous-commission pour l'étude des questions relatives au palmier à huile,” 10–11. See also Machioudi Dissou, *Économie de la culture du palmier à huile au Bénin et en Côte d'Ivoire: approche comparative des politiques agricoles en Afrique* (Dakar: Les Nouvelles Éditions Africaines, 1988), 146.

African political movements (universal suffrage, the single electoral college, and territorial assemblies with real power), while reducing the responsibilities of the French national assembly in colonial politics. The territorial assemblies gained power at the expense of both the French governor and the federal government in Dakar. They now directly elected a government council to run the internal affairs of each colony. In the end, the *Loi Cadre* was a political compromise aimed at preventing decolonisation by making the African elites responsible for the government of their territory.³³

The *Loi Cadre* outsourced the most sensitive issues of internal politics. This was particularly evident in Dahomey during the strike at the Avrankou oil mill in November 1957. At the time, the territorial assembly was largely controlled by the *Parti Républicain Dahoméen* (PRD). Founded in 1951 as the party of Sorou-Migan Apithy, the Dahomean representative in the French constituent assembly after the Second World War and in the national assembly until 1956, the PRD was the expression of the commercial and intellectual elite of coastal Dahomey. Its programme coincided with that of the colonial administration, and the party's symbol was the oil palm tree.³⁴ At the end of 1957, Apithy's government found itself in the uncomfortable position of mediator between the French company running the oil mill (in which the Dahomean territory itself was a shareholder), which was unwilling to implement a wage increase, and the Dahomean workers, who were supposed to be represented by the assembly. In the end, the government sided with the company and violently suppressed the demonstrations in January 1958.³⁵

In the rural context, Apithy's government put new energy into the creation of cooperatives.³⁶ These were closer to those of the "Action paysannat" than to those of Ucodea, in the sense that they were to be made up of peasants who sold their fruit to the mills and did not produce their own oil by hand. Dahomean agricultural instructors were therefore sent to visit rural villages and try to encourage the formation of cooperatives. Reports of the missions they carried out describe the various obstacles they encountered in the countryside: the fact that the peasants did not consider these institutions to be useful if they did not have access to advance loans, that they expected the cooperatives to concentrate on the cultivation of food crops, or that they were suspicious because of the memory of the exploitative collective fields of the colonial period.³⁷ While it is true that the plantations managed by the few existing cooperatives were in better condition than the others, maintenance was still unsatisfactory: the Gbada cooperative, for example, managed only 138 hectares out of the 1,500 planned.³⁸

³³ See Nicolas Bancel, *Décolonisations? Élités, jeunesse et pouvoir en Afrique occidentale française (1945-1960)* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2022), 269–84; Martin Shipway, "Gaston Defferre's Loi-Cadre and Its Application, 1956-57: Last Chance for a French African 'Empire-state' or Blueprint for Decolonisation?," in *Francophone Africa at Fifty*, ed. Tony Chafer and Alexander Keese (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 15–29; Alexander Keese, "'Quelques satisfactions d'amour-propre': African Elite Integration, the Loi-Cadre, and Involuntary Decolonisation of French Tropical Africa," *Itinerario* 27, no. 1 (2003): 33–58; Tony Chafer, *The End of Empire in French West Africa: France's Successful Decolonization?* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 163–92.

³⁴ Martin Staniland, "The Three-Party System in Dahomey: I, 1946-56," *The Journal of African History* 14, no. 2 (1973): 305–6; Maurice-Ahanhanzo Glélé, *Naissance d'un état noir (L'évolution politique et constitutionnelle du Dahomey, de la colonisation à nos jours)* (Paris: Librairie générale de droit et de jurisprudence, 1969), 110–18.

³⁵ Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 420–21; Virginia Thompson, "Dahomey," in *Five African States*, ed. Gwendolen M. Carter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963), 213–15.

³⁶ ANB, 1R20/4.2, Michel Noudehou, *Délibération* no. 58.15, 6 May 1958.

³⁷ ANB, 1R19/3.3, Pierre Aguenou, "Rapport mensuel: tournée d'information générale dans les trois subdivisions du Cercle de Porto-Novo," 3 September 1958; ANB, 1R20/4.2, Pierre Gbéno, "Rapport mensuel," 31 décembre 1958, 1-2; ANB, 1R17/2, Aristide Durogange, "Compte rendu de tournée," 24 August 1959, 3-4.

³⁸ Claude Vienney, "Nouvelles institutions juridiques dans l'organisation coopérative dahoméenne," *Archives internationales de sociologie de la coopération*, 1964, 63, 82.

This is why in September 1958, the Minister of Agriculture Alexandre Adandé set up an oil palm study commission. Born into one of Porto-Novo's most influential families, Adandé was educated at the École William Ponty and then specialised in ethnography at the *Institut d'Ethnologie* in Paris. He joined the *Institut français d'Afrique noire* (IFAN) as an archivist in 1938 and became head of the ethnography department in 1948. He was an early member of the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA), from its foundation in 1946 until its break with the *Parti Communiste Français*, and served on its steering committee from 1946 to 1951. He later became the leader of the *Union Démocratique Dahoméenne* (UDD), a party founded in 1955 that brought together the anti-Apithy front, the Abomey elite, the younger educated, the Muslim community of Porto-Novo, and the trade union movement.³⁹ He was Apithy's main opponent in the 1956 elections, which the PRD narrowly won thanks to French support.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Adandé became Minister of Agriculture in Apithy's government in July 1958, following the creation of the *Parti du Regroupement Africain* (PRA) in March of that year. The PRA brought together the main parties of French West Africa that were not part of the RDA, and therefore included both Apithy's PRD and a faction of the UDD led by Adandé.⁴¹

Besides setting up the study commission, in September Adandé also urged the French district commanders to "review the [cooperative] question with coldness and lucidity and try to make a fresh start."⁴² Of the replies to Adandé's letter, only the one written in November 1958 by Antoine Colombani, commander of the Porto-Novo district, is held by the national archives of Benin in Porto-Novo (whose colonial funds cover the Porto-Novo district much more extensively than the others). Colombani was the nephew of a former district commander in Dahomey in the 1930s, François Marie, and was posted first to French Indochina and then to Dahomey from 1951 onwards.⁴³ In his reply, Colombani's first point was that the few village cooperatives already established should be put under the authority of a regional organisation to direct their activities.⁴⁴ This regional organisation would have to develop a cooperative attitude among the peasantry, choose the site for the development intervention and, if the owners agreed, lease it for the time necessary to cover its expenses; after the lease, the owners would probably remain associated and continue the exploitation.⁴⁵ Colombani's proposal was based on a mutual understanding between the interests of the peasants and the needs of the regional organisation. In short, instead of choosing "between authoritarianism and laissez-faire," he proposed "the middle way of an enlightened, soft and firm dirigisme."⁴⁶

This correspondence has been interpreted as evidence that in 1958 Dahomean politicians still relied heavily on French experts and that Colombani was the first to be asked by

³⁹ Glélé, *Naissance d'un état noir*, 135; Staniland, "The Three-Party System in Dahomey: I, 1946-56," 309-11; Samuel Decalo, *Historical Dictionary of Benin* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1995). On his activity at the IFAN, see also Marie-Albane De Suremain, "L'IFAN et la 'mise en musée' des cultures africaines (1936-1961)," *Outre-mers* 94, no. 356-357 (2007): 151-72; Romuald Tchibozo, "Héritier des traditions de Xogbonou et intellectuel de son temps: une biographie d'Alexandre Sènou Adandé," in *Bérose - Encyclopédie internationale des histoires de l'anthropologie* (Paris, 2019). On West Africans and the École William Ponty, see Tony Chafer, "Education and Political Socialisation of a National-Colonial Political Elite in French West Africa, 1936-47," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 35, no. 3 (2007): 437-58.

⁴⁰ Glélé, *Naissance d'un état noir*, 138.

⁴¹ Glélé, 153-55.

⁴² ANB, 1R20/4.2, Circulaire de Alexandre Adandé aux Commandants des Cercles: Coopératives de village, 15 September 1958, 1.

⁴³ Olivier Colombani, *Mémoires coloniales: la fin de l'Empire française d'Afrique vue par les administrateurs coloniaux* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991), 44, 67.

⁴⁴ ANB, 1R20/4.2, Antoine Colombani à Alexandre Adandé: Coopératives de village, 3 November 1958, 1.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

the Dahomean government to act as an expert on agrarian reform.⁴⁷ Since the concomitant existence of a commission entrusted with studying the oil palm sector was unknown, this made sense. The discovery of some documents relating to the commission in the hitherto unexplored archives of the Pobè agronomic station allows us to complete this picture. Founded by the French in 1922, the Pobè station, now called *Centre de Recherches Agricoles Plantes Pérennes*, is still the main centre for oil palm research and development in Benin. When I did a traineeship there, I found that the station still kept its archives with sources documenting the history of the oil palm in Dahomey/Benin from 1922 until today. Unfortunately, the boxes and files are scattered without any classification (I did a very crude inventory myself) and, most importantly, are in a very precarious state of preservation. The importance of such an archive for environmental historians, historians of science, development, and rural West Africa cannot be overestimated. On the one hand, this lucky discovery reinforces recent claims about the potential of small archives in Africa; on the other hand, it testifies to the dreadful state these archives can be in, and shows the extent to which their potential could be considered endangered.⁴⁸

In the light of the sources found in Pobè, Adandé only asked Colombani (as well as the other district commissioners) to give his opinion on cooperatives – a request which suggests that the French district commissioners were not involved in the concurrent work of the study commission. This does not rule out the possibility that other Frenchmen were involved, as the documents do not include a list of the members of the commission. In any case, the solution finally adopted by the commission had nothing to do with Colombani's, and it was an idea that no Frenchman had thought of before. Presenting the findings of the study commission, Adandé did not question the development path that late colonial Dahomey had followed since the end of the Second World War: the territory's economy still had to be driven by the export of palm oil and kernels. Adandé argued that the only way to keep the mills profitable and to make the Dahomean palm products competitive on the world market was to create huge plantations of selected palms.⁴⁹ To do this, large areas of land would have to be taken from the peasants and, as the palms would take several years to produce, Adandé envisaged a system of mutual cooperatives to compensate the peasants who would have to give up their land. Moreover, since he claimed that the peasants could not be expected to form the cooperatives spontaneously, he argued that these cooperatives would have to be “syndicate associations” (*associations syndicales*). Adandé loosely defined the syndicate association as a type of mutual union whose membership was compulsory for a minority after a majority had decided to set it up. In practice, the state would have to decide on the use of the peasants' land, invest in their land to create new plantations, and be adequately represented in the governing bodies of the cooperatives.⁵⁰

On 27 February 1959, as soon as the commission finished its work, an ordinance was issued requiring the creation of syndicate associations for the palm blocs that had received public aid since 1945. The state declared the palm groves that had benefited from state aid to be of public interest: as a result, their maintenance became compulsory. In the event of poor maintenance, the public authority was allowed to grant the land to third parties. While Adandé had defined the syndicate associations as mutual groups created by a majority of peasants against the will of a minority, the ordinance he signed a few days later overturned

⁴⁷ Keese, “Just Like in Colonial Times?,” 269.

⁴⁸ On the potential of regional archives in Africa for post-colonial history, see Alexander Keese and Annalisa Urbano, “Researching Post-Independence Africa in Regional Archives: Possibilities and Limits in Benin, Cabo Verde, Ghana and Congo-Brazzaville,” *Africa* 93 (2023): 542–61.

⁴⁹ ACRAPP, ETAG/2014/0003.5, “Travaux de la sous-commission,” 30.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 14, 32, 44; ANB, 1R20/6.2, Alexandre Adandé, “Rapport de présentation au Conseil des Ministres: Déclaration d'utilité publique portant sur les plantations de palmiers sélectionnés bénéficiant de l'aide financière de la Puissance Publique,” 17 December 1959.

this majority principle and allowed the state to create syndicate associations without consulting the peasants.⁵¹ The first syndicate association was created in 1959 in Agonvy (Ouémé department) and covered 600 hectares.⁵² Its members provided the state with both land and labour in return for 100 CFA francs per day worked. This sum was intended more as an advance on the harvest rather than a real wage (the minimum agricultural wage at the time was 294 CFA francs per day). The unpaid labour represented the nominal value of the workers' share of the cooperative's future profits, to which they would be entitled once the plantation was in production.⁵³

The origins of syndicate associations and their afterlife

Adandé explained that the term “syndicate association” was derived from a French decree of 30 June 1955 on agricultural development projects in the French overseas territories.⁵⁴ The decree did indeed provide for the use of syndicate associations, along with other types of peasants' groups. However, it did not define what syndicate associations were, so it cannot be said that Adandé's syndicate associations were inspired by the French legislator.⁵⁵ Rather, his reference to the decree can only be seen as an attempt to lend legitimacy to the measure.

Moreover, according to what I found in the archives, the term “syndicate association” first appears in the report of the study commission. Not only did the French officials never propose its creation, but they also did not hypothesise comparable solutions under different names. In May 1958, FIDES inspector Jean Baudot, while listing a number of possible solutions for the Dahomean palm groves, had imagined that the peasants could give up their land in exchange for the benefits of the company running the plantation. However, he had assumed that these companies were either private, mixed, or spontaneous peasant cooperatives.⁵⁶

Instead, what the Dahomean commission brought in comparison to previous proposals was decisive state intervention. Adandé, who had lived and worked in Dakar, was a member of the executive committee of the *Union Progressiste Sénégalaise* (UPS) and was committed to African socialism. The retrospective article on Dahomean agrarian development that he wrote in 1963 was literally copied, without attribution, from Mamadou Dia's *Contribution à l'étude du mouvement coopératif africain* (1952). In particular, Adandé copied the sections arguing that African society was historically communitarian and that colonialism had destroyed this collectivist attitude.⁵⁷ Dia, also a graduate of the École William Ponty, was along with

⁵¹ Ministère de l'agriculture, Ordonnance n°5 du 27 février 1959; ANB, 1R20/6.2, “Rapport de présentation;” ACRAPP, ARMO/1900/0062, dossier “Demande de subvention – Fonds d'Aide et de Coopération, exercice 1959-1960,” “Fusion du Secteur de Rénovation de la Palmeraie et de la mission d'Étude de l'Ouémé – Orientation,” April 1959, 3, 11.

⁵² Archives Nationales Française, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine (hereafter ANF), 19940063/6/2, Ministère de l'Agriculture et de la Coopération, “Programme de travail 1960 – Demande de subventions au FAC,” undated [1959?], 15.

⁵³ Serreau, “Le développement à la base,” 284–85.

⁵⁴ ACRAPP, ETAG/2014/0003.5, “Travaux de la sous-commission,” 16.

⁵⁵ Décret n° 55-887 du 30 juin 1955: Conditions de réalisation des aménagements agricoles et des opérations de développement de l'économie rurale dans les TOM.

⁵⁶ ANB, 1Q11/2, Note de Jean Baudot, 2 May 1958, 36.

⁵⁷ Mamadou Dia, *Contribution à l'étude du mouvement coopératif en Afrique noire* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1958), 12–21; Alexandre Adandé, “Regard rétrospectif sur l'économie africaine et perspective de développement agricole au Dahomey,” *Études dahoméennes*, no. 1 (1963): 8–12. Several post-independence governments, often but not only inspired by African socialism, justified the introduction of cooperatives on the grounds of a harmonious, mutual precolonial past: Bowman, “Mass Production or Production by the Masses?,” 208; Danielle Jonckers, “Le mythe d'une tradition communautaire villageoise dans la région Mali-sud,” in *Les associations paysannes en Afrique* :

Senghor the most influential exponent of the UPS and a proponent of self-management socialism, based on local mutualism and global solidarity.⁵⁸ Adandé's article shows how much his idea of cooperatives owed to Senegalese socialism.

Late colonialism is often conceived as a broader framework, in which similar challenges were faced with similar approaches in very different contexts. As we mentioned above, for example, the cooperative had been a common solution to rural development, above all in British Africa. Nevertheless, the Dahomean syndicate association was not modelled on any type of cooperative previously implemented in the British or French empires. To find possible sources of inspiration, one should look at the Soviet *kolkhoz* or the Israeli *moshav ovdim*.⁵⁹ The former was first theorised by Lenin but only implemented with the collectivisation of land in the winter of 1929–30. It was a top-down cooperative, although the participation remained voluntary on paper.⁶⁰ The first *moshav ovdim* was established in Israel in 1921: it was located on state-owned land, but divided equally between families. In contrast to the *kibbutz*, each family was considered a separate consumption and living unit. Moreover, hired labour was allowed: there was no equality in terms of workload and reward, but the latter was based on the work of the family unity.⁶¹

The Dahomean syndicate associations shared characteristics with both the *kolkhoz* and the *moshav ovdim*: compulsory membership made them similar to the former, while the fact that the members retained some property, secured title to the holdings and had a share in the cooperative brought the syndicate associations closer to the *moshav ovdim*. Moreover, Dahomean politicians were probably familiar with these two solutions. As early as 1944, the recommendations for African agriculture of the Brazzaville Conference – an event that, with all its limitations, could be seen as a declaration of intent on what the French late colonial empire in Africa should look like – included a mission to be sent to the USSR to learn about the *kolkhoz* system.⁶² Whether this mission was carried out or not, colonial officials, and thus the Dahomean elite, had this model in mind.

More direct and closer in time was the knowledge of Israeli cooperatives. In the aftermath of the Suez crisis, Israel actively sought to establish relations with African countries, starting with Nkrumah's Ghana.⁶³ In November 1958, five Dahomeans went to Tel Aviv to attend the three-month seminar on cooperation organised by the Israeli General Federation of Trade Unions (*Histadrut*) for sixty participants from Asia and Africa. The purpose of the seminar was to teach the functioning of the three types of Israeli cooperative villages (*kibbutz*, *moshav*, and *moshav shitufi*).⁶⁴

However, the Dahomeans did not exactly replicate either the *kolkhoz* or the *moshavim*, and none of the two were ever mentioned in the documents I found. If, in the early 1960s,

organisation et dynamiques, ed. Jean-Pierre Jacob and Philippe Lavigne Delville (Paris: Karthala, 1994), 123–24; Dominique Gentil, *Les Mouvements coopératifs en Afrique de l'Ouest: interventions de l'État ou organisations paysannes?* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1986), 65, 75, 133.

⁵⁸ Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 207–8.

⁵⁹ Lucien Schmandt, "Panorama de l'action coopérative dans les pays d'expression française d'Afrique et à Madagascar," *Revue des études coopératives*, 1961, 30; Gabriel Gosselin, *Développement et tradition dans les sociétés rurales africaines* (Genève: Bureau international du travail, 1970), 217.

⁶⁰ See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance & Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁶¹ Joseph Ben-David, ed., *Agricultural Planning and Village Community in Israel* (Paris: UNESCO, 1964), 46–49; Craig Taylor, "Israeli Aid to Africa, 1954–1974" (PhD dissertation, Munich, Universität der Bundeswehr, 2022), 24–25.

⁶² Thompson and Adloff, *French West Africa*, 251.

⁶³ Zach Levey, "The Rise and Decline of a Special Relationship: Israel and Ghana, 1957–1966," *African Studies Review* 46, no. 1 (2003): 155–77.

⁶⁴ Mordechai A. Kreinin, *Israel and Africa: A Study in Technical Cooperation* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), 28–31.

countries such as Nigeria and Tanzania introduced settlement schemes explicitly based on the *moshav ovdim*, with direct technical assistance from Israel, this did not happen in Dahomey.⁶⁵ This originality was also noticed by development aid agencies. As early as 1959 the Dahomean government approached the European Economic Community to finance a 4,000-hectare plantation in the Mono region. The report drawn up by the European Commission acknowledged that the syndicate associations “will certainly shock certain minds because it partially fulfils the collectivisation of land.” However, they were justified as “a practical formula” that responded to the need to “move the rural economy from a medieval to a modern state in the shortest possible time.”⁶⁶

One year after Dahomey’s formal independence (1 August 1960), a new law (no. 61-27 of 10 August 1961) defined “compulsory cooperatives” (*coopératives obligatoires*) as the main instrument for rural development in the country. Rather than being something new, this was the final formalisation of the syndicate associations. Like their predecessors, the compulsory cooperatives could be created either by a majority of peasants or directly by the minister of agriculture. The law stipulated that once the state had declared an area to be of public interest, all those with property rights in it had to give up their land.

Again, the French were not involved in the drafting of the law. This is suggested by the fact that at the end of 1961 the *Fonds d’aide et de coopération* (the successor to FIDES) sent the agronomist Maurice Gaide to Dahomey to assess the soundness of the law. Gaide wrote that it would be “easy to criticise this mixture of articles, some of which are in line with the most orthodox Western cooperation, and others which are completely innovative and somehow reminiscent of some cooperation formulas used in socialist countries.” However, Gaide defended the new law on the grounds that the compulsory cooperatives made it possible to take land from owners who were not using it and give it to landless and unemployed young people without carrying out a complete agrarian reform and without threatening private property (the owners would have received rent for their land). Moreover, the figure of the cooperative worker guaranteed a cheap labour force that was not subject to labour legislation.⁶⁷

On the contrary, the US ambassador was never convinced of the soundness of the operation. He saw compulsory cooperatives as a basis for collectivism. As a result, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded a short-lived programme of free palm tree distribution to peasants, to counteract the cooperative trend.⁶⁸ As further evidence of the uniqueness of the Dahomean cooperatives, the USAID did not hesitate to support the *moshavim*-inspired settlement programme in eastern Nigeria in 1963.⁶⁹ Apart from this case, however, postcolonial Dahomey was not the scene of any particular Cold War aid competition.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Werner Roider, *Farm Settlements for Socio-Economic Development: The Western Nigerian Case* (München: Weltforum-Verlag, 1971), 23–24; Chima J. Korieh, *The Land Has Changed: History, Society and Gender in Colonial Eastern Nigeria* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2010), 207; Lal, *African Socialism in Postcolonial Tanzania*, 49; Taylor, “Israeli Aid to Africa,” 192–93.

⁶⁶ Historical Archives of the European Commission, Brussels, BAC 249/1980_118, FED, “Palmeraises sélectionnées du Mono – sous dossier technique, deuxième section: Environnement technique et sociologique des projets,” undated [1959], 6.

⁶⁷ ANF, 19940063/7/3, “Étude des demandes FAC 1962 faites au titre du développement de la production rurale par le gouvernement du Dahomey – rapport de mission de M. Gaide,” undated [December 1961], 10–13.

⁶⁸ Bruno Amoussou, *L’Afrique est mon combat* (Paris: L’Archipel, 2009), 131.

⁶⁹ Korieh, *The Land Has Changed*, 207.

⁷⁰ On development and the Cold War, see Sara Lorenzini, *Global Development: A Cold War History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); David C. Engerman, *The Price of Aid. The Economic Cold War in India* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018).

Despite USAID's counter-programme, post-colonial oil palm development relied entirely on compulsory cooperatives, which eventually allowed oil palm plantations to be established in Dahomey. However, instead of improving peasants' livelihoods by increasing palm oil production and redistributing wealth, the cooperatives in the long run became cages from which peasants tried to escape. The parastatal company that managed the plantations benefited from the compulsory nature of the cooperatives, underpaying the peasants for both their labour and their harvest. Cooperative members never received any rebates from these profits.⁷¹

Conclusion

Neither the syndicate associations nor the compulsory cooperatives marked a definitive break with earlier colonial development policies. Late colonial and then postcolonial Dahomey inherited institutional, economic, and political patterns. After independence, the French presence remained essential also for raising funds, negotiating with 'donors,' and preparing long-term development plans.⁷² Dahomean politicians continued to see oil palm-based exports as the main hope for developing their country. Moreover, they kept believing that its success depended on transforming peasants into disciplined plantation workers and spreading improved, high-yielding strains of oil palm. In this sense, the way in which the administration planned to develop the palm groves and the way in which it viewed the 'backward' peasants did not change. Syndicate associations were set up precisely to ensure their participation in the oil palm plantations, something that had not been achieved in previous late colonial interventions. However, this continuity in agricultural policy mirrored the convictions of the Dahomean leaders rather than a lack of autonomy.⁷³

This article has argued that, thanks to the territorial autonomy gradually granted by France since the *Loi Cadre*, Dahomean politicians were able to shape agricultural and rural policies even before formal independence. On the contrary, French experts had only partial control over their implementation. Although Dahomey continued on the path of export-led development, much of which was directed towards France, the development schemes of the 1960s were different from the ones implemented before. The basic institutional tool behind them, the syndicate association or compulsory cooperative, was completely new. Its invention dates back to French colonial rule, but was the product of Dahomean leaders and not of French experts. In the end, it was a combination of various sources of cooperative ideas rooted in contexts as diverse as the Soviet Union and Israel, and reinterpreted in the light of African socialism.

Starting from the question of how an African government behaved once it had a certain degree of autonomy, this article has found that the Dahomeans did not wait for formal independence to implement their own ideas about the future of the country. By rethinking the dynamics of late colonialism, developmentalism, and decolonisation from a non-European perspective, this article has attempted to contribute to our understanding of late colonialism and decolonisation. In late colonial governments, Africans were not of secondary importance and, through their gradual involvement in the decision-making process, they were part of the making of late colonialism itself. Unravelling the role of African actors, as

⁷¹ See for example Pierre-Yves Le Meur, "La politique du palmier à huile au Dahomey-Bénin depuis le XIXe siècle: Une étude de cas dans le département de l'Atlantique," (Stuttgart: Universität Hohenheim: Centre for Agriculture in the Tropics and Subtropics, 1995), 13–16.

⁷² Serreau, "Le développement à la base," 231–36; Thompson, "Dahomey," 242.

⁷³ On the elites' political imagination as being the main continuity between colonial and postcolonial state, see Leander Schneider, "Colonial Legacies and Postcolonial Authoritarianism in Tanzania: Connects and Disconnects," *African Studies Review* 49, no. 1 (2006): 93–118.

well as their interests and sources of inspiration, remains crucial to understanding the path that postcolonial states would take.

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