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Harry Gamble, *Contesting French West Africa: Battles over Schools and the Colonial Order 1900-1950*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. xiv + 358 pp. Maps, photographs, notes, bibliography, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8032-9549-0.

Review by Kathleen Keller, Gustavus Adolphus College.

In Camara Laye's somewhat fictionalized memoir, *The Dark Child*, the young narrator comes of age in the 1930s in rural Guinea where he is educated in several ways--in farming by his grandmother, in blacksmithing by his father, in the arts of magic by his mother, and finally in the ways of his ethnic group in a coming-of-age school.[1] At the ceremony marking his entry into manhood, each boy's parents select physical objects to represent him. To Camara's chagrin his stepmother chooses a pen and notebook, holding them up to symbolize his achievements in the French school.[2] Although he finds it embarrassing, his family does not, and Camara soon realizes that his future will be in pursuing a French education, leaving home for a school in Conakry, then eventually in France. Camara Laye's story depicts with emotion the push and pull between tradition and modernity that emerge in so many novels and memoirs set in the colonial era. To Camara, being educated in French schools was an opportunity, but it also meant an agonizing decision to leave behind his home, family, and traditions.

Camara's book offers an invaluable student's perspective on rural life and schools in the 1930s and 1940s in French West Africa. But what did French colonial schools in West Africa hope to offer their students? Did they view European education as a step toward French modernity and a step away from African tradition, as Camara suggests? Surprisingly, considering the growing interest in the history of the French colonialism in West Africa, few works in English have broached the role of education in French West Africa in depth. Harry Gamble's *Contesting French West Africa: Battles over Schools and the Colonial Order* takes on this formidable subject in a comprehensive book that contributes significantly to the scholarship in the field.

The idea that assimilation to French culture in the colonies was always a half-hearted project of empire is not new.[3] However, Gamble's book takes on the question of assimilation through the lens of education. Surely, one thinks, if assimilation was ever a goal of the French administration in Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF), education is the place where it would surface. Yet Gamble makes clear that in fact, in the twentieth century, the exact opposite was true. Instead of seeking to assimilate Africans into French ways of life, colonial authorities were consistently fearful of creating an elite of Frenchified Africans. As early as 1903 when an official education policy was first developed in the federation, Camille Guy, lieutenant governor of Senegal, insisted that the goal of education outside of the four communes (four early French

coastal communities who could claim political rights) should be “practical and rudimentary.” He claimed, “it’s a matter of turning young natives into workers who speak and read French” (p. 25). Students would learn some basic math, reading, history, and geography, but would mostly study subjects such as agriculture, woodworking, and metalworking (p. 27). In 1931, Paul Crouzet lamented that “the myth persists...that all the colored students continue to read in their school book and repeat: ‘the Gauls, our ancestors...’”(71). Crouzet wished to smash that myth because the French administration was designing curricula to meet local needs, as it saw them.

In fact, in the interwar era, Gamble shows that instead of encouraging Africans to adopt French ways, the government-general of AOF was invested in keeping Africans rooted in their home communities. In some of the most interesting passages of the book, Gamble describes how officials made sure that students studying far from home in Dakar retained their cultural traditions. Some students were required to undertake research about their home regions during summer breaks. These projects were to be based in rural areas, not towns, and to cover subjects such as “local history, folklore, local languages, local geography, and natural history” (p. 111). In the early 1930s the William Ponty School in Dakar sponsored theater troupes to perform songs, skits, folk tales, and other enactments of African culture (pp. 112-113). Far from being encouraged to abandon the culture Camara feared he would lose, educated Africans who assimilated too fully were mocked for their lack of authenticity. One skit described in a 1935 newspaper sums up the goal of the performances: while a presumably authentic chorus performs, a “native” described as both “de-tribalized” and “ludicrous” is trotted out on stage. Awkward and out of place, he eventually joins the chorus and re-connects with his roots (pp. 114-115). If the myth of assimilation still holds sway, Gamble effectively explodes it in this book.

As the title indicates, *Contesting French West Africa* is about more than just charting a history of education. It also is about struggles between Africans and the French colonial administration. Gamble writes that his book “deliberately tacks back and forth between French and African actors and perspectives. Rarely if ever mere recipients of colonial education, Africans who attended colonial schools often worked to bend their education to their own purposes” (p. 8). Chapters one and two focus on the *originaires* (Africans from the “four communes”). In these chapters Gamble is most effective at showing how Africans resisted colonial policies on education. Although historians have documented the fight for political rights waged by the *originaires*, Gamble shows how they also engaged in demands for education. In the four communes, colonial officials segregated whites and blacks in schools, limited opportunities for the *originaires*, and increasingly prioritized practical education. *Originaires* had political power, though, and fought back against efforts to limit the number of urban schools and push their children into “regional” schools. In this way the book makes an important contribution to our understanding of the *originaires* in general, who are among the most well-known of African colonial elites, but are almost exclusively viewed through a political lens. The *originaires* are often understood as “assimilated” elites, but Gamble concludes that “the four communes need to be viewed not as a case study in assimilation but rather, as contested, liminal spaces with large implications for the rest of French West Africa” (p. 42).

Perhaps the most famous of all African colonial elites (although not an *originnaire*), Léopold Sédar Senghor, plays a prominent role in chapters five and eight as debates moved from access to education to questions of how much assimilation and metropolitan centralization was

warranted. Senghor, in the interwar era, advocated for *Négritude* and praised both the value of French culture and values alongside the teaching of African languages. Senghor remained deeply rooted in the cultural realm, even as he advocated for widening educational access. Ultimately, because Senghor was a strong advocate of African culture and traditions, he rejected the importation of metropolitan education and his ideas landed him on the side of a plan to relegate African students to rural schools where agriculture, practical skills, and a lot of labor were practiced. But Senghor, born a subject who applied for citizenship while studying in France, was challenged by *originaires* who saw a future in modernizing, assimilating, and gaining status and skills through French education. Ultimately, it was the African elite, not the French colonial regime, that demanded French civilization through education. Chapter five's strength is that it shows not only a push and pull between French and Africans, but also the fracturing amongst African elites. Faced with a changing world, some of them saw an opportunity in French-style education, while others insisted on African languages as being at the heart of schools. Gamble does a truly fine job of exploring the nuances of their stances, even though most found ways to reconcile African identity with French education.

In addition to “tacking back and forth” between French administration and Africans, Gamble also moves from metropole to colony. He contextualizes AOF's educational plans within the shift to republican education in the metropole (pp. 6-7). This was an important change for the colonies because most schools in the nineteenth century had been operated by missionaries (pp. 22-23). Gamble also highlights links between romanticized images of the French peasantry and African rural people in the interwar era (pp. 89-95). Thus the book shows that both local and metropolitan currents of thought came into play in AOF.

Somewhat unusually, this book covers the entire first half of the twentieth century. This turns out to be a benefit to the argument of the book. In moving beyond the Second World War, Gamble locates more instances of contestation as education played a critical role in debates about the postwar French union and the years leading to independence. It was only in the latest stages of colonialism in West Africa that authorities seriously considered attempting to fully integrate AOF into the metropolitan education system.

At times this book might be a challenging read for undergraduate students. More seasoned scholars of French colonial history will notice that it sticks rather closely to Senegal for much of the narrative. It would have been nice to see the author devote a bit more attention to a place such as Dahomey which, like Senegal, also had a politically active and educated elite. A few African students and teachers are introduced in the course of the book aside from Senghor--Amadou Duguay, Clédor Ndiaye, Massire Coulibaly, Tiémoko Garan Kouyaté, and Ousmane Socé—but readers catch only a glimpse of their experiences in the school system.

Ultimately, these quibbles with the book are minor. After all, this is not a book so much about African students as it is about French colonial policies and struggles over them. Indeed, the book succeeds in bringing both French and African players into view in the “battles over schools.” The book makes an important contribution to the scholarship of the field. It is deeply researched, and uses an impressive variety of sources—from archival documents, to press sources, and published accounts. Additionally, it excels at revealing the fractures within constituencies, as metropolitan officials opposed colonial administrators in Dakar and *originaires* approached education differently than metropolitan educated elites such as Senghor. *Contesting French West Africa* provides critical insight into colonial policy and practice. It will be

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essential reading for colonial historians, and provides critical context for readers of accounts such as the one written by Camara Laye.

#### NOTES

[1] Camara Laye, *The Dark Child*, trans. James Kirkup and Ernest Jones, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1994).

[2] Laye, *The Dark Child*, p. 117.

[3] Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 74-75.

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