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Tony Chafer, *The End of Empire in French West Africa: France's Successful Decolonization?* Oxford and New York: Berg, 2002. 264 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 1-85973-552-5. \$20.00 U.S. (pb.) ISBN 1-85973-557-6.

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Tony Chafer's history of the decolonization process in French West Africa is a political history that attempts to present both French and African perspectives. Chafer sees the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial era not so much as an end point and new beginning, but rather as a passage from outright colonialism to a neo-colonialism marked by international clientelism. Similarly, he persuasively demonstrates how the process was marked not so much by a simple French-African divide, as it was by a prolonged and complicated set of demands and accommodations by various French governments and African political leaders with diverse interests and goals. Finally, within the African nationalist movement, Chafer explains the interests of various political parties, as well as trade unions, student groups, and youth movements.

Chafer's text comes equipped with a glossary in the front and a time-line of political events at the back. It is neatly chronological in its organization. The introduction and the conclusion provide useful and thorough reflections on the substance of the book, including a bonus comparison of French African decolonization with British African decolonization. It is a straightforward and useful text that overall appears well suited for use in courses on international relations, African or French politics, or postcolonialism.

Chafer allows that the complexity of French African decolonization is such that it is better to speak of a plurality of "stories" rather than a single story (p.8). Nevertheless, rather than reducing the scope of his project, Chafer strives to cover the entire complexity of the politics in the many territories in French West Africa (AOF), along with occasional excursions to French Equatorial Africa (AEF). The price of this inclusive sweep is the near absence of any local texture to his history. For example, he mentions the prominence of the Mouride brotherhood in Leopold Sedar Senghor's Senegal and elsewhere mentions that the marabouts were the foundation of Senghor's political support. Yet he explains neither Mouride nor marabout, not even to the extent of including them in his glossary. Discussing Mauritanian politics he mentions Sidi el Moktar Ndiaye's prominence, but he does not tell us whether Ndiaye was a Haratine, a Beydane or a Black African. Such information is crucial to a minimal comprehension of Ndiaye's political identity.[1]

Absent any detail about local cultures, traditions, beliefs or practices, Chafer's text presents its story as European history.[2] That is, although he includes much information about the political parties and goals of the African territories, the terms of his history are empire, colonialism, political parties, nationalism, unions, and students. These highly developed categories in Western political and social history allow Chafer a distinct, yet somewhat limited purchase on African societies and politics. He sees the story, so to speak, only so far as these Western categories allow. Moreover, Chafer is not unaware of

the Westernness of these categories; he discusses the European bias of trade union interests, and how education was deliberately used to cultivate an affinity for French culture and state among Africans. Ironically, this limit to Chafer's interest in African societies probably will make his book more palatable to readers interested in international relations and power politics. Throughout its expertly detailed coverage of French and African politics, this book allows the Western reader to feel entirely comfortable and at-home. Indeed, it is rather like touring the countryside in a mobile home, taking in the sights and events without ever staying one place long enough to get stuck in the local "mud." The dictum that "all politics are local" is not operative in Chafer's text.

While Chafer's method leaves out dimensions to this history that are intrinsically interesting and essential to a true understanding of African politics, nonetheless there is much to be learned here. He effectively debunks the claim that France intentionally designed its African decolonization, and demonstrates how instead this decolonization arose through a welter of stalled French initiatives, the pressure of African union, student, and youth demands, and the hunger for power by the French educated African elites. The various policies throughout the parade of French regimes including Vichy--de Gaulle's Free France, the Fourth Republic, and the Fifth Republic--are recounted with precision. He portrays well the persuasive ideal of independence through assimilation, made attractive by the ideal of French Republicanism and the universal brotherhood of man. At the penultimate moment, in 1959 as de Gaulle once again steered the French state, the AOF and AEF faced the choice not only of continued association with or independence from France, but also of continued unity among themselves, or independence from other African territories. This complicated culmination of nationalist movements is again treated with confidence and expertise by Chafer.

The legacy of French peaceful decolonization in Africa was an on-going relationship with its former colonies. This relationship was constructed out of a broad range of mutual cooperation in economic, military, technical, and cultural fields. For example, through establishing the University of Dakar--the first university in Francophone Africa--on the eve of independence, France insured that francophone West Africans would pursue French schooling and thereby be oriented toward French rather than British or American culture. The solid relationship between France and its former African colonies, Chafer writes, allows France to continue punching above its weight in the international arena. In other words, France owes its continued prominence on the world-stage in large part to its on-going relationship to its former African colonies.

For those impassioned by international history as a "great game" (as expressed in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*), Chafer's text will prove very rewarding. Its central thesis, that France is dependant on its former colonies for its current international status, is provocative. This past spring Mauritania experienced a failed coup.^[3] Speculation about who was the ultimate sponsor of the coup has run the gamut from the deposed Saddam Hussein to an al Qaeda-affiliated network. At least one African commentator, however, hypothesized that it was the workings of the French government, allegedly resentful and jealous of the increasing influence of the United States in Mauritanian affairs. At the time I dismissed this report as a far-fetched conspiracy theory. Having read Chafer, I wonder.

NOTES

[1] For a brief introduction to the Mouride brotherhood see <http://www.micasite.org/mouridism.htm>. For an explanation of these Mauritanian groups, see Alice Bullard, "Mauritanian Activists' Struggle Against Slavery," *Middle East Report* 32:2 (Summer 2002): 14-17.

[2] On the idea of non-European history as “European History” see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) and my review of Chakrabarty, in *Theory and Society* 31:6 (December 2002): 777-784.

[3] Alice Bullard and Bakary Tandia, “Images and Realities of Mauritania’s Attempted Coup,” *Middle East Report*, July 22, 2003, on-line at <http://www.merip.org>.

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