

H-France Review Vol. 3 (April 2003), No. 31

Emmanuelle Sibeud, *Une science impériale pour l'Afrique? La construction des savoirs africanistes en France, 1878-1930*. Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2002. 358 pp. Maps, illustrations, biographical notices, notes, bibliography, and index. 32.00 € (pb). ISBN 2-7132-1784-9.

Review by Alice L. Conklin, University of Rochester.

A recent edition of *Le Monde des Livres* (23 January 2003) contained a rare page devoted solely to new works on the French empire. The two books that the editor selected out were Marc Ferro's *Le livre noir du colonialisme*—a collection of articles detailing well-known colonial atrocities—and yet another of Pascal Blanchard and Sandrine Lemaire's popular volumes on the most spectacular and racist sides of colonial culture in France, *Culture coloniale: La France conquise par son empire 1870-1931* (this coming fast upon last year's *Zoos humains*).^[1] Both reviews were enthusiastic; they were also entirely uncritical. I would not want to read into this single set of reviews more than is warranted. But taken at face value, it would seem that a newspaper that regularly features serious historical scholarship might also call attention to, or at least show an awareness of, the more nuanced work that is beginning to emerge in France regarding its colonial past, particularly with regard to sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. It is very easy to condemn colonialism's most visible excesses. It is considerably harder to lay bare the myriad more subtle ways in which colonialism worked its way into the life of the nation over the course of the last century—ways which linger (and malinge) still. Yet this is precisely the kind of history that a growing number of French scholars are now attempting to write.^[2]

Emmanuelle Sibeud's recently published *Une science impériale pour l'Afrique?* is a case in point. It should give pause to all who believe they understand exactly how power and knowledge are related in a colonial setting. Sibeud sets out in a dense yet highly readable narrative to tell the story of how administrators-ethnographers in Africa fundamentally changed the content and practices of a nascent *science de l'homme* in France. Once content to leave the collection of social facts to amateurs while they themselves did the serious work of interpretation, French social scientists by the interwar years had come to recognize that the proper study of cultures required intensive fieldwork by the scholars themselves. It was, moreover, in colonial sub-Saharan Africa—the last of the world's large cultural complexes to be opened to Western science—that this particular epistemological revolution (at least for the French) took place. Yet as Sibeud's careful reconstruction of the ways in which local knowledge transmuted into metropolitan scientific practice makes clear, there was nothing automatic about this process.

Sibeud's point of departure was her discovery of a "véritable réseau de recherche coloniale" (p. 11) made up of a small fraction of the French administrators, officers, and missionaries who combined their jobs as "gestionnaires" of the French empire with a commitment to doing ethnography. She has tracked the careers and writings of sixty individuals, all of whom served in the African colonies and left behind a record of scientific publications and, in some cases, correspondence. One of the impressive aspects of

Sibeud's work is her recovery of this dispersed record of publication. Much of it is buried in ephemeral journals that flourished both in the metropole and in the African colonies, but a not insignificant portion of it also appeared in France's most prestigious scholarly reviews or popular science journals. Sibeud has framed her story around two fairly traditional dates: she begins in 1870, when a new demand for knowledge about Africa emerged in France in tandem with the continent's conquest, and she ends in 1930 with the founding of metropolitan France's first pluridisciplinary association devoted exclusively to the study of Africa: la Société des africanistes. The story unfolds chronologically and moves back and forth between local districts, imperial centers such as Dakar and Brazzaville, and a dizzying array of learned societies, colonial interest groups, government and academic institutions in Paris. Her goal throughout is to understand how the status of Africa as the contested object of scientific discourse evolved over these some sixty years and the specific role the presence of the empire played in determining Africanism's forms and content. That there would be a scientific *mise-en-scène* of Africa was never in doubt, given the Third Republic's commitment to a modern, scientizing empire. Who would speak for Africa, however, was very much an open question at the end of the nineteenth century.

French interest in knowing sub-Saharan Africa scientifically can be traced back to the beginning of the Third Republic and coincided with its new imperial ambitions. As early as 1874, the government created a Commission des voyages et missions scientifiques et littéraires to award subsidies to individuals for exploration of the continent. Yet, unlike the elaborate expeditions of specialists sent to Egypt and Algeria, little came of this first effort to inventory the peoples, places, and spaces of the nation's newest colonies. The reasons were manifold: a lack of trained specialists to send over, the low status of Africa as a land of purported savages—an image only strengthened by its recent easy conquest by the forces of civilization—the refusal of metropolitan institutions to work for or with the army, and a colonial bureaucracy that jealously refused access to scientific explorers whom it did not directly control. Africa thus remained “dark,” but conquest continued. By the 1890s, “le temps des publicistes,” Sibeud catalogues no fewer than four competing groups who “se disputent le titre et la qualité de spécialistes” (p. 57): physical anthropologists who had yet to set foot in Africa but who measured natives at world's fairs, a new group of colonial sociologists who claimed to know how to bring all primitives forward, missionaries who assumed all pagan *nègres* were alike, and a group of negrophiles who denounced colonialism's abuses in the name of republican universalism. Despite very different agendas, all of these groups accepted unquestionably that Africa was peopled by a largely undifferentiated mass of *indigènes* who occupied the lowest rung of the hierarchy of human races.

Ten years later, however, this monolithic and self-interested vision of Africa was no longer the only one on offer. It is Sibeud's thesis that silently and haltingly an alternative understanding of African realities was taking shape among a minority of colonial administrations. This vision took seriously the proposition that positive knowledge of diverse histories and cultures, not raciology, was the key to the rational exercise of power in Africa. Such knowledge did not yet exist, and administrators were ideally suited to provide it. At the vanguard of this new science of empire was the historian-linguist-ethnographer Maurice Delafosse. For Sibeud, the most interesting aspects of this awakening scientific vocation overseas were its ties to shifting intellectual trends in France and, ironically, its fundamental irrelevance to the *mise en valeur* of the colonies. Working autonomously *in situ* in Africa but seeking professional status (the colonial service in those years had none) by publishing in learned journals in France, Sibeud's *érudits coloniaux* made their greatest impact not on colonial policy but on French anthropology, a science *en pleine recomposition* at the turn of the century.

The bulk of Sibeud's book is taken up tracking the careers of the sixty administrators whom she has identified and situating their published work in the context of the anthropological debates, scholarly networks, and institutional realignments of the periods before and after World War I. At the end of the nineteenth century, French anthropology was very much divided between two scientizing traditions: on the one hand, ethnography, defined by its detractors as the mere description of historic peoples “saisis dans leur individualité” (p. 36) and therefore automatically the province of amateurs; on the other hand,

the real “science of man,” physical anthropology, which, since the founding of the Société d’anthropologie by Paul Broca in 1859, had moved into the laboratory and increasingly restricted itself to the measuring of human biological traits. Although ethnography was to become the dominant branch in the twentieth century, in the 1890s it still lacked the coherent methods, journals, and organizations that might elevate it to the ranks of a real science. Such disarray was a blessing in disguise for “les gestionnaires de la colonisation soucieux de faire valoir l’originalité du savoir qu’ils ont acquis au fil de leur expérience professionnelle” (p. 46). Unlike the explorers who had preceded them, administrators were forced to remain in the same region for extended periods of time. The most intellectually curious among them undertook local studies; the end products varied considerably, but over time “leurs travaux s’écartent de plus en plus de compte rendus panoptiques pour entrer dans les voies plus étroites de la spécialisation érudite” (p. 92). When their immediate superiors showed little inclination to supervise, reward, or organize their painstaking and highly specialized research, these same men turned to metropolitan savants for guidance, approval, and—most importantly—a forum for their work.

They chose their moment well. In Paris between 1900 and 1914, a scientific revolution of a different sort had already begun under the twin but often antagonistic auspices of Arnold Van Gennep and Maurice Delafosse, on the one hand, and the new university-based schools of Durkheimian sociology and Vidal de la Blache’s human geography on the other. Anti-racists all, they saw ethnography as “le domaine vacant” where they could “faire valoir leur différence et leurs compétences nouvelles” (p. 155). For Delafosse and especially Van Gennep—“le dissident structurel de la science de l’homme française” (p.155)—the goal was to transform ethnography into a full-fledged discipline in its own right by endowing it with the rigorous methodology that it had so long lacked. Africa’s aspiring *coloniaux érudits* were the ideal foot soldiers in this campaign: they alone had acquired, or could acquire, new knowledge through direct observation, and many were eager to be taught how to interpret their data sociologically. From 1905 to 1914, in journal articles, then in a new review and society he founded, Van Gennep encouraged administrators to submit their studies for critical peer review and attend meetings (when they could). The followers of Durkheim and Vidal de la Blache also published several of the new studies coming out of Africa in these years, but the Durkheimians in particular were much less interested in encouraging independent thinking among their administrator-authors. They persisted in seeing ethnography as a largely descriptive and therefore subordinate branch of sociology, whose *pratique* needed to be professionalized, principally to enhance the scientific status of *la discipline-mère*. Either way, the self-taught erudition of colonial administrators was critical to a “changement de régime scientifique” (p. 178) in ethnography in those years. If not yet a discipline, it was increasingly becoming a proper “métier” (p.178).

And what role, we might well ask, did the colonial state play in this intellectual realignment? Although before World War I there were proposals for the creation of a colonial bureau of ethnography, they never materialized. In-depth local knowledge of different populations was not what colonial governments sought in the first decade of the twentieth century. By then the latter valued mobility and interchangeability on the part of their personnel and were seeking to curtail the very autonomy that had allowed an earlier generation to produce ethnographies in the first place. Requests for an ethnographic service thus emanated from the metropole, as first Van Gennep then Marcel Mauss sought an institutional means to *encadrer* their colonial correspondents. This bureau, ideally, would coordinate their *enquêtes* and centralize knowledge, thus providing a direct liaison between metropolitan experts and local fieldworkers. Nothing came of these initiatives either, but their failure should not mask the “engagement intellectuel, au plein sens du terme, dans la colonisation” (p. 226) which the demand for such a bureau from metropolitan savants represented. As news of the atrocities in the Belgian Congo spread at the turn of the century, committed republicans such as Mauss and Van Gennep began to argue that professional ethnography, a science based on the belief in the equal value of all cultures, could make the business of empire enlightened and humane.

In one more ironic twist of fate, this belief would help lead to the final displacement of Sibeud's *érudits coloniaux* in French ethnographic circles by a new generation of university-educated ethnologists and the reification in their hands for the first time since 1870 of "Africa" as a specific object of study. By the 1920s, the scientific *mise en valeur* of the empire was the order of the day. As communist anti-imperialists and pan-Africanists claimed that they alone spoke for the oppressed peoples of the continent, it suddenly became important for French authorities to authenticate scientifically their claims to know Africa best. Once hostile to the very idea of an ethnographic service, by 1925 both the metropolitan and colonial governments were willing to create and subsidize an Institut d'ethnologie at the University of Paris. Many of its first students did their fieldwork in Africa; in 1930 they created the Société des africanistes and in 1931 embarked upon the mission Dakar-Djibouti, France's ostensibly first in-depth ethnographic prospecting of its territories. For Sibeud, it is only at this moment of consolidation that France's science of Africa became definitively imperial. Anthropologists such as Marcel Griaule simply ignored the contributions of those who had come before him, and, unlike the historically minded Delafosse, they focused their work exclusively either upon "ethnies enfermées dans leur alterité" (p. 269) or anachronistic enclaves such as the Ethiopians of Gondar: "les uns et les autres sont les figures étranges et desamarrées d'une Afrique redéfinie dans la dépendance et condamnée 'à l'authenticité'" (p. 269). But even this subservience to empire would be short-lived: by the 1950s the next generation was already contesting the "dévoilement idéologique" of the interwar Africanists (p. 276).

Sibeud has packed an enormous amount of information into her compact book; her interpretations are bold and deft; and her control of her sprawling material is masterful. She is clearly sympathetic to her forgotten *érudits coloniaux* who first identified Africans as worthy of serious study, only to see their new savoir (and savoir faire) confiscated by university specialists. One is reminded in reading her of how important an intimate knowledge of individuals and institutions in the metropole and overseas is for understanding how modern scientific ideas about Africa developed in France. Thus historicized, the relation being power and knowledge in an empire appears both more contingent and complex than has often been argued.

I nevertheless have four questions. Africanism, Sibeud ultimately insists, was not a colonial science. French colonialism did not produce "des sciences nouvelles ... explicitement et entièrement dévouées à la colonisation." Rather, French science as a whole took an imperial turn around 1910, as a "prolongement du projet républicain," itself profoundly convinced of the liberating potential of science (pp. 275-76). Does a science have openly to serve colonialism to be colonial? What exactly is "imperial science?" Second, regarding the history of the science of man in France, were there not *érudits coloniaux* in other parts of the empire (Oceania and Indochina come to mind) whose ethnographies also contributed to the transformation of the discipline? Third, Sibeud is very critical of the Société des africanistes, whose members chose to underscore Africa's exceptionalism by studying it in their own closed forum—and to conflate all of Africa with the Africa bounded by French borders (Dakar-Djibouti). This went against the universalist logic of the Institut d'ethnologie, whose program in 1925 was to study all so-called primitive peoples and cultures, not just those of France's colonies. Yet the existence of a Société des américanistes and Société asiatique was hardly questioned in these years by the Institut's founders, and a Société des océanistes was founded in 1938. The genealogy of the *africanistes* may thus be more complicated than Sibeud suggests. Finally, how did colonial ethnography transform not just the methods but the content of what was to become cultural anthropology in France? For those interested in grappling with such questions in the future, and for students generally of French colonialism and intellectual life under the Third Republic, Sibeud's splendid book will be essential reading.

NOTES

[1] Marc Ferro, ed., *Le livre noir du colonialisme* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2003); Pascale Blanchard et Sandrine Lemaire, eds., *Culture coloniale: La France conquise par son empire 1870-1931* (Paris: Autrement, 2002); Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, Gilles Boetsch, Éric Deroo, and Sandrine Lemaire, *Zoos humains: De la Vénus hottentote aux reality shows* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002). For an insightful review of *Zoos humains*, see Claude Blanckaert, "Note critique. Spectacles ethniques et culture de masse au temps des colonies," *Revue d'histoire des sciences humaines* 7 (2002): 223-32.

[2] Other new books on the empire worth noting include Daniel Rivet, *Le Magreb à l'épreuve de la colonisation* (Paris: Hachette, 2002); and Florence Bernault, ed., *Enfermement, prisons et châtiments en Afrique du XIXe siècle à nos jours* (Paris: Harmattan, 2002).

Alice L. Conklin
University of Rochester
ackn@mail.rochester.edu

Copyright © 2003 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172