"African Opinions" at the Brazzaville Conference: *Evolué* Politics, Representation, and the Future of French Colonialism in Africa

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Abstract: This article focuses on the essays that *évolués* wrote and Félix Eboué presented to participants at the Brazzaville Conference in 1944 and specifically analyzes how this group of elite Africans understood and participated in debates on citizenship, empire, and rights and how they articulated their arguments about the future of French colonialism to the most important decision-makers in the francophone world. For these *évolué* writers, the continuation of French colonialism was a necessity with no immediate end in sight. Their arguments, which ranged from expanded citizenship rights for elites to the dangers of assimilation, captured the fraught social, political, economic, and intellectual landscapes of wartime French colonial Africa. As a result, their letters tell us a great deal about both not only their beliefs and desires for the future but also the nature of reform that Félix Eboué felt comfortable sharing at the Brazzaville Conference with other colonial administrators and stakeholders in 1944.

Résumé: Cet article se concentre sur les essais que des évolués ont écrits et que Félix Eboué a présentés aux participants de la Conférence de Brazzaville en 1944 et analyse spécifiquement la manière dont ce groupe d'élites africaines a compris et participé aux débats sur la citoyenneté, l'empire et les droits. Ces essais nous permettent de comprendre comment les évolués présentaient leurs arguments sur l'avenir du colonialisme français aux décideurs les plus importants du monde francophone. Pour les évolués qui ont écrit ces essais, la continuation de la colonisation française était une nécessité sans fin immédiate en vue. Leurs arguments, qui allaient des droits de citoyenneté élargis pour les élites aux dangers de l'assimilation, permettent de

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saisir les difficultés sociales, politiques, économiques, sociales, économiques et politiques de l'Afrique coloniale française en temps de guerre. Par conséquent, leurs lettres nous en apprennent beaucoup non seulement sur leurs croyances et leurs désirs pour l'avenir, mais aussi sur la nature des réformes que Félix Eboué se sentait à l'aise de partager lors de la Conférence de Brazzaville avec d'autres administrateurs coloniaux et parties prenantes en 1944.

Keywords: The Second World War, central Africa, decolonization, French colonialism, citizenship

The French Ministère des Colonies published *Conférence Africaine Française: Brazzaville, 30 Janvier 1944–8 Février 1944* a year after the conclusion of the Brazzaville Conference, in which colonial administrators discussed the future of French colonialism in Africa.[1] *Conférence Africaine Française* is a short, unassuming publication that is remarkably similar to most French colonial conference proceedings; the booklet featured speeches by key administrators, listed the names of participants and their positions within the French colonial bureaucracy, and detailed recommendations that emerged from the ten-day meeting in Brazzaville, the capital of French Congo, French Equatorial Africa, and the hub of Afrique Française Libre (AFL) from 1940 to 1943.

I purchased one of the remaining copies of *Conférence Africaine Française* while I was working on an essay about the Brazzaville Conference for a handbook on French history. As I read through my copy of the book, I noticed that dozens of pages of the text had never been opened. I flipped to the Table of Contents and found out that the unopened portion of the book included a section on a session that occurred on February 3, 1944. I carefully sliced open the folded and sealed edges of these pages to access the cordoned off articles and found a fascinating range of essays about citizenship, rights, evolution, and reform written by African elites who administrators barred from directly participating in the Brazzaville Conference. Unopened texts are not necessarily unusual, as many historians have carefully sliced their way into sealed sections in reading rooms across the world; however, examining the contents of an unopened section provides an opportunity to consider the priorities of prior readers. In this case, the people who handled my copy of *Conférence Africaine Française: Brazzaville, 30 Janvier 1944–8 Février 1944* were more interested in the roster of participants, conference recommendations, and speeches by administrators than the passionate and deeply political essays African elites wrote in their attempts to participate in a major discussion about colonial reform. Similarly, historians have largely ignored the ways elite Africans found ways to insert their voices on the future of French Africa during the Brazzaville Conference.

[1] *Conférence Africaine Française: Brazzaville, 30 Janvier 1944–8 Février 1944* (Paris: Ministère des Colonies, 1945).

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This article focuses on the essays that *évolués* wrote and Félix Eboué presented to participants at the Brazzaville Conference in 1944 by specifically analyzing how this group of elite Africans understood and participated in debates on citizenship, empire, and rights *and* how they articulated their arguments about the future of French colonialism to the most important decision-makers in the francophone world. Despite the systemic barriers that transcended class lines for Africans in French colonies, these *évolués* continued their efforts to secure increased political rights for themselves in a very narrow manner that largely excluded women and non-elites. The conservative nature of reform these African elites promoted stood in sharp contrast to the ideas presented by African nationalists at the Manchester Pan-African Congress in 1945. As a result, their letters tell us a great deal not only about both their beliefs and desires for the future but also the nature of reform that Félix Eboué felt comfortable sharing at the Brazzaville Conference with other colonial administrators and stakeholders in 1944.

The Brazzaville Conference was a momentous occasion in 1944, and contemporary historians of Africa and French colonialism often invoke the basic facts of the conference: French administrators met in Brazzaville in 1944 to make recommendations for the future of France's African colonies, Africans were not allowed to participate, and the actual outcomes were fairly lackluster because the conference was purely consultative.[2] French colonial historians who have written on the Brazzaville Conference primarily focus on international dynamics,[3] context,[4] and limitations[5] of the event.[6] Few have given specific attention to African voices or even *feelings* surrounding the conference.[7] This article takes a different approach: even though Africans

[2] For example, see Frederick Cooper, *Africa Since 1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 40; James Lewis, "The French Colonial Service and the Issues of Reform, 1944–8," *Contemporary European History* 4–2 (1995), 153–188.

[3] Charles-Robert Ageron, "La préparation de la conférence de Brazzaville et ses enseignements," in *Brazzaville Janvier-Février 1944: Aux Sources de la Décolonisation* (Paris: Plon, 1988), 29–41.

[4] Claude Levy, "Les origins de la conference de Brazzaville, le context et la decision," in *Brazzaville Janvier-Février 1944: Aux Sources de la Décolonisation* (Paris: Plon, 1988), 21–29.

[5] Paul Isoart, "Les aspects politiques, constitutionnels et administratifs des recommandations," in *Brazzaville Janvier-Février 1944: Aux Sources de la Décolonisation* (Paris: Plon, 1988), 79–96; Jacques Marseille, "Le conférence de Brazzaville et son mythe," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 16 (Oct–Dec 1987), 109–110.

[6] The most robust discussion of the Brazzaville Conference occurred in 1987 at a colloquium organized by the Charles de Gaulle Institute and l'Institut du temps présent. The colloquium proceedings features a wide range of essays that contextualize, provide overviews, and offer critiques of the Brazzaville Conference. *Brazzaville Janvier-Février 1944: Aux Sources de la Décolonisation* (Paris: Plon, 1988).

[7] Zan Semi-Bi, "La reception des principes de Brazzaville par les populations africaines en AOF," in *Brazzaville Janvier-Février 1944: Aux Sources de la Décolonisation*

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were not invited to participate in the conference, as stakeholders they were incredibly informed about the proceedings, and many Africans, especially intellectuals and elites, saw it as an opportunity to think about the future, even if the actual outcomes of the conference were lackluster. This was not a result of ignorance; rather, African elites recognized that the Brazzaville Conference would possibly usher in a new era of racial and colonial politics in a rapidly changing world.

Analyzing elite African writings presented by Félix Eboué at the Brazzaville Conference provides an opportunity to rethink the chronology and geography of debates on assimilation and association in the French empire. Most scholarly discussions surrounding elite politics and France's assimilationist colonial policies typically focus on Senegal and taper out by the early twentieth century.[8] The geographical and chronological focus on Senegal is not particularly surprising considering France's long presence in the region and the major social and political transformations that occurred there over the course of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Some of the most pivotal works on French colonial debates on assimilation in Africa emphasize the role of assimilationist policies and how they transformed in the early twentieth century as administrators backtracked on uplift ideologies in favor of a different approach that privileged association and offered more power to the local chiefs they once criticized and tried to destabilize in France's African colonies.[9] This article expands on these conversations by

(Paris: Plon, 1988), 235–244; Elikia M'bokolo, "La reception des principes de Brazzaville par les populations Africaines en AEF," in *Brazzaville Janvier-Février 1944: Aux Sources de la Décolonisation* (Paris: Plon, 1988), 246–252.

[8] For example, see Kelly Duke Bryant, "'The Color of the Pupils': Schooling and Race in Senegal's Cities, 1900–10," *The Journal of African History* 52–3 (2011), 299–319; Tony Chafer, "Teaching Africans to Be French: France's 'Civilising Mission' and the Establishment of a Public Education System in French West Africa, 1903–30," *Africa: Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente* 56–2 (2001), 190–209; Alice Conklin, "'Democracy Rediscovered': Civilization through Association in French West Africa (1914–1930)," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 37–145 (1997), 59–84; Lorelle Semley, "'Evolution Revolution' and the Journey from African Colonial Subject to French Citizen," *Law and History* Review 32–2 (2014), 267–307; Hilary Jones, "Rethinking Politics in the Colony: The Métis of Senegal and Urban Politics in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century," *The Journal of African History* 53–3 (2012), 325–344; Mamadou Diouf, "Assimilation colonial et identités religieuses de la civilité des originaires des Quatres Communes (Sénégal)," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 34–3 (2000), 565–587.

[9] Alice Conklin, "'Democracy Rediscovered': Civilization through Association in French West Africa (1914–1930)," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 37–145 (1997), 61. Conklin states that the shift was not necessarily because of a new found respect in Africans or African cultural/political customs; rather, France sought to "contain the évolués." Saliha Belmessous, *Assimilation and Empire: Uniformity in French and British Colonies, 1541–1954* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 155. Belmessous argues

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emphasizing that conversations on assimilation were clearly still important to African elites in 1944, as *évolué* contributors to the Brazzaville Conference carefully debated assimilation and association in their writings.

While there is a robust and dynamic body of scholarship on status, identity, and intellectuals in western Senegal, very little has been written on elite debates that occurred elsewhere.[10] A major reason for this historiographical void stems from the waning of the *mission civilisatrice* in the early twentieth century, just decades after the formal introduction of French colonialism in French West Africa (AOF) and French Equatorial Africa (AEF). The colonial infrastructure and footprint of France in western Senegal was stronger than other areas due to France's longer presence in the region, which predated the Scramble for Africa, and the economically strategic value of its location due to its proximity to rivers and ports. Most of the prominent educational institutions in France's African colonies were in western Senegal, which meant there was a wider range of educational opportunities for both *métis* and African populations in that region.[11] In fact, Harry Gamble notes that secondary educational institutions did not expand from Dakar and Saint-Louis into the rest of French West Africa until after the Second World War.[12] Unsurprisingly, the concentration of prestigious schools led to higher rates of educated elites in western Senegal. Colonial infrastructure, migration, education, and development were drastically different in AEF and much of AOF, particularly because of concessionary control in some areas, forced labor, and the introduction of the *indigénat*

that early twentieth-century *colons* thought the continuation of assimilationist policies that sought to educate Algerian *indigénes* would lead to efforts to assert political rights that would ultimately destabilize French control in Algeria. Martin Deming Lewis, "One Hundred Million Frenchmen: The 'Assimilation' Theory in French Colonial Policy," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 4–2 (1962), part V. Lewis analyzes the writings of Léopold de Saussure, Joseph Chailley-Bert, and Jules Harmand to trace ideological shifts away from assimilationist policies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

[10] There are some exceptions. For example, Rebecca Shereikis, "From Law to Custom: The Shifting Legal Status of Muslim *Originaires* in Kayes and Medine, 1903–13," *Journal of African History* 42 (2001), 261–283; Catherine Atlan and Jean-Hervé Jézéquel, "Alienation or Political Strategy? The Colonized Defend the Empire," in *Promoting the Colonial Empire: Propaganda and Visions of Empire in France*, eds. Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 102–115.

[11] For schooling in Senegal, see Bryant, "'The Color of the Pupils'," 299–319; Tony Chafer, "Teaching Africans to Be French: France's 'Civilising Mission' and the Establishment of a Public Education System in French West Africa, 1903–30," *Africa: Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente* 56–2 (2001), 190–209; Harry Gamble, *Contesting French West Africa: Battles Over Schools and the Colonial Order,* 1900–1950 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017).

[12] Gamble, *Contesting French West Africa*, 7.

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in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[13] As a result, there were far fewer elites in AEF and AOF *outside* of western Senegal. Still, their voices mattered and became an important part of Eboué's case for specific types of colonial reform during and after the Brazzaville Conference.

African intellectual debates on equality, evolution, and the future of France's colonies in Africa have not received adequate attention despite the fact that elite conversations on citizenship in AEF and AOF continued long after French colonial administrators allegedly put the issue to rest by adopting association as their preferred policy in Africa after the First World War. Both Lorelle Semley's *To Be Free and French: Citizenship in France's Atlantic Empire* and Gary Wilder's *Freedom Time: Négritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* push intellectual, political, and social histories of francophone Africa far beyond the assimilation/association binary and encourage readers to think through the ways Africans crafted new and evolving definitions of French citizenship, identity, and the nation. Semley's case study of Marc Kojo Tovalou Houénou, who "pushed and pulled at the meanings and the limits of French citizenship during empire," offers readers the opportunity to explore the ways that the Dahomean lawyer approached citizenship as a high stakes legal debate.[14] Similarly, Wilder's discussions of both Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire in *Freedom Time* unpack the nuanced ways that both thinkers and political leaders theorized French republicanism and citizenship in a manner that sought to reimagine and craft a new France that incorporated its former colonies into a trans-continental system grounded in equality and democracy.[15] In both of these texts, Semley and Wilder emphasize the active processes of imagining a future for France's colonies and defining the meaning of citizenship. This article builds on Semley and Wilder's respective works by using the "African Opinions" essays to try to understand their authors' ideas of citizenship, identity, and belonging within the French empire as evolving ideas steeped

[13] For example, Phyllis Martin discusses infrastructure and race relations in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Brazzaville, which she frames as "the impoverished capital of an imperial backwater" in which "initial development was slow and uneven." Phyllis Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 12. Gregory Mann discusses the regime of the *indigénat* well beyond western Senegal in "What Was the 'Indigénat'? The 'Empire of Law' in French West Africa," *The Journal of African History* 50–3 (2009), 331–353. Marie Rodet analyzes the intersection of forced labor, gender categories, control, and resistance in French Sudan in "Forced Labor, Resistance, and Masculinities in Kayes, French Sudan, 1919–1946," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 86 (2014), 107–123.

[14] Lorelle Semley, *To Be Free and French: Citizenship in France's Atlantic Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 204.

[15] Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Négritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), chapters two and three.

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within conversations that extended far beyond the meeting rooms of the Brazzaville Conference.

Almost a decade before Michel-Rolph Trouillot wrote his widely acclaimed opus, *Silencing the Past*,[16] Congolese historian Elikia M'Bokolo delved into different types of historical silences surrounding the Brazzaville Conference by considering the lived experiences of three different sectors of the population of French Equatorial Africa: 1) "the largest portion—those who knew nothing about [the Brazzaville Conference] and were to learn only the stereotyped version popularized beginning in August 1958"; 2) "the silence of those who, well informed of the event, refused to talk about it because nowhere did they see the change that they pretended to inaugurate"; and 3) "the silence of those who knew of the event, but no longer saw the importance of it either because they were overwhelmed by the course of events or because they themselves were occupied with other priorities."[17] M'Bokolo's acknowledgement of the silences surrounding African voices in AEF is significant because it grapples with the complexities of life for people in the days, months, years, and decades before, during, and after the Brazzaville Conference. Their silences were not simply because of ignorance, as some would believe; rather, these silences were deep and multifaceted, caused by indoctrination, pragmatism, disbelief, skepticism, and the violence of daily life in AEF.

This article builds on the work of M'Bokolo by examining the oft-ignored contributions of elites and intellectuals from spaces that fostered these silences and the ways in which they internalized and perpetuated oppression upon marginalized groups within their own communities. Many historians of twentieth-century Africa portray the Second World War as a critical turning point that facilitated the rise of nationalist movements, particularly due to the momentous 1945 Pan-African Congress in Manchester, which bolstered the voices of West African delegates and ultimately declared that "complete and absolute Independence for the Peoples of West Africa is the only solution."[18] This article offers a more nuanced view of elite wartime politics that contrasts imaginings of widespread anti-colonial resistance and political solidarity that

[16] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

[17] M'bokolo, "La reception des principes de Brazzaville par les populations Africaines en AEF," 251.

[18] University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives, W. E. B. Du Bois, *Fifth Pan African Congress final resolution*, October 1945, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers Papers, MS 312, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives. https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b107-i461#:~:text=Summarizing%20the%20claims%20and%20principal,and%20economic%20betterment%20%22in%20all.

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crossed class and ethnic lines during the mid-1940s. By focusing specifically on the authors of the essays that Eboué presented to conference participants and their arguments for the future of French Africa, we are able to see dynamic and diverse ways of considering status, the expansion of political and civil rights, and the fraught ways they sought to (re)create systems of oppression in a historical moment that many saw as a time of excitement for the democratization and liberalization of colonial rule.

Eboué's Dossier: African Elites, Assimilation, and Adaptation

By late 1943, France faced a colonial conundrum due to growing international pressure against colonialism and tensions in Algeria and Indochina.[19] Stalin even critiqued France's shortcomings in the colonies and argued that Allied soldiers should not "shed blood to restore Indochina, for example, to the old French colonial rule."[20] It was also increasingly impossible to ignore the contributions of France's colonies in the ongoing global conflict of the Second World War. Growing concern over the future of French colonialism led to the decision to host a colonial conference in Brazzaville, the original capital of Afrique Française Libre (AFL), in 1944.

The opening convocation of the Brazzaville Conference symbolically coincided with the unveiling of a statue that honored Savorgnan de Brazza, the Italian explorer who traipsed central Africa in the 1870s and 1880s, crafted and secured treaties for France in the region, built a station for France on the Congo River that developed into the city of Brazzaville, and eventually became the Governor of French Congo from 1886 to 1897.[21] The decision to honor the "founder" of Brazzaville and the colonial state of French Congo during the 1944 colonial conference was perhaps telling:

[19] For more on Indochina, see Dorothy White, "General De Gaulle and the Decolonization of Black Africa," *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* 1 (1976), 52–63; Anne Raffin, "Easternization Meets Westernization: Patriotic Youth Organizations in French Indochina during World War II," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 20–2 (2002), 121–140; Martin Thomas, "Free France, the British Government and the Future of French Indo-China, 1940–45," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 28–1 (1997), 137–160. For more on Algeria, see Martin Thomas, "Resource War, Civil War, Rights War: Factoring Empire into French North Africa's Second World War," *War in History* 18–2 (2011), 225–248; Spencer Tucker, "Ferhat Abbas and the Algerian Manifesto of 1943," *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* 4 (1979), 221–232; Ageron, "La préparation de la conférence de Brazzaville et ses enseignements," 29–41.

[20] "Roosevelt-Stalin Meeting, November 28, 1943, 3 P.M., Roosevelt's Quarters, Soviet Embassy," in *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, The Conferences at Cairo and Tehran,* 1943 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1961), 485.

[21] *Conférence Africaine Française: Brazzaville, 30 Janvier 1944–8 Février 1944* (Paris: Ministère des Colonies, 1945), 9.

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France's colonial past would be firmly entrenched in its present and future, and the monument was a visual marker that alluded to this reality.

The composition of the decision-makers at the Brazzaville Conference reflected the conservative nature of reform politics that dominated meeting sessions. René Pleven, the president of the conference and the French Committee of National Liberation (CFLN) Commissioner for the Colonies, did not invite Africans to participate in the seemingly monumental occasion. Félix Eboué and Michel Raphael Saller were the sole people of African descent who participated in the conference, and their high rank in the colonial administration secured their participation, not their race. For the most part, decision makers were white male governors and administrators in sub-Saharan French Africa.[22] Forty additional participants attended the conference in a consultative capacity, including 22 functionaries who served as "colonial experts," nine individuals from the Assemblée Consultative Provisoire, the French Assembly that represented the Allied-aligned resistance movements, political parties, and territories under the leadership of the CFLN, six observers from the administrations in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, and the heads of the Brazzaville and Cameroon Chambers of Commerce.[23]

Officials who participated in the conference headed commissions tasked with addressing social customs and labor, economic affairs, administrative reforms, education, public health, personnel, and customs/duties. While Charles de Gaulle stressed the significance of Africa during the war in his opening address, the ways administrators approached reform was quite limited. Administrators were not interested in completely overhauling France's colonial system in Africa and offering immediate equality and the right to self-determination to Africans. Rather, administrators and officials had the difficult task of expressing a need for change while also stifling concrete steps to bring about meaningful reform. Charles de Gaulle even stated in his opening address that the French nation had to be the one to proceed with imperial reforms and that France "will decide in her sovereignty," which meant that official reforms could not even happen until after the total liberation of France.[24]

The best examples of African interjections in the conference's discussions of colonial reform happened before the conference actually began. While Africans were not able to participate in the conference itself, Félix Eboué compiled essays written by elite Africans that focused on social issues

[22] Jean Noutary was the only exception, as he was serving as the *interim* governor and head administrator over the colony of Togo during the conference.

[23] Ageron, "La préparation de la conférence de Brazzaville et ses enseignements," 36.

[24] Charles de Gaulle, "Discourse pronounce par le General de Gaulle, Président du Comité Français de la Libération Nationale à l'ouverture de la Conférence Africaine Française le 20 janvier 1944," in *Conférence Africaine Française: Brazzaville, 30 Janvier 1944–8 Février 1944* (Paris: Ministère des Colonies, 1945), 30.

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ranging from traditional customs to the concept of assimilation, and shared them with administrators during a conference session on February 3, 1944. These essays feature a complicated range of debates on French colonialism and African politics, cultures, and societies.

The key contributors of the "African Opinions" that Félix Eboué presented to the administrators at the Brazzaville Conference were Brazzaville's *Cercle des Evolués,* a Gabonese resident of Brazzaville named Jean-Rémy Ayouné, and Fily Dabo Sissoko, a *chef du canton* from French West Africa. [25] Due to the unique social positions of these contributors, it is important to grapple with the meaning and origins of *évolué* status in French Africa. French education expanded drastically after the Scramble for Africa in the late nineteenth century. As the need for more intermediaries and cogs in the colonial bureaucracy grew, France began offering rigorous education to select numbers of Africans deemed qualified enough to serve the colonial state. Elite education came with an important caveat: pedagogy and curriculum could not disrupt racial hierarchies or the permanence of French colonial rule in Africa.[26] Africans secured *évolué* status by learning French, assimilating to French dress and food customs, and assuring administrators that their moral values were compatible with French standards.[27] Félix Eboué launched a program to expand discussions of elite political rights by introducing the "*notable évolués*" category in the early 1940s. Eboué and more progressive colonial administrators sought to offer more rights to Africans who met the steep standards of the new category. Those who became *notable évolués* would gain the right to vote in local elections and could not be punished under the *indigénat,* but they still could not gain French citizenship.[28]

The experiences of *évolués* in French Africa were deeply uneven. Famous *évolués* like Léopold Sédar Senghor travelled to France to study at elite academic institutions and participated in global literary movements while debating blackness, Frenchness, and modernity.[29] Others, like Félix

[25] "African Opinions" is the name of the section that includes essays written by Africans in *Conférence Africaine Française.*

[26] See Mohamed Kamara, "French Colonial Education and the Making of the Francophone African Bourgeoisie," *Dalhousie French Studies* 72 (2005), 108–109; Spencer Segalla, "The Micropolitics of Colonial Education in French West Africa, 1914–1919," *French Colonial History* 13 (2012), 1–22; 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* 35–3 (2007), 437–458; Gail Kelly, "Learning to be Marginal: Schooling in Interwar French West Africa," *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* 11 (1987), 299–311.

[27] Kamara, "French Colonial Education," 113.

[28] James Genova, *Colonial Ambivalence, Cultural Authenticity, and the Limitations of Mimicry in French-Ruled West Africa, 1914–1956* (Peter Lang: 2004), 197.

[29] Janet Vaillant, "Homage to Léopold Sédar Senghor: 1906–2001," *Research in African Literatures* (2002), 17–24.

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Houphouët-Boigny, attended École William Ponty and other prestigious post-secondary educational institutions in French Africa and became active in local and regional social and political circles.[30] The *évolués* who wrote the essays that Félix Eboué presented at the Brazzaville Conference were neither Parisian-educated colleagues of Senghor nor vocal labor activists and organizers like Houphouët-Boigny. Fily Dabo Sissoko attended the École normale supérieure William Ponty and Jean-Remy Ayouné completed education at a Catholic seminary in AEF. Both Sissoko and Ayouné worked closely with French colonizers before and during the Second World War, as Sissoko served as a *chef de canton* in Niambia and Ayouné advised Eboué on African politics and created L'Union Educative et Mutuelle de la Jeunesse de Brazzaville, which sought to provide education and support to *évolués* who felt isolated in the capital.[31] Brazzaville's *Cercle des Evolués* was a group of elites that consulted with the local administration and provided their perspectives on relevant issues. Despite their proximity to power in French Congo, members of the *Cercle des Evolués* did not seek to drastically overhaul the colonial system.[32] These authors wrote essays that Félix Eboué presented as "African Opinions," but the substance of their backgrounds and experiences distanced them from the daily lives of a vast majority of people in AEF and AOF.

The inclusion of the essays by Brazzaville's *Cercle des Evolués*, Jean-Rémy Ayouné, and Fily Dabo Sissoko in the Brazzaville Conference proceedings cannot be disconnected from Félix Eboué's politics and view of the future of French Africa. Eboué, like Senghor, Houphouët-Boigny, Ayouné, Sissoko, and the members of the Brazzaville's *Cercle des Evolués*, was a product of his elite education and experiences in the French colonial system. Eboué began pushing for social and political reforms in the late 1930s and early 1940s, including his efforts to create *notable évolué* status while also emphasizing that "we must understand the real significance of a custom as representing the underlying traditions and feelings which produced it – tribal traditions and feelings of patriotism. To deprive the native of these would be like taking away a French peasant's farm and putting him into an industrial press gang."[33] Eboué recognized the momentous task of achieving stability in a bifurcated system that created *notable évolués* and bolstered the authority of traditional chiefs, and asserted the central role of respect:

[30] 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* 35–3 (2007), 440–441.

[31] Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 94.

[32] Robert Edmond Ziavoula, *Brazzaville, une ville à reconstuire* (Paris: Karthala, 2006), 33–34.

[33] Félix Eboué, "Memorandum on Native Policy," *Sudan Notes and Records* 25–2 (1943), 41. *Sudan Notes and Records* published a complete translation of Eboué's 1941 Memoranda in 1943.

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> To achieve this we must continually hold in front of us the necessity that they should enjoy respect. They cannot enjoy the respect of their people unless they enjoy ours. We must learn to regard them as members of a natural aristocracy, the traditional rulers of the country, and we must treat them as such. We represent the sovereignty of France. They are the holders of local authority. Our authority is the authority of office, theirs the authority of birth.[34]

While Eboué seemed to understand the significance of local institutions and hierarchies, debates over the power of local chiefs and educated elites did not necessarily end after the publication of his 1941 *Memorandum on Native Policy*. Eboué continued to consult with *évolués* to discuss politics, citizenship, and the future of French colonialism in Africa.

The authors of essays included in *Conférence Africaine Française* held political views that were relevant to Eboué, which is not entirely surprising because some of the contributors were politically and socially linked to him in Brazzaville. Eboué and his colleague, Raphael Saller, were at distinctly different sides of the assimilation/association debate, as Saller believed that "Africans could become Frenchmen and that colonial policy should encourage such a development."[35] In an effort to prime conference participants for a conversation about the future of relationships between Africa and France, Eboué presented three distinct perspectives on colonialism, civilization, and assimilation.

The Past, Present, and Future According to Brazzaville's Cercle des Evolués

The reports written by the *Cercle des Evolués* of Brazzaville, a group of civil servants in the capital of French Equatorial Africa, reflected Eboué's history of consulting local elites for their opinions on colonial policies.[36] In their series of letters, the *Cercle des Evolués* offered poignant critiques of French colonialism and arguments for citizenship. Their writings focused on customs, the evolution of women, and citizenship proposals. Brazzaville's *Cercle des Evolués* immediately tackled one of the most problematic features of French colonialism in Africa: a lack of research and understanding of local practices and customs. Rather than paint all cultural practices as stagnant and in need of a type of reform that only the French could provide, they argued that the French administration should base their recommendations on facts grounded in thoroughly researched studies that reflected the nuances of unique societies in Africa. This included pushing back against monolithic

[34] Eboué, "Memorandum on Native Policy," 43.
[35] Brian Weinstein, *Eboué* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 301.
[36] Weinstein, *Eboué*, 301.

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approaches to gender equality that forced girls and boys into mixed educational environments because of potential marital strife in the future. Rather, they proposed increased educational opportunities beyond primary school for girls in gender-segregated schools.[37] While some conference participants may have seen this as regressive, the *Cercle* built upon their previous argument for acknowledging local nuances in an effort to move away from a one-size-fits-all mold. In this case, *évolués* from Brazzaville argued that mixed education in AEF specifically led to men seeking wives outside of the territory and the continuation of that trend would lead to major demographic and social issues. In short, mixed schools were not necessarily the answer to creating greater gender equality in Africa.[38]

The issue of mixed-gender schooling was not a new one. Rather, discussions about the presence of girls in public and private educational settings became increasingly common in the 1930s due to funding issues, administrative priorities regarding labor, and concerns surrounding marriage and the role of women in Brazzaville.[39] While the *Cercle des Evolués* expressed frustration with mixed-gender education, the actual social threat posed by integrated institutions was relatively low. In fact, only a few spots were available for girls in public schools in Brazzaville in the 1930s.[40] Due to both the miniscule number of spots available for girls in public schools and concerns over the purpose of education for girls, many elite families opted to send their daughters to Catholic schools, whose curricula often focused on domestic duties and preparation for lives as good Catholic wives, mothers, and daughters who could ensure the creation and proliferation of generational wealth.[41]

While Brazzaville's *Cercle des Evolués* sought to push back against racist tropes and France's reductive and overly generalized approaches to colonial policies in AEF, it is important to note that elite Congolese men dominated the organization and their recommendations on gender equality did not necessarily represent the voices of girls and women in Brazzaville or beyond. The *Cercle* was clearly concerned by the issue of Congolese men finding brides outside of the region, which could have destabilized not only norms related to

[37] Les Cercle des Evolués de Brazzaville, "Des Coutumes," in *Conférence Africaine Française, Brazzaville: 30 Janvier 1944–8 Février 1944,* 88–89.

[38] Les Cercle des Evolués de Brazzaville, "L'Evolution des femmes," in *Conférence Africaine Française, Brazzaville: 30 Janvier 1944–8 Février 1944,* 89.

[39] Martin, *Catholic Women of Congo-Brazzaville*, 79–91.

[40] Phyllis Martin, *Catholic Women of Congo-Brazzaville: Mothers and Sisters in Troubled Times* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 76.

[41] Martin, *Catholic Women of Congo-Brazzaville*, 79–91. Kristin Mann's *Marrying Well: Marriage, Status and Social Change among the Educated Elite in Colonial Lagos* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985) discussion of consolidating status through marriage is also helpful for understanding the ways education, gender, and class intersected and influenced discussions of matrimony.

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marriage, but also gendered hierarchies in Brazzaville. By emphasizing the importance of gender segregated education, the *Cercle* asked for the French to respect cultural norms in Brazzaville, but their request may have also been part of an effort to think through individual autonomy and political rights in AEF. People throughout the world debated universal suffrage in academic settings, courtrooms, and homes throughout the first half of the twentieth century and France did not extend the right to vote to women until a few months after the Brazzaville Conference on April 21, 1944. With this context in mind, it is possible to read the *Cercle's* efforts to define appropriate types of education for Congolese girls as part of a larger attempt to imagine gender, sexuality, and the limits of political rights in the future. For the *Cercle,* heterosexual marriages were a fundamental part of the social and cultural landscape of French Congo and Congolese women needed to marry Congolese men to birth and raise Congolese children. By proposing the elimination of integrated schooling, the *Cercle* sought to maintain gendered power dynamics that encouraged wifehood and motherhood rather than inclusion in the formal intellectual and political workings of the community and the colony. In doing so, the *Cercle* simultaneously argued for greater educational rights for girls *and* an assurance that this education would not destabilize gender roles in the region in the near or distant future. This delicate dance reflected how they perceived the future of the colony: a space that respected local cultures *and* kept social, cultural, economic, and political power in the hands of men.

The final essay written by the *Cercle des Evolués* focuses on the question of citizenship for Africans. Despite their previous arguments for the French to respect local cultural practices, the *Cercle* pivoted to provide a nuanced discussion of assimilation and "Citizenship of Empire" that could offer rights that were in line with France's approach to metropolitan civil and political rights for its citizens. As the *Cercle* pondered the future, they saw the juxtaposition of autonomy and assimilation as the critical question facing France and Africa. They noted that instead of "complete emancipation by autonomy, the elite of French Equatorial Africa are for free integration into the colonizing people through assimilation."[42] Similar to Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor, the *Cercle* opposed complete political independence and the severing of ties between France and her colonies. Yet, unlike Césaire and Senghor, the *Cercle* was not calling for a revolutionary reimagination and reformulation of France that incorporated her former colonies into an egalitarian political system based on the concept of universalism; rather, they advocated for a very narrow type of citizenship that was dependent upon assimilation.[43] In other

[42] Les Cercle des Evolués de Brazzaville, "Statuts," in *Conférence Africaine Française, Brazzaville: 30 Janvier 1944–8 Février 1944,* 97.

[43] For more information on Senghor and Césaire's ideas about decolonization and citizenship, see Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), chapters 2 and 3.

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words, to be worthy of a limited form of citizenship rights, one needed to assimilate to the customs and culture of the colonizer. While this may seem to contradict their earlier argument that administrators should respect local customs, the authors were clearly in conversation with Eboué and his nuanced proposition of a bifurcated system that would produce French-educated African elites while also emphasizing the importance and value of traditional cultures and authorities for others.[44]

The *Cercle* advocated for the extension of expanded rights to Africans by outlining a two-step program that would *ideally* benefit everyone in the French empire. The first step toward expanded rights focused on offering "Citizenship of Empire" to Africans in France's colonies, which would guarantee them the same "civil and political rights as French citizens in Europe, but their political rights would be exclusively limited to the colonies."[45] At first glance, their recommendation was seemingly revolutionary because it advocated for equality within France's African colonies. The *Cercle* immediately undermined the power of its initial proposition by creating a caveat: assimilation would be a prerequisite for this new category of citizenship. While they acknowledged that all French people had citizenship rights and that the same standards should exist for people in France's colonies, the *Cercle* posited that the "diversity of the degree of evolution of populations in France's colonies" necessitated the limitation of these rights outside of metropolitan France.[46]

The *Cercle's* argument for "Citizenship of Empire" for assimilated Africans was not entirely surprising or original; rather, it was an outgrowth of racist ideologies of progress, modernity, and civilization that justified European conquest and the creation, maintenance, and expansion of colonial rule in Africa. Yet, the *Cercle's* ideology was noteworthy because of their seemingly incongruent insistence for both cultural sensitivity and "Citizenship of Empire" through the process of assimilation, which was strikingly similar to Eboué's proposals in the early 1940s. The idea of "Citizenship of Empire" was not the end goal for the *Cercle des Evolués*. They also argued that the next step should be full French citizenship that would extend beyond the colonies. The *Cercle* noted that this was something that would only be granted to "particularly deserving individuals."[47]

In their arguments for both "Citizenship of Empire" and full metropolitan citizenship rights for select elites, the *Cercle* carefully navigated the tools and logic of the colonizer in an attempt to solidify their own political rights. The *Cercle* argued for a system that offered significant benefits to *évolués* by

[44] Félix Eboué, "Memorandum on Native Policy," *Sudan Notes and Records* 25–2 (1943), 39–66.

[45] Les Cercle des Evolués de Brazzaville, "Statuts," 97.

[46] Les Cercle des Evolués de Brazzaville, "Statuts," 97–98.

[47] Les Cercle des Evolués de Brazzaville, "Statuts," 98.

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securing their own political and civil rights while abandoning non-elites to continued colonial violence and exploitation with the tacit belief that they simply had not assimilated *yet*. The pragmatic efforts of these elites to maintain their privilege and proximity to power potentially helps us understand the ways they identified in Congolese society. They did not have an inherent sense of solidarity with African men, women, and children who suffered under French colonial rule in AEF; rather, they experienced both Brazzaville and the larger francophone world in a way that reflected their positionality. The members of the *Cercle* were part of a growing population of permanent residents in Brazzaville that boomed in the interwar years.[48] These elites were intermediaries and auxiliaries to French administrators, traders, and more in the capital of French Equatorial Africa.[49] They spoke French, wanted to dance in night clubs with French music, drank French wine (until they were no longer allowed to do so), and likely sent their children to Catholic schools.[50] They lived in Bacongo, which had a much larger concentration of Congolese elites in contrast to Poto-Poto, and participated in leisure activities in social enclaves that further distanced them from non-elites in the city.[51] Their social standing created a context for them to identify as cosmopolitan elites who perhaps felt their interests aligned more with fellow *évolués* and the French than with other Africans in AEF.

The *Cercle's* representations of status and "evolutionary levels" distorted colonialism in practice on the ground in French Africa. In both AOF and AEF, non-elites both inside and outside of urban centers experienced a very different side of colonial rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially during the Second World War. While a small minority of Africans were able to navigate colonial education systems and find opportunities inside and outside of the colonial bureaucracy before and during the Second World War, that simply was not a reality for most people in French Africa. Many non-elite Africans in AEF experienced the violence of labor regimes under concessionary rule, followed by oppressive taxation, conscription, and forced labor well into the 1940s.

Assimilation was not a major focus of the French administration in AEF as a whole and in large swaths of AOF outside of western Senegal. Still, colonial

[48] Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, 45.

[49] Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, 43.

[50] For more on alcohol consumption and dancing trends, see Danielle Sanchez, "Bar-Dancing, Palm Wine, and Letters: Alcohol Consumption, Social Life, and Entrepreneurialism in Free French Brazzaville, 1940–1943," *Journal of African Military History* 3 (2019), 123–154; Danielle Sanchez, "*Pas de Deux* As I Tell You: Physical Education, Dance, and the Remaking of Discipline in World War II Brazzaville," in *Sports in African History, Politics, and Identity Formation*, eds. Saheed Aderinto and Michael Gennaro (Routledge, 2019), 28–42.

[51] Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, 43.

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administrators in wartime Brazzaville fretted over the potential of unqualified candidates overrunning of the *notable évolué* system. To administrators, the circumstances created by the Second World War had the potential to encourage unqualified applicants to seek *notable évolué* status due to 1) the perceived benefits that it could provide and 2) the fact that applicants "may possess relatively decent French spelling skills and have decent syntax, they may only leave the house decently dressed, wearing shoes and a tie, they may ride a bicycle, play the accordion, and drink beer out of a bottle on occasion," but they may also have also had traits or engaged in cultural practices that would void the designation of *évolué*.[52] The administration's fear of extending rights to unqualified Africans existed alongside their efforts to continue forced labor and other colonial abuses on those who were not protected by their status. Nevertheless, paranoia about unqualified *notable évolués* seemed to be unfounded, as most Congolese people in Brazzaville focused on other priorities, particularly daily survival.[53]

Jean-Rémy Ayouné's Argument for Civilization, Progress, and Assimilation

Similar to the *Cercle*, Jean-Rémy Ayouné was concerned about the issues of education and civilization in French Africa.[54] In the course of his essay, Ayouné grappled with the meaning of civilization, which he defined as the "ensemble of institutions created by man to meet his needs and satisfy his aspirations. These institutions must meet the needs of man's intelligence, morality, aesthetics, and bodily needs."[55] Ayouné also stated that civilization was synonymous with progress, which was not uncommon due to the popularity of the idea among French colonialists and African elites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

[52] Circulaire, H. Sautot to the Heads of the Department and Subdivision of the Territory of Oubangui-Chari, July 13, 1943. ANOM GGAEF 5D206.

[53] For daily life in World War II Brazzaville, see Danielle Sanchez, "Free(ing) France in Colonial Brazzaville: Race, Urban Space, and the Making of *Afrique Française Libre*" (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2015); Sanchez, "*Pas de Deux* as I Tell You," 28–42; Sanchez, "Bar-Dancing, Palm Wine, and Letters," 123–154.

[54] Jean-Rémy Ayouné was born in Gabon in 1914. He attended Catholic educational institutions in Lambaréné, Gabon and Brazzaville. He joined the federal civil service in Libreville in 1934 and created Mutuelle Gabonais, which critiqued the special treatment of the métis population of Gabon. He returned to Brazzaville in 1942 and joined the civil service with the support of Félix Eboué. For more on Ayouné, see Douglas Yates, *Historical Dictionary of Gabon* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 61–62.

[55] Jean Rémy Ayouné, "Occidentalisme et Africanisme," in *Conférence Africaine Française, Brazzaville: 30 Janvier 1944–8 Février 1944*, 90.

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Ayouné continued by juxtaposing "more advanced civilizations" that were constantly improving and other "embryonic societies"; the relationships between the advanced and the embryonic led to Ayouné's assertion of the need for colonization, which he defined as "the act by which man seeks to establish a vital balance between all groups forming humanity."[56] For Ayouné, the concept of civilization offered a future that was rich with opportunities for improvement. Rather than view the future through an individualist lens with self-improvement as a prerequisite for rights, Ayouné believed in the moral imperative of France to colonize other societies and facilitate a sense of equilibrium across all of humanity.[57] His emphasis on balance also tied into his assertion that civilization is "the race of man in search of the ideal, the good, the beautiful, the true and the *just*."[58] In both of these excerpts, Ayouné advocated for a utopian future of universalism, justice, and a sort of balance that extended beyond political boundaries.

Ayouné clearly was not interested in the idea of independence when he wrote his essay, and his ideas for the future were perhaps more in line with a reimagining of relationships between not only the metropole and French Congo but the world at large. Unlike Césaire, Senghor, and the *Cercle,* Ayouné's understanding of a potential reconfiguration of relationships with the metropole depended on assimilation not just for elites, but for all of Congolese society. Ayouné imagined a serious rearranging of the world because a society becoming civilized could presumably open opportunities to achieve justice (and possibly equality); yet, Ayouné's definitions of justice and equilibrium are unclear. While Brazzaville was the home of "communist agitators" in the early twentieth century, Ayouné likely would not have identified in such a manner.[59] Rather, his essay focused on civilization, universalism, and very narrow forms of uplift through colonialism that would presumably facilitate *access* to the ideals of truth, justice, and balance. Ayouné's work with cultural and educational societies in both Gabon and Congo in the 1930s and 1940s provide additional insight to his worldview and priorities. In 1934, Ayouné worked with other educated elites in Libreville, Gabon to establish Mutuelle gabonaise. After he moved to Brazzaville, Ayouné formed and became an officer in the L'Union Educative et Mutuelle de la Jeunesse Africaine, which was an educational mutual aid organization.[60] Administrators felt these organizations were "harmless" distractions for elites, but this assessment underestimated the robust opportunities these groups provided to participants who sought to think through

[56] Ayouné, "Occidentalisme et Africanisme," 91.
[57] Ayouné, "Occidentalisme et Africanisme," 91.
[58] Ayouné, "Occidentalisme et Africanisme," 90. Emphasis added.
[59] Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville,* 48.
[60] Weinstein, *Eboué,* 276–277.

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French politics, literature, culture, class, and the meanings of brotherhood and racial uplift.[61]

One of the major issues with Ayouné's arguments on civilization and colonization is that he failed to recognize the long and robust intellectual, cultural, and political histories of Africa. Rather, Ayouné's understanding of civilization relied on racist European tropes he peddled in his own voice as an *évolué* while he simultaneously ignored the sophisticated histories of African civilizations, societies, and cultures. While Ayouné presented three different ranks of societies that Europeans encountered in Africa – the "backwards" societies with "no neatly defined institutions"; the lands that had "a draft of civilization… but not sufficient enough to classify it among the civilized countries"; and societies that "already possess all of the institutions which characterize the civilized countries" – he did not include a category that referenced any African societies that met the standard of civilization set by Western powers.[62] Each of the categories that Ayouné presented required substantial and sustained colonial intervention, which ultimately bolstered the arguments of administrators at the Brazzaville Conference: independence was not a possibility in the near future for Ayouné or conference participants.

In the course of his essay, Ayouné attempted to place French Congo within the three categories that he presented to readers. He noted that the colony had no "defined" institutions, no universal language, no scientific institutions, "fetishist" religious institutions, and "spontaneous [artistic] creations without fixed principles" which he perceived as inferior to European art.[63] Ayouné's evidence for placing French Congo within the category of "backwards societies" with "no clearly defined institutions" was particularly ironic considering the ways that France approached the region as a space to be dominated and exploited through the *indigénat* and the inhumane colonial forced labor regime. While the French initially justified colonial expansion with the idea of the *mission civilisatrice*, capitalist exploitation became the guiding principle of French colonialism, especially when the empire was at war. Perhaps most troubling, Ayouné never considered why the region was still in the first stage of "progress" after decades of French rule. Ayouné argued for the "integral extension in Africa of Western civilization," but did not interrogate the ways that Western "civilization" had already asserted itself in Africa through state-sponsored labor abuses, genocide, land exploitation, environmental degradation, sexual violence, and more.[64]

Much like the *Cercle*, it is impossible to understand Ayouné's utopian imaginings of the future without contextualizing his positionality. His worldview reflected his connections to the Catholic church, Félix Eboué's colonial

[61] Weinstein, *Eboué*, 276–277.
[62] Ayouné, "Occidentalisme et Africanisme," 92.
[63] Ayouné, "Occidentalisme et Africanisme," 92–93.
[64] Ayouné, "Occidentalisme et Africanisme," 92–93.

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administration, and elite social circles. He performed in plays in front of segregated audiences, tinkered with the ideas of prominent Catholic thinkers, consulted with Eboué on "Native Affairs," and moved around in a social circle comprised of people with similar educational backgrounds, tastes, religious beliefs, and priorities. The type of future that he proposed in his essay ultimately would have preserved or perhaps even enhanced Ayouné's and his cadre's privileged position in Brazzaville and beyond: French, a language that he already spoke, would become even more prominent; French civilization and culture, which he revered, would guide the process of colonization; and the significance of his work within L'Union Educative et Mutuelle de la Jeunesse Africaine and Eboué's inner circle of *notable évolué* advisors would only increase due to the practical necessities of enhancing work toward unilateral assimilation through education and uplift.[65]

A "Black Line of Evolution": Civilization and the Problem of Assimilation in the Writings of Fily Dabo Sissoko

Fily Dabo Sissoko was a well-known writer and political leader in French Sudan (contemporary Mali) before and after independence. Sissoko wrote a series of letters about French colonialism in West Africa during his time as a *chef de canton* in Niamba that Félix Eboué presented to the participants of the Brazzaville Conference in 1944. Similar to Ayouné, Sissoko believed that civilized nations had the responsibility to colonize less civilized societies. Sissoko also noted the range of "evolutionary levels," from the "tribe that barely crossed the paleolithic level" to the more advanced societies that allegedly progressed because of prior contact with Europeans.[66] To illustrate these differences, Sissoko juxtaposed leaders and ethnic groups from different parts of French West Africa, including Cheikh Sidia, who Sissoko viewed as worthy of praise, and the Dogon, "who draws inspiration from horses or copiously fed rats in cages."[67]

Sissoko agreed with the *Cercle's* argument that complete integration was impossible at that moment because of the range of evolutionary levels in France's colonies in Africa.[68] Unlike Ayouné, Sissoko argued for a nuanced version of evolution that acknowledged cultural and social differences between African societies and France. By posing the question of whether Africans would "deny their past or hang onto it while showing a sincere or

[65] Ayouné, "Occidentalisme et Africanisme," 97. "Wanting to corral a sense of respect for the nuances and local flavors of regions and continents that are otherwise poorly defined and difficult to limit is to deliberately atrophy it… In summary, we are for the full extension of Western civilization in Africa."

[66] Fily Dabo Sissoko, "L'evolution et la colonization en A. O. F.," in *Conférence Africaine Française, Brazzaville: 30 Janvier 1944–8 Février 1944*, 98.

[67] Sissoko, "L'evolution et la colonization en A. O. F.," 99.

[68] Sissoko, "L'evolution et la colonization en A. O. F.," 99.

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feigned desire to have new skin," Sissoko alluded that progress toward civilization was not as simple as unquestioningly adopting the garb, affect, and models of Frenchness.[69] Sissoko used the examples of the British in India, Roman history, and France in Canada and Saint-Louis (Senegal) to illustrate the impossibility of complete assimilation. In short, "Truly, in current circumstances, those who think they are fully assimilated are a wreck."[70]

Sissoko's solution to the "wreck" of assimilationist ideologies and practices was association. Sissoko engaged with writings by Waldeck-Rousseau, Izoulet, and Ousmane Socé, in addition to AOF colonial administrative reports and the *Discours du Conseil du Gouvernement de Dakar* from 1925 to 1931 to ultimately argue something very different from the *Cercle* and Ayouné: uniformly forcing French culture on Africans would end in failure because it would lead to "intellectual hybridization."[71] Instead, Africans needed to be stakeholders and active agents in their own evolution, and "Blacks [should] stay Black" while Europeans should work to evolve Africans according to "their own Black line of evolution."[72] Sissoko's intervention reflected his belief in the importance of certain aspects of African history and cultures, even though he clearly looked down upon the Dogon and others. While Sissoko appreciated the linguistic and literary progress of Fulbe speakers and the political, military, and cultural advances made by individuals such as Torgui and Cheick Sidia and his followers, it is impossible to ignore the fact that Sissoko's categorization of societies and progress were firmly connected to European ideas of civilization and modernity. Furthermore, Sissoko still saw the necessity of sustained French intervention to guide the evolution of Africans, even if their evolution was to happen on a separate, "Black line of evolution."[73]

Sissoko's second essay, "L'évolution à œuvre," expanded on his first piece by considering evolution in practice in French West Africa. Sissoko began the essay by situating the development and beliefs of the *évolué* class in AOF. He noted that some non-elites thought the French forced them "to mimic the Whites."[74] Yet, Sissoko claimed that they had pride in the culture they received because they were able to select and adopt the parts that made sense in their lives.[75] He also argued that the French helped them "better understand our race and its infinite possibilities that, to inside examinations, seize us with admiration."[76] While Sissoko believed that French colonialism

[69] Sissoko, "L'evolution et la colonization en A. O. F.," 100.
[70] Sissoko, "L'evolution et la colonization en A. O. F.," 103.
[71] Sissoko, "L'evolution et la colonization en A. O. F.," 105.
[72] Sissoko, "L'evolution et la colonization en A. O. F.," 105.
[73] Sissoko, "L'evolution et la colonization en A. O. F.," 105.
[74] Fily Dabo Sissoko, "L'évolution à œuvre," in *Conférence Africaine Française, Brazzaville: 30 Janvier 1944–8 Février 1944,* 106.
[75] Sissoko, "L'évolution à œuvre,"106.
[76] Sissoko, "L'évolution à œuvre,"106.

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offered the opportunity to understand his identity and potential, he also criticized certain African literary and linguistic traditions, which contrasted his appreciation for the great works of Homer, Pascal, La Fontaine, Corneille, Rousseau, Renan, Hugo, and Dumas *père*, who he noted "is one of us."[77]

The rest of Sissoko's second essay focused on his travels in West Africa, where he and his companions sought to understand life, progress, cultures, and societies. He briefly traced key stopping points in his travels, such as Ouagadougou, where he felt others looked at them with "the intense envy of 'turning into a white," Dori, where they learned all of life's lessons, including "dramas of passion, social and political dramas, stories of fortune and gain, and the pursuit of Allah," the fearlessness of Djibo, the beautiful songs of shepherds near Lake Débo, the kindness of the people in Ségou, the "poise and candor" of the Bambara in Bamako, Bougouni, and Sikasso, and the elegance found in Saint-Louis.[78] Ultimately, Sissoko built upon his experiences of his travels in West Africa to uphold the argument that assimilation disregarded Black backgrounds, cultures, and histories.[79] Sissoko believed that West African societies were experiencing "revolutionary processes" and evolution that did not and should not completely wipe Africans of their cultures.[80] He ultimately ended his essay with the simple and powerful conclusion that adaptation rather than assimilation was the key to the future in French West Africa.[81]

Sissoko's two essays were strikingly different than the other pieces Eboué presented to participants at the Brazzaville Conference because of the way that Sissoko engaged with African cultures and histories. While Sissoko disparaged certain ethnic groups, his overarching argument centered on the idea that Africa had histories and cultures that were worth building upon. Sissoko clearly had an affinity for French literary traditions, but he also saw great beauty and potential in African expressive cultures and social practices. Sissoko's essays balanced his nuanced background as an elite, chief, and Khassonké man living in the French empire. The complexity of his writings presented at the Brazzaville Conference represented his connection to the *Négritude* literary movement, in which Sissoko, Senghor, Césaire, and others grappled with the central question of the meaning and value of Blackness in a world dominated by whites. Still, it is important to emphasize the fact that

[77] Sissoko, "L'évolution à œuvre,"106. Sissoko was referring to Alexandre Dumas *père* (1802–1870), not his son, Alexandre Dumas *fils* (1824–1895). Sissoko considered Dumas to be "one of us" due to his ancestry; Dumas' grandfather was Alexandre Antoine Davy de la Pailleterie and his grandmother was an enslaved African woman named Marie-Cessette Dumas. Marie-Cessette's slaveowner was Alexandre Antoine's father, Marquis Alexandre Davy de la Pailleterie, until he sold her in 1775.

[78] Sissoko, "L'évolution à œuvre," 106–109.

[79] Sissoko, "L'évolution à œuvre,"110.

[80] Sissoko, "L'évolution à œuvre,"111.

[81] Sissoko, "L'évolution à œuvre,"111.

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Sissoko believed the French had important work to do in West Africa. While he recognized the power and beauty of *certain* African cultures, he also thought that the French needed to continue their work of "evolving" Africans with the caveat that this evolution should adapt to individual contexts and maintain space for African identities and cultural practices.

What Didn't They Say?: Understanding "African Opinions" in the Brazzaville Conference and Beyond

The strongest connection between the "African Opinions" essays can be found in what they do *not* say: that immediate independence was necessary. The *Cercle*, Ayouné, and Sissoko argued for a continued place for France in Africa, although each of their visions for the future varied significantly. While their respective critiques of assimilation, adaptation, and association differed, Brazzaville's *Cercle,* Ayouné, and Sissoko shared a few common traits: they were all members of an elite class who collaborated with the colonial state and had the resources, skills, and positions in colonial society to be able to share their views with influential figures such as Félix Eboué. Their educational backgrounds, wealth, and gender offered privileges that laborers, market women, and others could not access. Thus, the sole African voices "present" at the Brazzaville Conference were not only limited to pre-selected essays but were also confined to a cohort of *évolués* who were neither representative of local populations nor committed to any sort of solidarity with non-elites.

We must also consider why these were the only "African Opinions" Eboué presented to conference participants. Even though the *Cercle des Evolués*, Ayouné, and Sissoko expressed a range of opinions in their essays, the substance of their arguments were largely consistent with Eboué's ideas about assimilation and local politics in French Africa. Eboué's 1941 "Memorandum on Native Politics" emphasized the value of a two-pronged system that balanced assimilation to French ideals culminating with *notable évolué* status and a separate track that bolstered local traditional authorities and customs. The *Cercle des Evolués* and Sissoko argued for cultural autonomy but still saw a value in evolution that led to their own distinct ideas of civilization. Unlike Sissoko and the *Cercle des Evolués*, Ayouné did not emphasize the importance of local traditions; yet, he still argued for sustained French colonial intervention in an effort to bring French civilization to Africans, which was something that Eboué also believed.

The similar political leanings of the authors hint at why Eboué presented their articles to the participants at the Brazzaville Conference, but we also must consider practical issues that also influenced insider and outsider voices in the crafting of "African Opinions." Eboué had established relationships with the *Cercle des Evolués* of Brazzaville and Ayouné, as his administration consulted with the former and he regularly called on the latter for advice on local issues in the early 1940s. His working relationships with both parties

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created an opportunity to source and present essays that featured like-minded approaches to colonial reform to the most important decision-makers in the francophone world. While Eboué presented these essays as "African Opinions," each of these contributions represented years of intellectual debates among francophone African elites (which often included Eboué) and spanned across France's colonies in AEF and AOF.

In 1945, Léopold Sedar Senghor published an article in *Le Phare de Dahomey* that detailed the lack of political progress in France's colonies in Africa. Senghor argued that the administrators who participated in the Brazzaville Conference asked for more independence in the colonies and that governors received instructions recommending that they not wait for the vote of the new French constitution to proceed with reforms in the spirit of the conference."[82] Senghor's reference to the recommendations given to governors is particularly surprisingly because René Pleven, the Commissioner for the Colonies in the French Committee for National Liberation, stated at multiple times during the conference that their recommendations were simply that: non-binding recommendations for the future. Nevertheless, Senghor applauded the Governor General of Madagascar and Félix Eboué for doing their "best," while administrators and governors in AOF and Togo made no efforts toward colonial reform.[83] Like others following conference proceedings around the world, including Paul Robeson and the Council on African Affairs, Senghor believed that the Brazzaville Conference was a turning point in French colonial politics, but by 1945, he realized that progress toward greater political rights in the French empire was not necessarily a guarantee.[84]

The political moment of 1944 and 1945 created a hurricane of conversations on the future of Africa, from the internal discussions about concerns that French settlers might break off from France to create a system that mirrored South Africa's approach to white minority rule to the momentous

[82] Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Défense de l'Afrique noire," *Le Phare du Dahomey*, September 1945, 1.

[83] Senghor, "Défense de l'Afrique noire," 1.

[84] The Council on African Affairs, issued a press release that detailed correspondence between the Chairman Paul Robeson and Charles de Gaulle. Robeson and De Gaulle discussed the legacy of both Eboué and the Brazzaville Conference itself. Robeson's initial telegram to De Gaulle "lauded the 'progressive measures and outlook for the French colonies' which have taken shape under the Free French administration, and declared, 'We look to France to play a prominent role in the fulfillment of the democratic aims of the United Nations with respect to the colonial people of Africa and other areas.'" In response to Robeson's telegram, De Gaulle proclaimed, "Our aim and objective is to establish these peoples within a federated system of the new France. The Brazzaville Conference marked the first step in that direction. Liberated France will be the France of liberty." "De Gaulle Answers Greeting; Lauds Governor Eboué," July 13, 1944. ANOM GGAEF 5D187.

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1945 Pan-African Congress in Manchester.[85] There were certainly people who pushed for increased labor and political rights, from market vendors in Brazzaville to West African delegates at the 1945 PAC, but there were also people who believed, perhaps for pragmatic reasons, in the sustained presence and intervention of the French in Africa.[86] Ayouné, Sissoko, and the members of the *Cercle des Evolués* and other elites were a small portion of the population of French Africa, but the decision to include their essays in discussions during the Brazzaville Conference emphasized their disproportionate access to key decisionmakers, which ultimately solidified the preservation of their voices as representative of "African Opinions" in the historical record.

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[85] Geoffroy de Courcel briefly discusses concerns over French settlers in Algeria creating a segregationist system similar to South Africa in "Allocution d'ouverture," in *Brazzaville Janvier-Février 1944: Aux Sources de la Décolonisation* (Paris: Plon, 1988), 13.

[86] An African market vendor wrote to the Secretary Governor in Brazzaville about their frustration with taxes, administrative harassment, and limitations on what vendors were allowed to sell. He stated that African vendors "are always harassed by M. Butafoco… who does not want the natives coming to sell food like eggs, chicken, papayas, lemons, pineapples, goats, pig meat, small pigeons, corn, and sugar cane." The author noted that his community was paying their taxes, but the local colonial administration's actions and decisions were deeply problematic and detrimental to the lives of people in Brazzaville. As a result, he posed a harrowing question to the Secretary General: "We ask Monsieur the Secretary General, how can we provide for our children and pay our taxes in 1941?" Anonymous letter to the Secretary Governor, October 19, 1940, ANOM GGAEF 5D191.

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