

France-Afrique : from Ancients to Moderns

Interview with Yves Gounin, Conseiller d'Etat, former Legal Advisor to the President of the Republic of Senegal (January 24 2011)

How would you define France's African policy since 2007? How would you outline its principal policy directions?

Since independence, France's policy towards Africa has been hesitating between two options. The first option, that of the Ancients, considers that Africa – especially the former French colonies – should keep its privileged position. It is with this in mind that an autonomous Ministry of Cooperation was created and has been kept in existence for almost 40 years. This approach offers convincing arguments: first, history; then, language; and finally, economic interests that have been, for a long time, very strong on both sides. The second option, that of the Moderns, advocates the normalization of the Franco-African relationship. There is no reason, according to the Moderns, to treat Mali or Gabon any differently from Haiti or Kenya. Our cooperation policy, they argue, smacks of paternalism and colonialism. We must put an end to this unhealthy relationship.

Did this rupture take place under Nicolas Sarkozy?

Nicolas Sarkozy announced indeed a rupture which has been slow to materialize in practice.

The speech of Cotonou, on May 19, 2006, intended to make a clean break – even though it is a hackneyed theme within the Franco-African relationship, always promised and never implemented. The newspaper *Libération*, which cannot be accused of being pro-Sarkozy, presented that speech as an expression of the candidate Sarkozy's will to “clean up Françafrique”.

The speech contained strong words: *“We need to do away with the old boy networks, the unofficial envoys who have no other mandate than the one they have invented for themselves. Political and diplomatic institutions functioning normally should take precedence over the unofficial networks that have done so much harm in the past. We need to turn the page on complacency, secrecy and ambiguity for good”*.

There is however many a slip twixt cup and lip. Indeed, the first decisions taken by President Sarkozy are in line with the Cotonou speech. A modernist Minister was appointed rue Monsieur and he says loud and clear that he will follow the Cotonou speech as if it were a roadmap. The African cell of the Elysée disappeared – or, to be more accurate, is now under the authority of the diplomatic adviser of the President, a sign of normalization.

But things quickly went wrong: the speech of Dakar, often criticized by many who have not read the speech itself, which signs away Sarkozy's policy in the long term; and the removal of Jean-Marie Bockel from his position in March 2009 and that of Bruno Joubert in September 2009.

What is Nicolas Sarkozy's personal attitude towards Africa?

Nicolas Sarkozy does not have the same relationship with Africa as his predecessors. Whether viewed in a positive or negative light, Charles de Gaulle, Georges Pompidou, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, François Mitterrand and Jacques Chirac all

had, each in their own way, a close relationship with Africa. They had an in-depth knowledge of the continent and maintained many personal contacts with African officials (be it the friendship between Pompidou and Senghor or Chirac and Diouf). Sarkozy does not have this type of connection. He does not know Africa and he does not really take an interest in the continent. But that does not mean he is not doing his job: Nicolas Sarkozy has already visited the African continent six times, while, during the same period, the visits of the U.S., Chinese, Russian, British or German political leaders can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

But this means that France's policy towards Africa is far less personal under Sarkozy compared to his predecessors. It is no longer the Office of the President that takes the decisions.

So, where are the decisions taken on France's African policy?

This is where our history becomes interesting and a bit distasteful.

For rather complicated reasons, France's African policy is under the responsibility of Claude Guéant, Secretary General of the Office of the President of the Republic. He took over this portfolio during the presidential campaign and kept it. It is worth mentioning here that Claude Guéant is in charge of the two same portfolios as Jacques Foccart: the police (Guéant is a former police prefect) and Africa.

So, is Guéant a new Foccart?

This would be a bit simplistic.

Indeed, as I have said before, Claude Guéant is a powerful man – some have said that he is the “most powerful man in France”, others called him a “viceroy” – who controls France's Africa policy. But, contrary to Jacques Foccart, he doesn't spend much time on Africa. And he does not have many people around him to help him with this portfolio. In the 1960s, Foccart was heading the Secretariat general for Malagasy affairs and supervised a staff of about 100 people; Claude Guéant has no one, except a few night visitors like Robert Bourgi.

Do you consider that Claude Guéant's role is limited?

It is not Claude Guéant's role that is limited; it is France's approach to African affairs.

Many think that France is an omnipotent puppeteer pulling strings, making and breaking governments. This may have been true in the past, under Foccart and his famous networks, during the Biafra war, Operation Barracuda in Bangui or the excesses of Bob Denard in the Comoros. But times have changed. France does not have the capacities to intervene and, even if it had them, does not want to intervene in Africa. If you look at the coups d'état in West Africa in the last few years, in Mauritania, in Guinea, in Guinea-Bissau, in Niger, not to mention Côte d'Ivoire (I mention on purpose very different situations and countries where France's influence varies), you would be hard pressed to uncover any French involvement. France can no longer “*with 100 men change the course of history*”¹. This is what I say to my African counterparts who question me and complain about France's unacceptable interference in African internal affairs. As far as I am concerned, Africans should probably complain more about a declining interest from France, rather than from too much interference.

Is the increasing Europeanization of France's policy towards Africa the cause or the consequence of France's declining interest?

Let me put it bluntly: for a long time now, France has considered Europeanization as a way to share with its

¹ This oft-cited expression can be attributed to Louis de Guiringaud, Minister of foreign affairs of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who told *L'Express* on December 15, 1979 that Operation Barracuda had deposed Emperor Bokassa and reinstalled former President Dacko.

partners part of the cost of its own Africa policy, while, at the same, continuing to take decisions independently. The first few years of DG8, the Directorate-General of the European Commission responsible for development, are illuminating: the French were omnipotent, while the German and the Dutch didn't have a say.

But you don't need to be a genius to predict that, with time, these institutions would become more independent. Indeed, as time went by – the entry of the United Kingdom being a milestone – the European Economic Community (EEC) graduated and became more than a simple power multiplier. It came up with its own agenda. France had to accept at Lomé in 1975 that the field of cooperation now included the ACP countries (African, Caribbean and Pacific).

The agendas of France and the European Union seem to pull in two different directions. What about the other international actors in Africa? China is often mentioned.

Indeed, China's venture into African affairs was quite remarkable. Today, in Paris, you cannot talk about Africa without mentioning China, or *Chinafrique*. I nevertheless think this concept is a misrepresentation of what *Françafrique* entails. It also denotes a lack of understanding of Chinese policy in Africa.

Chinafrique evokes a meeting at nightfall in a smoke-filled room of the Forbidden City of a few Communist officials who come up with a mysterious and complex strategy to get their hands on Africa's natural resources. In reality, the Sinologists – and, unfortunately, very few of them seem to think that *Chinafrique* is worth studying – have a hard time finding any indication of such a strategy. We must change perspective here and study Chinese policy towards Africa not from the perspective of Africa – where, indeed, the appearance of this new actor is striking – but from the perspective of Beijing – for whom Africa seems to be a peripheral and very marginal partner.

You will also not have the same perspective on China if you are in Sudan or in Zambia (countries where China is present to defend its interests) or in Mali or Senegal (that are apparently of little interest to China). Any undifferentiated discourse on “Africa” risks overlooking the importance of making such a distinction.

Finally, I think that the hype surrounding the Chinese breakthrough will not last long. I am ready to bet that, for China, a day will come when reality catches up to them: this is already starting in Zambia where the African workers are striking to protest against their working conditions in the Chinese mines and in West Africa where small shopkeepers are protesting against the dumping of cheap Chinese products in their markets.

In any case, is China a threat to France?

I don't think so. You might think I am hypocritical, but I am actually being honest. France can no longer consider Africa as its sphere of privileged interest (“*pré carré*”). This is a frame of reference very often used: France living in its colonial past, jealously guarding its former colonies, suspicious of the U.S. yesterday, of China today and may be of India and Brazil tomorrow.

France keeps on calling – with limited success – for the international community to rally around Africa. And Africa is not particularly grateful to France for that. Without France, and without Jacques Chirac who tirelessly advocated on Africa's behalf during countless G7 meetings and countless European Council meetings, there would be fewer international meetings talking about Africa.

France cannot ask countries to take an interest in Africa and complain, at the same time, that Africa is attracting too much attention, in particular from the BRIC countries.

But then, why celebrate the independence of the former colonies? Were you not shocked by the Bastille Day military parade?

About the guest list for the military parade – and I can assure you that the Protocol Office, in collaboration with

the relevant services of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Defense Ministry and the Office of the President worked hard on it – I think France has been accused unjustly.

The real question is: should we celebrate their independence?

The celebration was fraught with innuendos, if not misunderstandings. What are we celebrating? The end of French presence? This is strange, if not slightly masochistic if you are the one who has been kicked out. Or are we trying to sing the praises and highlight the “positive aspects of colonization”, thus running the risk of reopening the stormy debate of 2005?

I do have a problem with the celebration: the Africans did not ask for such a celebration; it was not their idea. If they had come to us saying: “We would like to organize something with you to celebrate our independence”, the celebration would have been a lot healthier than the one put together almost unilaterally by the former colonial power.

Would you argue that this celebration could be interpreted as a fight between the Moderns and the Ancients, the tension that, according to you, underlies France's African policy?

It is true that the celebration of fifty years of independence seems to be driven by the Ancients.

But I want to warn you against a Manichean use of this concept – which I borrowed from Daniel Bourmaud. I do not pit the bad Ancients who want to keep Africa as a museum piece against the good Moderns who want to normalize the relationship. I think that the Ancients have certain qualities, and the Moderns certain flaws.

Which ones?

The Ancients insist on the fact that they love Africa. They criticize the Moderns for not loving it enough. Personally, I find this discourse rather exasperating. Since when do you need to “love” a continent or a country to work in it or to study it? Do the diplomats working in Japan or the researchers who study it go around proclaiming their “love” for that country?

This being said, I must admit, however exasperating I may find this, these feelings, this sincere love for Africa is not all negative. The Moderns sometimes have with Africa a relationship that is cool and disembodied. The Africans are the first to deplore this.

Whether Ancients or Moderns, the French in Africa are driven by their interests. Which interests?

Ah! The interests of France! We keep on hearing about France's interests.

Yes, France was driven by its interests in Africa. Military interests: let's not forget that the Free French Forces were able to reform in French Equatorial Africa. Economic interests: in the 1930s, a quarter of France's foreign trade was with its colonies. Linguistic and cultural interests: the Francophonie (even though we often forget that its current institutional structure was less the idea of France and more that of Diori's Niger, Diouf's Senegal and Bourguiba's Tunisia. Political interests: this idea, still so powerful, that France would not be a great power without Africa.

But, on a closer look, do these interests still exist?

History? As time goes by, colonial history will carry less weight. In 2010, we celebrated 50 years of independence, but also the centennial of French Equatorial Africa (founded in 1910). As time goes by, the memory of that common past will slowly be erased.

Economy? Africa represents just one per cent of France's foreign trade. And even for its energy needs, France's oil suppliers are not limited to its sphere of influence (France imports far more oil from Angola, Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria than from Gabon).

Politics? Supposing that this was ever the case (we forgot very quickly that as early as 1961, the newly independent African states voted against France at the UN and with the non-aligned block following the coup of Bizerte), France can no longer count on the unconditional support of its so-called African allies. To be a real player on the international scene, Europe turned out to be, if not a better force multiplier, at least a more efficient sounding board.

You say that France no longer has any interests in Africa. Doesn't Françafrique still have its best days ahead?

Don't get me wrong, Françafrique does exist. I do not deny it. But it has changed. Antoine Glaser and Stephen Smith explained it very well in the second volume of *Ces Messieurs Afrique* (*These Mr. Africa*) that can be summarized in four words: "Françafrique has been privatized". It is no longer at the heart of France's policy, as it used to be during the glory days – now long gone – under Foccart. Nowadays, a few wheeler-dealers fearing neither God nor man continue to do more or less shady deals in Africa. Patrick Besson portrays them beautifully and demystifies them in his excellent book, *Mais le fleuve tuera l'homme blanc* (*But the River Will Kill the White Man*) (Albin Michel, 2009) which I highly recommend reading.

The pathetic dealings of these ageing jerks should not cast a shadow on the work done by other French nationals, the diplomats, the youth serving in Africa, the businesspeople who do not live in the same world as that of their parents or grandparents.

You are talking about a transition from one generation to the next. What impact will this transition have on the analysis of Franco-African relations?

The Ancients are usually older, self-taught, and have been involved with Africa for 40 years. They have accumulated a lot of experience, but it is focused on the French Africa of the past. It is a small village that meets regularly, spawns new members and keeps telling the same anecdotes. The Moderns keep going back and forth between Europe and Africa because of career imperatives.

Even today, this struggle between Ancients and Moderns persists, but this is a struggle of the past. We like to conjure new specters by pretending that Robert Bourgi might be a new Jacques Foccart. On that point, Robert Bourgi himself is very lucid. The Foccart era is about to come to an end and no one is fighting to preserve a special relationship.

France is still very prejudiced towards Africa. Has France run out of ideas for its speeches and to meet African challenges?

Indeed, Africa is caricatured in France; it is seen as backwards and warlike. A dissertation I quote in the introduction of my book showed that the only television programs on Africa were wildlife documentaries and a few dramatic reports on wars and other scourges that decimate the population of the continent.

When Africa is in the news – the televised debate between Sarkozy and Royal was a caricature of this tendency – it is portrayed as a threat in terms of immigration.

In response, we have become outrageously Afro-optimistic in order to combat the image the French have of Africa and many are those who shout themselves hoarse to sing the praises of Africa. Afro-optimism is trendy nowadays, as can be seen in the work of Matthias Leridon or Hervé Bourges. To fight the negative image of Africa, we feel the need to extol its assets, to sing its praise. I find this infuriating – even though I can see that the same attitude can be found in the debate on Europe or France. What bothers me the most is that it is a hodgepodge of different ideas and that people are too lazy to make the effort to differentiate between different political and human contexts and between economic situations that vary greatly from one country to the other. The Afro-optimistic book of Jean-Michel Sévérino and Olivier Rey, however, avoids that pitfall.

Would you agree that France no longer understands Africa?

This might be a bit excessive, but I am afraid that you might be right. France no longer understands Africa, because it has increasingly lost interest in the continent. Thirty or forty years ago, with the military service, many French nationals were sent, willingly or not, to Africa within the framework of cooperation agreements. Nowadays, the younger generation doesn't know much about Africa. Where you are 20 years old and you are looking for an internship, you go to the United States, to Australia ... not to Malawi, with the exception of a few noble souls.

On the other hand, Africans continue to look to France. Of course, this is not true everywhere or for every African: Gabon is more interested in France than Tanzania or Mozambique is. And, of course, I do not forget the Africans, including those from the former French colonies, who have other partners besides France. Bilateral exchanges are no longer exclusive. But they are still highly asymmetrical and unbalanced.

This is probably key to understanding the continuing malaise about France's policy towards Africa: it is of limited importance in France, but very important in Africa.

About that: what would you say to the Africans of France?

My message ... is not to have one.

I would like to say to the Africans that they should stop obsessing about France.

I have promoted my book in many African countries and I was struck by the interest it generated. On the other hand, I must humbly tell you that the topic has not moved crowds in France. This probably illustrates quite well the idea of asymmetry I mentioned earlier.

In Africa, France fascinates, attracts, and sometimes repels. There is a strong relationship with France and Africans are following its politics, its tabloid press, and its sports results. The relationship with France is rather strange, swinging between fascination and detestation. I think you could even speak of schizophrenia, as this relationship is fraught with contradictions.

Africans can brandish the flag of their offended sovereignty and denounce France's interference, while, in the same sentence, squawk about France's inaction (for example, in Niger after the fall of President Tandja). What is France to do when faced with such a contradictory discourse?