**Comparative workshop on the underground in liberation struggles in Africa**

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**The underground student movement and the struggle for national liberation in Côte d’Ivoire (1948-1960)**

**Introduction**

This paper, presented as part of this workshop on underground struggles in Africa, aims to evaluate the role of popular movements in the process of national liberation in sub-Saharan Africa and break with certain official readings of this history which emphasise the role played by members of the political elite such as Félix Houphouët Boigny. Houphouët Boigny was, without doubt, the most famous political leader in West Africa at the time of the liberation struggles. He then became President of the independent state of Côte d’Ivoire (1960-1993). Official history tends to celebrate the heroes of the struggles for independence in Africa but popular movements need also to be taken into account to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the movements for national liberation in sub-Saharan Africa over the course of the 20th century.

Focussing on the period 1948-1960, I examine the political discourse of the underground organizations of the student movement, their networks, their organizational structure, their leaders and the connections they were able to establish with other political and trade union organizations for the liberation of Côte d’Ivoire from colonial rule. I also measure the impact of the underground experience on postcolonial Ivorian society particularly in reference to the emergence of new political figures who broke with the pro-French attitude of the Ivorian political leaders of the time.

What historical sources can be used to reconstruct the history of the underground student movement in Côte d’Ivoire during the colonial period? Sources come in three principal forms. Firstly, we have the autobiographical accounts of certain role players from the period. Recently published, these accounts retrace the careers and experiences of the underground struggle of these individuals during their university years. Secondly, there are oral sources in the form of life stories. The collection of these oral sources provides information on the organizational models of the underground student movement and the viewpoint of the colonized people. These accounts help balance and relativize the often racist representations of the French colonials of the controversial topic of national liberation. Finally, we have the diplomatic archives which can be consulted in Nantes and which contain new and interesting information on the organization of the underground student struggles in Côte d’Ivoire during the colonial period. My article essentially demonstrates two things from a comparative perspective. The first is that, while the underground student movements for national liberation in Côte d’Ivoire lacked the vigour of those seen in South Africa, Southern Africa and elsewhere for the real historical reasons that I demonstrate, the fact remains that from 1948 onwards they did exist and their history remains to be written. The second thing I demonstrate is that they offered a framework for political and ideological training to the students of that generation which, during the 1980s and 1990s, became the leaders of the underground opposition parties to the postcolonial administration in Côte d’Ivoire.

1. **The origins of the underground student movement in Côte d’Ivoire**

It is important to state from the outset that studies on the engagement of students in the process of liberation in West Africa have been few and far between and their broader significance has seldom been given adequate attention. Since the study by Gariuki on the West African Students’ Union (WASU), published as a single article in 1953, nothing emerged on student movements in West Africa until the 1979 publication of a study by S. Amoa entitled *University students’ political action in Ghana* followed by a study by G.O. Olusanya on the topic of WASU published in 1982. Furthermore, nothing had been produced on the subject of student associations which were relatively active in former French Africa, including the most powerful among them, *la Fédération des étudiants d'Afrique noire en France (FEANF)*[[1]](#footnote-1), until the 1985 publication of a book on the topic by S. Traoré *(La FEANF,* Paris, L'Harmattan, 1985). A number of autobiographical works have appeared by former student leaders from the period of decolonisation such as that of the Senagalese Amady Aly Dieng, published in 2011. These works allow us to take stock of the activities of FEANF, the most powerful organization of francophone students, founded in 1950 in Paris.

These sources on the engagements of students in the liberation of sub-Saharan Africa generally obscure the issue of underground student struggles during the colonial period. One of the reasons for this silence is to be found in the methods of the liberation of Africa from European imperialism. In most countries in Southern Africa, Algeria, Guinea-Bissau, etc., armed struggles were necessary to bring an end to foreign rule or racial discrimination. This was the case in the struggle of Nelson Mandela’s ANC and the South African Communist Party of Steve Biko against the Apartheid system. The proliferation of underground political and trade union organizations to counter the repressive rule of the occupier was, from this point of view, natural. However, Côte d’Ivoire and the vast majority of African countries under French rule, with the notable exception of Algeria, obtained their independence by means of negotiations and agreement with the former colonial power. In short, politics taking the form of underground organizations for national liberation were more prevalent in the context of armed struggle than in peaceful liberation processes.

In the case of Côte d’Ivoire, the lack of historical sources on the experience of underground student struggles in the period 1948 to 1960 is explained by the relative paucity of underground politics among students. Nonetheless, despite lacking the intensity and endurance of underground politics in South Africa, Mozambique and Algeria, for example, the existence of underground opposition organized by students into what Arjun Appadurai describes as “cellular structures” existed in Côte d’Ivoire from the end of the 1940s. An example of this was the establishment of the *Association générale des élèves et étudiants ivoiriens en France (AGEECI)*[[2]](#footnote-2) in 1948. Analysing the underground political careers and activities of a number of Ivorian students from the end of 1950 until 1980, Karel Arnaut highlights that “going underground” provided time and space for the development of popular awareness and for the preparation of a mass movement which eventually led to a change in government.[[3]](#footnote-3) He is however quite wrong to suggest that the move towards underground activity in Côte d’Ivoire only dates to the period of 1961-1963 at the time of the “false plots”[[4]](#footnote-4) of Houphouët Boigny and their brutal repression at that time.

The testimony of Doudou N’diaye, collected last February, is critical to our understanding of the origins and evolution of the underground political student movement in Côte d’Ivoire. The accounts of this famous trade unionist show how the struggle of Ivorian students was actually part of the larger struggle of Africans against French imperialism. A decisive moment was the founding of the *Parti africain pour l’indépendance* (PAI)[[5]](#footnote-5)in September 1957 by the Senagalese Majhmout Diop. The PAI was an underground political party whose influence reached as far as Angola.[[6]](#footnote-6) The party was an embodiment of the anticolonial and anti-imperial current which brought the masses into contact with issue of the national independence in a way never before seen. Dodou N’diaye continues: “later, we decided to fall back on national framework to pursue underground political action, particularly at the beginning of the 1960s after the PAI faced a serious crisis following a number of contradictions.”

Testimonies, autobiographical works of student and political leaders of the time as well as archival sources clearly show that the underground struggles in Côte d’Ivoire were largely of an intellectual nature. This position can be explained, in my opinion, by the fact that the complicity of Ivorian elite nationalists lead by Houphouët Boigny with French imperialism made violent repression likely and armed struggle difficult. Despite the risks, a leftist French organisation, the *Groupe d’action communiste (GEC)[[7]](#footnote-7)*, did significant work in Côte d’Ivoire towards political and ideological training of the Ivorian elite including members of the *Rassemblement démocratique africain (RDA)[[8]](#footnote-8)*, the party which strove for the independence of Côte d’Ivoire. According to the testimony of Doudou N’diaye, the GEC led the underground movements. For this reason the communists were included in the management of an RDA school for cadres which was organised as a prelude to the 2nd interterritorial congress of the movement held from 2 to 6 January 1949 at the Etoile du Sud Hotel in Treichville. 120 Pupils of which 65 were Ivorian nationals took part in the training where they learnt, among other things, to disrupt meetings of rival groups:

I must note that, prior to this congress, entrusted to Péchoux,[[9]](#footnote-9) a school for cadres was held during which subjects of a theoretical nature and, following these, practical exercises were studied. I note in particular, as subjects, there were ‘how to disrupt a public meeting of rival’ and ‘drawing up an article reporting a case of colonial repression’.[[10]](#footnote-10)

At the same congress, the communists also participated in the re-enactment of scenes of forced labour which were to be filmed for the instruction of RDA militants. 1951 was an important turning point for underground political and student movements in Côte d’Ivoire and, more generally, for the decolonisation movement in that country. That year, the leader of the RDA, Félix Houphouet Boigny, broke ties with the French Communist Party. No political leader in British Africa, notes Ghanaian historian Albert Adu Boahen, had ever made such a dramatic move, antagonizing and undermining the sentiment of students. [[11]](#footnote-11) This decision led the GEC to withdraw its cadres from the country thus depriving overt and covert struggle organizations of their ideological and mobilisation capacities.[[12]](#footnote-12) This rupture also led to the radicalisation of students and opposition groups against the leader of the RDA who was accused of being an accomplice of the French in propping up foreign rule of sub-Saharan Africa. This resulted in a proliferation of underground groups of students, workers, and politically connected people opposed to what they saw as the neo-colonial position of Félix Houphouët Boigny.

Six important underground movements existed in the 1950s. Ivorian students abroad, supported by already active cadres, led various opposition groups. Among these were the *Mouvement ivoirien de libération* (MIL), the *Parti révolutionnaire ivoirien* (PRI), *Comité révolutionnaire ivoirie*n (CRI)[[13]](#footnote-13).However, no action, apart from the distribution of pamphlets and tracts, was taken by these small groups inside or outside the country.[[14]](#footnote-14) While several trade union leaders like Abdoulaye Fadiga, discussed in greater detail below, Harris Memel Fotê, Laurent N’guessan Zoukou or Salif Doudou N’diaye are celebrated in the history of Ivorian student and political trade unionism, none of them, nor any underground organisation, maintained the momentum necessary or uncontested leadership needed to take revolutionary fervour to its peak.

Another handicap that beset Ivorian underground movements was the difficulty they faced taking root in any sustained way in the country. This limited their ability to effectively spread propaganda and mobilise preventing them from gaining mass support. They nonetheless survived in Côte d’Ivoire until 1958 when differences emerged between Houphouët Boigny and Ahmed Sékou Touré, the nationalist leader of Guinea, regarding the French Community of states proposed by France obliged Ivorian opponents to withdraw to Guinea. Their ideological links with Ahmed Sékou Touré gave Houphouët Boigny the pretext he needed to expel his opponents from Ivorian territory and driving them into exile in Guinea.[[15]](#footnote-15) Because it was impossible to operate in Côte d’Ivoire owing to its pro-French position and because the only francophone university in West Africa was in Dakar, Ivorian activists moved their operations to France, Senegal and Guinea; operations in the latter beginning in 1958.

1. **Recruitment, organizational structure and repression of underground student networks**

To be effective Ivorian students quickly realised that they needed to combine their efforts to create a united student movement. For this reason, during the summer vacation of 1957, according to writer Fréderic Grah-Mel, Ivorian students in France, who formed part of the *Association des étudiants de Côte d’Ivoire en France (AECIF)*, a subsidiary of FEANF, linked up with their comrades from the *Association des étudiants de Côte d’Ivoire (AECI)* and the *Association des élèves de Côte d’Ivoire à Dakar (AECID)* under a single umbrella which went by the name of *the Union générale des étudiants et élèves de Côte d’Ivoire* (UGEECI). *[[16]](#footnote-16)* It was the militants of this organisation, that is to say almost all Ivorian students and pupils, which stood against Félix Houphouët Boigny. Trade union opposition was conducted from three locations, Guinea, France and Senegal, under the general coordination of Abdoulaye Fadiga.

The oral testimonies that I collected between 2011 and 2014 point to the central role of one man : Abdoulaye Fadiga who travelled between Paris, where he was a student, and Dakar organising the underground movement opposing Félix Houphouët Boigny and his pro-French policies. As President of AECIF Abdoulaye Fadiga regularly visited Francis Wodié, a student of law in Dakar. According to him, Ivorian students in Senegal, members of UGECI, regularly received him at which times he incited them to underground political action. Since the summer vacation of 1957, AECIF linked up with their comrades from the Association of Ivorian Students (AECI) and the Association of Ivorian Pupils in Dakar (AECID) under a single umbrella known as UGEECI, the General Union of Students and Pupils of Côte d’Ivoire. It was the militants of this organisation, that is to say almost all Ivorian students and Pupils, which stood against Félix Houphouët Boigny, the Ivorian political leader of the time. The students were against the alliance between Houphouët and the colonialists and capitalists which was, in their estimation, merely a means of gaining considerable personal advantages.

Towards the end of the university year of 1959, Abdoulaye Fadiga went to Dakar in order to “indoctrinate” students by inciting them to resolute engagement and strengthened political conviction by engaging in underground political activities. These missions by Abdoulaye Fadiga were not by accident. They were designed to counter manoeuvres of Félix Houphouët Boigny, who, in order to decapitate the radical wing of the nascent Ivorian student movement, did not hesitate to gather support among rival unions which were more favourable to his collaborationist strategy with France. Francis Wodié comments:

It became necessary to strengthen the trade union movement by linking political action with trade union activities. Abdoulaye Fadiga therefore wanted AGECI to maintain a radical line despite the dangers and the tactics of intimidation and corruption resorted to by the government. He was also adamant that nothing should be allowed to sway the student movement in the direction on the *Union nationale des étudiants de Côte d’Ivoire (UNECI)[[17]](#footnote-17)*, the student union close to the Ivorian authorities towards the end of the colonial period. That is why he came to talk to us in Dakar and convince us of this, claiming that those who did not share this view were the fruit of a “bourgeois education”. [[18]](#footnote-18)

It was important to Abdoulaye Fadiga to overcome what S. Amoa describes as the “low level of political awareness”. In the same way, in order to raise awareness about the underground political struggle among Ivorian students on French soil, he visited *MECI (Maison des étudiants de Côte d’Ivoire)[[19]](#footnote-19)* based in the 13th arrondisement in Paris which was the nerve centre of overt and covert political agitation there. Abdoulaye Fadiga was always the linchpin of these meetings. He visited Ivorian students in Paris to conscientize them and encourage them to engage politically and demonstrated the necessary connection between union activity and political action which he saw as complementary. About 15 students met him under such circumstances and it was from these meetings, according to Francis Wodié that the first underground cell was born.

The political cell was there to reinforce the union position. Sustained by Marxist thought, students and certain Ivorian intellectuals formed underground groups in the form of *Core Cells* which maintained a relationship with the unions. They believed that unions were a mass movement while underground cells were the political movement of the *vanguard.* According to Francis Wodié, the *modus operandi* for recruitment to underground cells consisted of searching among union members for the most conscious and advanced elements to be part of the radical wing of trade unionism in order to bring about the final liberation of Côte d’Ivoire and Africa from imperial domination.

At the beginning of the 1950s, Ivorian students abroad, supported by already active cadres, lead various opposition groups. Among these were the *Mouvement ivoirien de libération* (MIL), the *Parti révolutionnaire ivoirien* (PRI), *Comité révolutionnaire ivoirie*n (CRI)[[20]](#footnote-20).However, no action, apart from the distribution of pamphlets and tracts, was taken by these small groups inside or outside the country.[[21]](#footnote-21) Word-of-mouth was another recruitment strategy but it came with the risks entailed by acting in the open. For example, notes Doudou N’diaye, “I invited people to my home in Dijon and spoke to them there. I revealed things to them. Some people said that they could not live in that way. Others said they were very interested in underground political activity. We incorporated people like that into the movement. We also clandestinely instructed workers by inculcating them with communism with the help of French socialists. So it was necessary to have these books for oneself to explain to them how an underground political party works. It was very difficult. At one point it struck their conscience.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

Another figure of the underground in the 1950s was Joachim Paul Anachy. He was educated in France and influenced by communism and returned to Côte d’Ivoire in secret in the hope of seizing power. Starting in 1959 he began gradually to set up underground cells modelled on communist cells in that they were watertight, the members of one cell dnot knowing the members of any other cell. This initiative came as a reaction to the total ban on the establishment of legal communist parties of which he had been notified by the Ministry of the Interior. He was sent to France later on a professional internship where he set up additional cells. According to those closest to him, he communicated with the members of his network in coded messages. If he wrote “my wife is well”, for example, it meant “we have held a meeting”.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Towards the end of the 1950s two events would solidify the radical position of students in francophone Africa towards France and African leaders aligned to France. These events also brought some visibility to the underground cells organised by students. In 1956 the French parliament voted for the framework law for the splitting up of the former federations of French West Africa (AOF) and French Equatorial Africa (AEF). This would bring about what the former Senegalese president Léopold Sédar Senghor described as the balkanization of Africa; a blow to the possibility of continental unity. In 1958 General de Gaulle, President of France, urged Africans under French administration to push for independence within the framework of a French community of African countries. Every country in francophone West Africa voted in favour of the proposal in the 1958 referendum on the matter apart from Guinea which voted against the proposal which Sékou Touré, leader of that country, saw as a form of neo-colonialism.

In Côte d’Ivoire’s case, student organisations were active in the debate around the question of the French community of African countries. Jacques Doumbia Sangaré noted in 1978 that he, a number of his Ivorian comrades and other Africans living in Côte d’ Ivoire were in favour of immediate independence for Africa. They campaigned in favour of the “no vote” in the referendum. They also organised a boycott of General de Gaulle’s conference of 24 August 1958 in Abidjan as part of his tour of Africa to promote his position towards the planned referendum.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The most striking thing about this account is the regionalism that characterised student activism both underground and overt. This ideological position came to the fore when, in the referendum of 28 September 1958, Guinea voted against the proposal for a community of French African countries. In reprisal to what it considered a challenge, France decided to economically strangle and politically isolate Guinea by breaking off all cooperation with the country. A plan of African solidarity was put in place to support Guinea. Ivorian academics like N’guessan Zoukou, and Memel Fotê as well as the famed historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo from Upper Volta (Burkina-Faso), arrived in Guinea to support the country and Sékou Touré in their defiance of French domination. Other Ivorian intellectuals like Laurent N’Guessan Zoukou, Akin-Akin, Blaise Yao N’go, Kodjara Koné and Memel Fotê, expelled from Côte d’Ivoire for political reasons or involvement with union activities, found themselves as exiles in Guinea. It was necessary to help Sékou Touré so that his example succeeded and radiated throughout Africa.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Guinea therefore became fertile ground for political and union activism in West Africa and a refuge for a number of underground movements. Opposition, whether led by students or politicians, to the pro-French policies Félix Houphouët Boigny was thus nipped in the bud in Côte d’Ivoire and was exported instead to Guinea. In May 1959, Ivorian intellectuals, exiled to Guinea for demanding independence like that of Guinea, founded the National Liberation Committee of Côte d’Ivoire (CNLCI). According to its manifesto, the committee “aimed to urge the holders of power to demand national independence or, failing this, to take strong action to quickly secure the complete liberation of Côte d’Ivoire making it an independent nation within the larger African Community.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Working with the French, Ivorian authorities undertook to repress the leaders of this underground activism under the guise of union engagement. Abdoulaye Fadiga, the main leader, along with about fifteen students were arrested and handed over to the French authorities. Francis Wodié recalls:

Before returning to my hotel, I asked my friend Bonny Germain to come with me. He did this happily. Upon arriving at my hotel, I noticed people posted at various points at the entrance to and around the building. They had come to “pick us up” that evening and were keeping watch. They arrested Bonny and me and “sent” us to the “Paris Depot” where we spent three nights. One morning, very early, they came to remove us from our “cell” and took us to the Paris airport from where we were transferred to Côte d’Ivoire on a direct flight. My parents were waiting as they expected me back for holidays. At the Abidjan Airport they were surprised to see me “picked up” instead by the police.[[27]](#footnote-27)

**Conclusion**

Two main conclusions can be drawn from this analysis. The alliance between France and the new political regime of Félix Houphouët Boigny in Côte d’Ivoire was a major stumbling block to the spread of the Ivorian underground movement in the academic environment. The underground student movement resisting the continuation of French domination in Côte d’Ivoire supported by Félix Houphouët Boigny could not, under these conditions, operate from France where underground cells had been established. It can be concluded that the Ivorian underground student movement was unable to fundamentally change the neo-colonial basis of the future Ivorian state being built by Félix Houphouët Boigny.

The second conclusion comes out of the first. Underground political and union activism in the last days of the colonial era were successfully crushed. However, the underground cells were the training grounds of a generation of political leaders who would go on to form those underground political parties active during the reign of Félix Houphouët Boigny. The most famous case was the creation of the *Ivorian Popular Front (FPI)* by former President Laurent Gbagbo. In 1990 he and other leaders from the left like Bamba Moriféré, Francis Wodié, Zadi Zaourou along with trade unions and students challenged one party rule. Following popular uprisings, President Félix Houphouët Boigny was obliged to introduce multiparty democracy which marked the end of his political dictatorship in the country.

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    Association of Ivorian Pupils of Dakar (AECID)

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