

# African history and African studies. A personal view. A tandem interview with Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch and Donald Crummey

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Gli studi storici sull’Africa si sono sviluppati a partire dagli anni Sessanta in coincidenza con la prima grande ondata di indipendenze. Tra i pionieri di questi primi studi spiccano i nomi di Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, professore emerito di Storia dell’Africa all’Università Denis Diderot - Parigi VII e Donald Crummey, professore di Storia dell’Africa alla University of Illinois, at Urbana-Champaign.

Abbiamo chiesto loro di parlarci dello sviluppo degli studi africanisti e del loro rapporto, personale ed accademico, con l’Africa.

**Let’s start from the beginning... How would you describe your “first encounter” with Africa?**

**Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch:** My first encounter with Africa was the French Algerian war, in 1960 (the war began in 1956). My husband was a 27 year-old graduate student, therefore a late conscript. Because of the war conscription was long: 28 months, and he had to spend one year in Oran, Algeria. At that time, I was teaching in a grammar school. I was pregnant and I used part of my leave to go to visit him. My eldest daughter was born in Algeria at the beginning of July 1960. Because the school year resumed in October, I spent nearly 4 months in Algeria. I was completely seduced by the country, the people, the struggle for independence and the beauty of the

landscape. But I was also struck by my ignorance: I was supposed to begin a Ph.D. on Paris in the 15th century. My supervisor had told me: «splendid topic, but very difficult, I am not sure that you will not need your all life to solve the question». I was wondering whether or not I was willing to spend my life in 15th century Paris... My discovery of Algeria solved the question: I thought that it was stupid to spend my life in the Middle Ages while, as an historian, I understood nothing about the main problems of my own time. Therefore I changed my mind, and I decided to begin a Ph.D. on Algerian history. When coming back home, I studied Arabic for 3 years. Meanwhile, I met Henri Brunschwig, who was looking for an assistant on Africa South of Sahara; he had just been elected as a director of Research at the EHESS (then 6th section of the Ecole pratique des hautes Etudes): why not? This was also Africa, and then it was a decision for life. I have never regretted it.

**Donald Crummey:** I first encountered Africa in 1962 as a volunteer. I had just graduated from the University of Toronto and was accepted as a participant in a Long-Term Ecumenical Workcamp sponsored by the World Council of Churches. The workcamp was in Kenya. My interest in Africa had been aroused by the political events of 1960, involving African independence as well as the turmoil in Congo and the Sharpeville Massacre in South Africa. Originally that interest focused on West Africa and the excitement generated by Ghana and Nkrumah, but the chance to live and work for nine months in Kenya proved to be a life-changing event. I was overwhelmed by the openness and hospitality of the Kenyans and caught up by the excitement surrounding the independence election of 1963. I also met some Ethiopians during my time in Kenya and felt that Ethiopia combined so many of the issues that really interested me: its symbolic role in Pan-Africanism; the relationship between history and nation in Africa; the existence of an indigenous, deeply-historical church.

**Following these first steps, you both have done wide archival and field research on different aspects of African history. How has changed during the years your methodological approach to the history of Africa?**

**CCV:** My very first study was a paper asked for by Henri Brunschwig. Years later I heard that it was in fact to test my ability; we were three candidates and it was his mode of selecting between us. For one year, while teaching in the mornings, I went every day to the colonial Archives in Paris to write my two first articles: they dealt with French/British maritime competition for trading in the kingdom of Dahome, in today Benin, towards the end of the 19th century. Today, I think that I was really both daring and unconscious writing on such a topic with no fieldwork, although, when rereading this paper today, years later, it appears to remain rather convincing. This paper was published in *Annales* in 1964 [1], and my very first step in Africa South of the Sahara occurred only in 1965. That was the reason why I decided that they would be in Benin: I wanted to test if what I wrote was coherent with the field realities. My destination was Gabon, but I managed to realize several stops over through West Africa: in Niamey, then in Ouagadougou, and at last in Cotonou, from where I drove to Abomey, the capital city of the old kingdom. Having a look at the country made me feel more comfortable. My main fieldworks occurred in Equatorial Africa: Gabon, Congo, Centrafrican Republic. Given the wealth of colonial archives of all kinds, public and private archival sources, I did not miss sources, including oral testimonies. Meanwhile, I unceasingly travelled across my fields of research, not so much to proceed on intensive oral research, but to watch, to listen to and to be impregnated with the country, the ideas, the African reactions, the European attitudes, etc. Certainly, it would have been impossible to write what I wrote without understanding, as strongly as I could, what I saw. I like to compare myself with a sponge: when I am in Africa, I absorb everything. My observation is intense at any time, anywhere: in the streets, on the marketplaces, discussing with colleagues, friends, missionaries, peasants, anybody. Sometimes, I really learnt quite original facts. I began travelling in

1965, spending four months in Equatorial Africa, where, among other things, I tried to reproduce Savorgnan de Brazza's itinerary during his third mission in Gabon and Congo. Then I went to Africa every year, at least once a year, since 1967 or 1970. I cannot say if my methodological approach to the history of Africa has changed or how it has changed during the years. What I can say is that for years I slowly acquired a broad methodological perspective and now my understanding and interpretations probably come more quickly. I often instinctively understand nearly at once the meaning of what I read or what I observe. This obviously was not the case in the mid 1960s! I had everything to learn. Nowadays, I have to be unceasingly aware that everything is in the move, nothing is obvious forever. It is the reason why I am convinced that you cannot be a good historian of Africa without going often to Africa, even if you work mainly on archival materials, and obviously, today, without collaborating with African scholars in Africa.

**DC:** In 1964, I entered the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University to study African History. My dissertation, on the role of Protestant and Catholic missionaries in the first decades of Ethiopian contact with Europe in the mid-19th century, was very conventionally based on European archival sources and on published Ethiopian texts. Following successful defence of my dissertation in 1967, I was employed for six years as an Assistant Professor in the History Department at what was then Haile Sellassie I University. This was a profoundly formative experience. The department had a research requirement for all students, a BA thesis, and a typical thesis rested on the use of Ethiopian documents, published and unpublished, and of oral traditions. Supervising undergraduate theses necessarily exposed me to new methodologies and areas of interest. I also became persuaded that the 17th and 18th centuries were seriously neglected by Ethiopian historiography, which concentrated largely on the 19th and 20th centuries, so I refocused my research interests back in time. Untapped sources for the history of Ethiopia in the 17th and 18th centuries existed in extensive marginalia in manuscripts of the British Museum (later

the British Library). These marginalia contained a great deal of information about land and its transfer, so, for several decades, my research was directed to mastering this body of material, to searching out examples in manuscripts still held in Ethiopian churches and monasteries, and to using oral informants to illuminate its meaning [2]. Since the early 1990s I have also been involved in environmental history [3]. This has involved a shift to the 20th century. I have used historical photographs (paired with matching contemporary photographs) to understand the parameters of landscape change and intensive interviews with elderly Ethiopian men and women who have lived in the landscapes through the period covered by the photographs. My earlier work on land documents was concentrated in the area around Gondär, the Ethiopian capital of the 17th and 18th centuries, whereas my environmental history work has been concentrated in Wällo province, heavily affected by the famines of 1973 and 1984. To link these two different geographical areas I compared landscape change in Wällo with landscape change in Gondär.

**Your academic experience in the field of African Historical studies is characterised by both a broad field experience and by your contribution to the development of such studies in your own countries, France and the United States. Obviously, there is a difference between the two, as France had a colonial empire, the USA had not. From your point of view, which are the main peculiarities of African Studies in France and in the US?**

**CCV:** African studies in France obviously focused on francophone Africa, above all because research grants for these areas were quasi the only ones to be obtained in France; and also research infrastructure for French researchers was much developed in former French colonies. Possibly the most important factor was the former imperial language of communication: French. Therefore French historians, till very recently, focused a lot (too much to my mind) on Francophone Africa. This focus on francophone Africa had a specific drawback: it discouraged for long comparisons and

comparative history. Only recently, for the last 20 years or so, French scholars, through the mediation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, created French Institutes of Research in Nairobi, Ibadan, Johannesburg and, recently, Addis Ababa. Since then, French history of Africa began to internationalize. Is it a difference with African studies in the US? Not so much, because, for years, African studies in the US focused on Anglophone Africa. Only for the last thirty years American researchers resolutely engaged on francophone research. I think that in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, things did not differ so much from the US: desegregation in the US was coeval to decolonisation in Africa, therefore the process of research was chronologically similar. The difference was that in France for a while there was a strong connection between Africanists, most of them anticolonialist scholars, and African scholars, even if their viewpoints diverged. In the US, African American scholars opposed to American Africanists, who were all white scholars. Things have evolved since then. From the 80s, African studies, like other cultural area studies, developed well in France, but at the same time French colonial history more or less disappeared. Therefore the difference is obvious today: American scholarship more or less is on the way to supersede former quarrels (afrocentrism versus africanism, which were raging in the 90s, being the best example), while in France we experience a kind of a regression with French traditional nationalism denying a postcolonial *travail de mémoire*.

**DC:** To be sure, the US had no colonial presence in Africa, but it does have a deep historical connection with Africa through the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which has produced one of the two largest communities of people of African descent outside the continent. So US attitudes, in a deeply historical sense, have been shared with Europe and shaped by both the slave trade and by the institution of African enslavement. The earliest constructive intellectual curiosity about Africa in the US arose from within the African diaspora and African Americans have continued to play an important role in trying to shape US attitudes and policies towards Africa in a direction more

favourable towards Africa itself. This effort confronts continuing racism in the US and resistance from American centres of political and economic power.

**As you, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch noted, African historical studies began to develop with the independencies, in the 1960s. Since then, Africanists in Africa, Europe and the US have followed many different paths. What could you identify as the main failures and main successes of the scholars of the field since the 1960s? And what do you think about the role of African Universities?**

**CCV:** I should not say that there were failures or successes. Rather, there were various phases and steps forward. The first step was in the 60s: the discovery of an African history, mainly by western historians. Beforehand, only colonial history, and African anthropology, existed. History became possible only with independence. The main feature, quite normally, was a claim for a rehabilitation of the African past, which effectively had been ignored, despised, or forgotten by historians, relegating it only to anthropology. The main conquest probably was the historical value, although it was probably exaggerated, recognized to oral sources, nicknamed at the time “oral traditions”. There might be a few distortions praising a kind of lost golden age, but all in all, a lot of work was done, even if it was often more factual than problematic. The second phase, from the 1980s onwards, was characterized by the emergence and development of African historical schools, which since the beginning were mostly trained by western scholarship, such as Dar es Salaam school or Dakar school. This gave birth to a few abuses, like afrocentrism and “Cheikh Anta Diopism”, but it also had the advantage to introduce new ideas and to open the way to the subaltern studies to come. Meanwhile, African history became more open to new trends, such as gender studies, social history and cross cultural studies. The third, contemporary, phase, is shaped by the emergence of a cosmopolitan African history characterized by the internationalisation of scholarship, which is quite positive, because it allows to connect scholars with different approaches: Europeans, Americans, African Americans and Africans living

in the continent as in the diasporas. No other discipline enjoys so much international cooperation and cosmopolitanism. This is a very positive point. Nevertheless this demands a sound mutual understanding, which is yet far from being fully realized, but which obviously is in progress. A very recent success is that specialists from the same discipline, such as history, although specialized on different, mainly western, fields have accepted the idea that African social sciences and African realities are not made of another stuff: the “banalization”, as Achille Mbembe or Jean-François Bayart would say, of African studies as world studies is a very important and positive point, which at last begins to be recognized in France, possibly a little later than in the US.

**DC:** The main successes have been a truly remarkable expansion in historical knowledge about Africa, produced by scholars at African institutions and at institutions in Europe and the Americas and the creation of institutions for the creation and transmission of historical knowledge throughout Africa and Europe and the Americas. In the US African history is now taught in a wide range of institutions throughout higher education. On the other hand, this expansion of knowledge about Africa has had only a modest impact on general consciousness about Africa in North America, where, as in Europe, some pretty primitive attitudes towards Africa persist. Expansion of knowledge in institutions of higher education has not been matched by a comparable expansion at the secondary and primary levels. Finally, institutions in Africa, founded in the 1950s and 1960s for producing and promoting knowledge of the African past have had a very rough ride since the 1970s, with the onset of economic depression and the restructuring, to Africa's disadvantage, of the institutions of global capital. The decline of Departments of History in Africa has been part of the general de-institutionalization of Africa, which began in the 1970s and which is a function, first of all, of the global capitalist economy and its devaluation of Africa, and, secondly, of the failure of the political institutions accompanying African independence in the 1960s, which were posited on the assumption

of a continuing growth of African economies in relationship to the global economy.

**Africanists have therefore contributed, as you Donald said, to a truly remarkable expansion in historical knowledge about Africa, which is, however, generally limited to higher education. There have been recently some debates on how the colonial past of Africa should be taught in the schools. I am referring particularly to the French law on the “historical rehabilitation” of French colonial past. As scholars of the field, how may you contribute to this debate?**

CCV: In France we are still imbued with colonial history, or rather, with colonial memory. At the same time, however, ideas such as decolonization and third world aid have developed and are now part of everyone thinking. Memory has been exploited, manipulated and the consequences are evident today. We could define this as a clash of memories, a clash that is much more violent because during the last twenty years, for reasons that are still to be ascertained, we have assisted to an oblivion of the French colonial past: it has become too embarrassing. Today, this impasse has become impossible. This phenomenon, which someone calls in an evocative way the *fracture coloniale* [4] is completely a new one, or better, what is new is the fact that the history of the colonial period becomes an arm in the hands of the historian. What is astonishing is to see the historians lending themselves to measure the benefits and detriments of colonialism. Historians should not be moralists and the colonization was not strictly good or bad, it simply existed. The role of the historian is to understand why, how and which were the consequences on the society, both colonized and colonizing. But not to put historical facts on a balance and weigh them!

This, however, is not a revival of what it is called, with a pejorative hint, the anticolonialism of the 1960s; it has nothing to do with it. During the 1950s and 1960s politics and science were much more separated than today. At that time, great historians looked after this separation: Charles-André Julien for North Africa and Henri Brunschwig for Black Africa. In spite of the

colonial struggles of the time, the dichotomy between politics and historical knowledge was carefully respected. The “anticolonialist” intellectuals were a minority and they could be understood only if the analysis proposed by them were as much documented and precise as possible. The scientific works of this period therefore had not so much a political bias. The historians who today dispute on the pros and cons of colonialism are thus an innovation, at least in its dimension. They do not realize that they are carrying on a store of knowledge, the best example being the pros of the French education and medicine, that has its roots in, for example, their parents’ work experience abroad during the colonial era or their own experience, for instance working with the NGOs.

We are not all equal in a face-to-face between history and memory. We assist today to a instrumentalization made by politics both of history and memory. Historians are part of the play also as citizens; since we are talking about present-day history we have to consider that their emotional sphere is involved as much as it is for everyone else. What someone calls “the tenacious and contestant ideological visions of the colonization, the slave trade or the colonial wars” is not a revival. It is, on the contrary, the emergence of an actual phenomenon, which has come out from an amalgam of memories manipulated by the encounter with politics that often appears openly ideological. Politics is always present, and is never exactly where it announces itself. March Bloch [5] has demonstrated that politics impregnates in every epoch the relationships between individuals, which at the same time are relationships of meaning, interest and power, and involve the historians as much as the others [6].

**DC:** We need to continue to insist on an understanding of the colonial era which fully incorporates the perspectives of the African subjects of European colonialism and which sees European colonialism as a self-interested enterprise. We need to resist attempts to rehabilitate the “civilizing mission” and other ideological justifications of colonialism and their racist implications about Africa, its past and its potential.

**Taking into consideration the role of Africans in determining their own history is also putting Africa in a broad context, including its historical ties between the different cultural areas of the world. In your opinion, which is today the place of African history in the context of the World History?**

**CCV:** The question of the universality of history was first asked at the International Conference of African Studies in 2000 in Oslo. More than 80 percent of the historians came from the West and most of them were still convinced that Western historians were the best, and, moreover and worse, that World History was better written by western historians. But eventually discussions emerged, together with multilateralism, especially thanks to the help of UNESCO, strongly motivated by a small committee of historians, who afforded a substantial grant to let organize and sponsor a panel gathering prominent African scholars. The general tone at the end of the conference had changed, at least a little. The shift was still more obvious five years later in Sidney. The fact that an African scholar was part of the opening round table was a clear sign of such shift and it can definitely be considered as a great 'premiere'. Most Western historians recognized the high quality of the work of the African representatives and at the same time were also fascinated by them. This progressively has helped African history to be recognized by other historians as part of the global context of world history. This is, nevertheless, obviously not yet fully realized; especially in French universities were, except for a few exceptions, still few departments of history recruit historians specialized in world history other than European history.

**DC:** African history is a fully engaged dimension to the history of the "Old World," of Africa/Eurasia. Egypt was a major source of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern civilization and Egypt was rooted in its African environment. Mediterranean Africa has been fully engaged in regional history and its larger ramifications since Egyptian times. Africa has been an integral part of the Muslim world, since that world emerged in the 7th century. West, Central and East Africa and the Nile Valley have each constituted a domain for the development of state institutions, of complex technologies in agriculture, textiles, and metallurgy, and of major artistic achievement.

**We can say, therefore, that new challenges and new tasks are waiting for the new generation of the scholars of Africa. Which suggestions would you give to them?**

**CCV:** First, to be open to world history, including western history, as much as other historians should be open to African history. African history, especially in France, was till quite recently not enough aware of the mainstream discussions and thinking among historians of other fields. Comparative history has not to be limited to comparisons between varied parts of Africa, but needs to be informed also by comparisons with anywhere in the world. Let us take for example urban history, or cultural history, or any other field. This means, among other things, that French historians must be much aware of foreign languages and literatures. African languages of course, but also English literature (and Portuguese, and Dutch, and Arabic...), because most of important books are now written in English, and other good ones in other languages, as well. Of course, the reverse should be realized too: many francophone works are of a high quality and French scholars do not think quite the same as their English counterparts. Nevertheless, it may unfortunately be conceivable for an American not to read French and nevertheless write a correct study, but it is no longer conceivable for a francophone scholar not to read English, just because there are probably ten times more English written books than French written books.

Secondly, it is important to recognize the necessity of collaborating with international scholars and especially for graduate students, to collaborate with their African counterparts, and to discuss as well with their French (or English or American) supervisors as with African scholars. This is also valuable for French senior specialists, who probably know it less than younger ones: the “repli sur l’empire” is over. French scholars may remain renowned scholars only if they accept to question themselves when listening to the others, not necessarily to agree with them, but at least to listen to them and to accept that viewpoints may differ because everybody, including themselves, receives from his or her own given culture and therefore has to be open to other cultures. The western world is a cultural area no more no less than other ones. As a younger French scholar once told me: “French scholars no longer are “les maîtres de la brousse” as they were in the 1960s

when they were the only supervisors. French scholars now have to prove their legitimacy to write African history although they are French"... This is of course part of a joke, but has also a part of truth.

**DC:** The opportunities for original, creative research, which serves larger societal values of racial equality and a deeper understanding of humanity, have never been greater. There are challenges, to be sure, but they are worth overcoming.

**To conclude, I ask you a foreseeing opinion: how do you see the future of Africa? Are you on the defeatist side, which sees no hope for Africa, or do you believe that something will change in a positive way?**

**CCV:** The contrast between African and Western countries seems to be untenable. However, we should not be too exaggerated. It is true that things are not good for a remarkable part of the continent, but we should not forget those African countries which have a system of government and a social organization that are fundamental to avoid the worst things to happen: Botswana, Mali, Tanzania and others. We do not have to forget about Senegal, where the democratic alternation has won for the first time, or the Côte d'Ivoire, where several recent putsches failed and avoided a dictatorship reprisal. And, obviously, South Africa, for which while the worst catastrophes had been foreseen, nobody interrogated about the reasons why such negative events did not actually happen. Paradoxically, what struck about the African continent is its vitality. A vitality which can be seen in many aspects: demography, culture, politics and even economics, despite the appearances and catastrophes. Owing to this contradictory situation it is difficult to foresee which will be the future of Africa. But we should not be struck by the afro-pessimism that dominates the Western world and that originates from ancient times. During the slave trade, Christians were wondering if Africans had a soul; then, during the colonial era, Africans were described as lazy children to be instructed on everything. And then, after the independencies, Africa was considered unable to go on by its own. This

reveals, as Valentin Mudimbe has pointed out, the lessons of the “bibliothèque coloniale” with which we all, Europeans and Africans, are imbued.

What is likely is that Africa is living now a very active transitional period; in other words, a period in which there is the elaboration and gestation of a culture in the process of forming itself, something close to what Egyptologists call the transitional period between ancient, middle and new empires. These phases are long and difficult, but have very rich potentialities. This emerging culture is at the same time inter- and multicultural, enriched with syncretism and *métissage*, particularly lively also in its dramas. Such a rich process could not develop in quietness and passiveness. It needs willpower, pugnacity, imagination, and therefore sufferance and life.

**DC:** I believe that positive change will occur and that some future generation, perhaps one coming soon, will perceive our present conjuncture as having been temporary and passed. Positive change may affect the continent unevenly, but we will know that it is coming when we see African peoples and nations more fully in control of their own destinies and in a more positive, profitable and creative relationship with the global economy.

## Notes

[1] Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *La fête des coutumes au Dahomey: historique et essai d'interprétation*, «Annales», 4/19, 1964.

[2] Donald Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia: from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2000.

[3] Donald Crummey and Thomas Bassett (eds.), *African Savannas: Global Narratives and Local Knowledge of Environmental Change*, Oxford/Portsmouth, NH, James Currey Publisher and Heinemann USA,

2003.

[4] Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel and Sandrine Lemaire (eds.), *La fracture coloniale. La société française au prisme de l'héritage colonial*, Paris, La Découverte, 2005, 311 p.

[5] According to André Burguière it is the understanding of this tie and the powerful usage of the reciprocal explanation of past and present that determines the contemporary rediscovery of March Bloch; see André Burguière. « Bloch historique », *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 2-8 février 2006, p. 90

[6] For a wider coverage of this subject, see

[http://www.ldh-toulon.net/article.](http://www.ldh-toulon.net/article.php3?id_article=1452)

[php3?id\\_article=1452](http://www.ldh-toulon.net/article.php3?id_article=1452), the text of a lecture held by Catherine Coquery Vidrovitch in Paris in March 2006.