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The Daily Lives of Françafrique: French Expatriate Communities in Port-Gentil, Gabon, 1960-1989

BAPTISTE SIBIEUDE

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Using oral history interviews with former expatriates in Gabon, this paper seeks to look at how their community has evolved over time and more importantly what it tells us about Franco-Gabonese relations. Coming from all kind of horizons, the interviewees draw a lively picture of what it was like to live overseas in a rather separated community. Their lives and how they interacted with the larger Gabonese society – or did not – over the period at hand is key in understanding French policies towards Africa. If in the early days of independence, the boundary between the colonial and the postcolonial was rather blurred, by the late 1980's, a shift has occurred and a certain normalization of Franco-Gabonese – which is yet to be further analyzed and discussed – has happened: the “Heroic Age”, as some of the former participants call the 1960's and early 70's, has given way to another era that is more difficult to characterized. Gabon and its large number of French expatriates raise questions about our common understanding of decolonization ending with independence and lead us to consider it as a much longer process encompassing not only the political realm but also the economic or interpersonal ones – just to name a few.

In September 1966, my grandparents, Blandine and Gilbert Sibieude, and their four children arrived in Port-Gentil, Gabon where they were welcomed by Gilbert's superior, Mr. Moussel, and his wife who had arrived a few months before in early 1966. My grandfather was to work as Mr. Moussel's number two in the oil company SPAFE.¹ Despite both men enjoying the social life and the advantages a life as an expatriate in tropical Africa could offer, they were both ordered back to Paris within 18 months of my grandfather's arrival. The main reason behind their early call-back concerned an internal rivalry within SPAFE between Mr. Moussel and Mr. Haym Levi, the head of exploration in Paris, who had sent my grandfather to be his henchman on the spot. This rivalry caused trouble between SPAFE's internal intelligence and security office and the Gabonese security services to the point where Mr. Haym Levi was told that “the man who is in Port Gentil and who

¹ Created in 1949 as SPAEF, it was renamed SPAFE in 1960 when Gabon gained independence. Then, in 1968, it became Elf-Spafe until it was again renamed in 1973 as Elf-Gabon. It was owned by the French state, and was the local branch of a much larger French oil company: Elf. Cf. TOTAL GABON, “Rappel Historique.” <http://www.total.ga/historique-3>. accessed 28th March 2016; Douglas Andrew Yates, *The French Oil Industry and the Corps Des Mines in Africa* (Africa World Press, 2009).

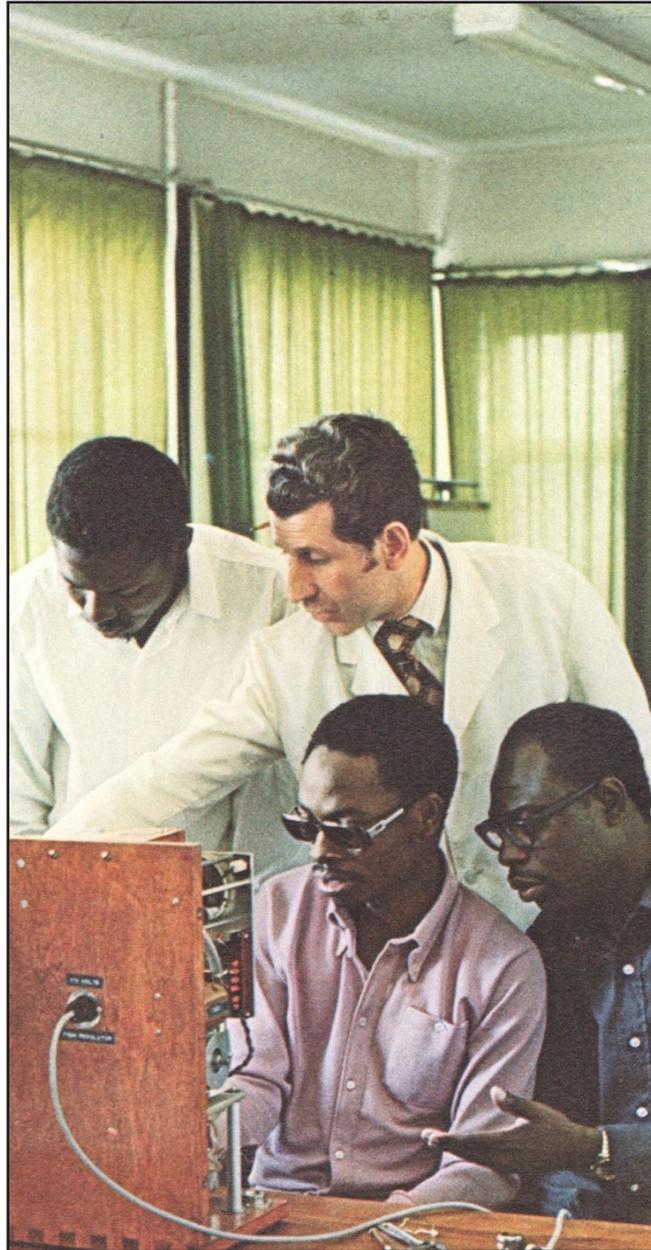


FIGURE 1. GABONESE TRAINEES AND AN EXPATRIATE ENGINEER
ELF-GABON, 1979

causes trouble must leave”- Gilbert thus left Gabon and Mr. Moussel followed a few months later.²

This anecdote from my family’s past brings together different themes that will be key to this paper: how the presence of natural resources explains why Frenchmen were in Gabon at that time; how the French community was not a monolithic group but was in many ways divided by issues relating to personal beliefs and ideologies, as well as by inter-personal rivalries; and, finally, how French expatriate

² This little narrative is the result of several oral history interviews conducted with people involved in the process and who asked to remain anonymous. My grandmother also gave substantial details in Baptiste Sibieude (Interviewer), *Interview with Sibieude, Blandine (Interviewee) 1935- November 22nd, 2015*.

communities, the oil industry and the Gabonese state and society interacted with each other and how this influenced the way French expatriates were behaving and understanding the world around them.

Indeed, even though Gabon was granted independence in August 1960 it remained closely within the French sphere of influence, what De Gaulle called the “pré-carré”, and became known in the 1990s as “Françafrique.”³ Because of its natural resources— timber, manganese, uranium, and most importantly, oil⁴— Gabon was deemed by French policy-makers to be of great significance.⁵ However, these extractive industries required heavy machinery, substantial investments, logistical skills and a stable political environment, while at the time of independence Gabon had barely a thousand students in high school.⁶ This resulted in the newly instated Gabonese authorities, just as those of other former French colonies like Senegal or Ivory Coast,⁷ partnering with France to receive technical assistance. “Coopérants”⁸ were sent to help the Gabonese state and expatriate workers were sent to manage the different extractive industries.⁹ Expatriate communities comprised of “coopérants”, expatriate workers, and “petits blancs” (petty whites or white poor) remain overlooked by standard post-colonial historical research, despite their significant role in former African colonies.¹⁰ Moreover on the company history web page of Total Gabon no reference is made to expatriates after 1960, even though they were essential to the development of the company, especially at the beginning: when Elf-Spafe opened its refinery in 1967, the SOGARA, in Port Gentil’s periphery, the vast majority of the workers, from the managers to the working staff, came from France.¹¹

To study these communities is essential if one wants to understand how the post-colonial relationship evolved between Gabon and France and how these

³ Although the term was actually coined by the Ivory Coast’s first president Houphouët-Boigny with a positive connotation, it was popularized in the 1990s by activists protesting against France’s policies in Africa: Stephen W Smith, “France in Africa: A New Chapter?,” *Current History* 112, no. 754 (2013).

⁴ The first oil deposits were discovered in 1956 by SPAEF near the colonial post of Port Gentil, the mineral wealth was discovered slightly later in the early 1960s.

⁵ Richard Joseph, “The Gaullist Legacy: Patterns of French Neo-Colonialism,” *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 6 (1976): 4.

⁶ Ministère de l’Éducation Nationale, “Statistiques De L’enseignement Au Gabon,” (1974), Table n*34.

⁷ Except for Guinea who broke away from France abruptly in 1958.

⁸ Technical assistants and/or teachers in the French development lingua.

⁹ Throughout this essay, the term “expatriate workers” refers to the Frenchmen sent by private companies to work for them abroad while the term “expatriate(s)” refers to the community of Frenchmen overseas at large, comprising all the different categories of Frenchmen abroad.

¹⁰ In 1981 during a conference, Louis de Guiringaud, French foreign affairs minister in 1976-1978 estimated the number of Frenchmen in Africa to have increased by about 200.000, up from 100.000 in 1960, see in Louis De Guiringaud, “La Politique Africaine De La France,” *Politique étrangère* (1982): 443; Marshall Murphree, “Whites in Black Africa: Their Status and Role,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 1, no. 2 (1978): 156.

¹¹ Baptiste Sibieude (Interviewer), *Interview with Sibieude, Bernadette (Interviewee) 1945- December 17th, 2015*.

French men and women overseas fit within this framework- how they shaped this relationship and were in turn shaped by it. This paper argues that the framework, inherited from and produced by the colonial era, remained very strong amongst French expatriate communities throughout the 1960s and much of the 1970s, and that only in the mid-1970s this framework/discourse started to change. The old colonial stereotypes based on the working-place framework (see fig. 1. for a visual representation) in which “the Frenchmen expected to direct and the Gabonese to be directed”¹² were starting to fade out – although slowly and not without resistance. By the end of the 1980s, this development, which culminated in the 1990 Port-Gentil anti-French riots, meant the end of an era for French expatriate communities in Gabon. The main factor that has influenced such evolution is the generational renewal of expatriates. Starting from the 1970s, many French and Gabonese had not or had barely known the colonial era and many political and social developments which occurred in this period helped to change attitudes and discourses: the discovery of the power of the Petrodollars, the increasing level of education of the Gabonese population which, as a result, no longer fit the colonial stereotype of an uneducated, backward black population. That being said, these changes and evolutions did not happen straightforwardly, but were the result of constant interaction between different worldviews more or less prevalent depending on the particular decade studied, and other events happening at the same time in the world. As such, this paper faces “the problem on which all history of mentalities stumbles, that of the reasons for and modalities of the passage from one system to another.”¹³

Archival sources on topics related to French post-colonial relationships with its former colonies remain difficult to access,¹⁴ and historians have not been interested so far in studying expatriate communities extensively; therefore to write this history of the French Expatriate communities and their mentalities, I had to rely heavily on oral history and the few written sources I was able to find, ranging from memoirs and blog entries to academic and generalist articles published

¹² I am here making a reference to O’Brien’s statement in the context of Senegal “Frenchmen expected to direct and the Senegalese to be directed” in Rita Cruise O’Brien, *White Society in Black Africa: The French of Senegal* (Faber & Faber, 1972), 19. This way of thinking that permeated both colonizers and colonized and then post-colonizers and post-colonized groups has also been extensively studied by Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952).

¹³ Roger Chartier, “Intellectual History or Sociocultural History? The French Trajectories,” *Modern European intellectual history: Reappraisals and new perspectives* 13 (1982): 13-46; Cited in Peter Burke, “Strengths and Weaknesses of the History of Mentalities,” *History of European ideas* 7, no. 5 (1986): 443.

¹⁴ The French national archives past 1964 relating to the “Fond Foccart,” the main archival depository in France related to France’s African policies, are not readily accessible.

in the relevant periods (1960s to 1980s).¹⁵ In terms of oral history, I interviewed 16 former expatriates who lived (as little as eighteen months or as long as fifteen years) in Gabon between 1967 and 1985. These individuals can be divided in three generational subgroups: each forming the basis of the three subsequent parts of this article.

This article's first section revolves around my grandparents, Blandine and Gilbert Sibieude who arrived in 1967 in Port-Gentil which was the base of operations for the oil industry. It includes the perspectives from my grandmother Blandine, my grand-aunt Bernadette Sibieude, whose husband used to work for the same company as my grandfather (but as a worker, not as a manager), Monique Chuberre, whose husband was also working for the same oil company as my grandfather, Francois Cavier, who replaced my grandfather once he left in 1968, and Alain and Elizabeth Wybo who were in Gabon because of Alain's post as Chief of Gabon's Navy as part of the cooperation agreements signed between France and Gabon in 1960.

The second network of perspectives stems from the experiences of my grand-aunt Bernadette, who returned in the mid-1970s to Gabon, and her friends there. Just like in the first section, these individuals were all more or less connected to the oil industry. Jean-Louis and Béatrice Plasse were in Port-Gentil in 1971-1972 and between 1977 and 1982, where he was the technical director of the Refinery. She was the daughter of the infamous Maurice Robert, former director of the Africa section at the DGSE and Ambassador to Gabon between 1979 and 1981. Philippe Loisel was the financial and administrative director of the refinery; he was in Gabon from 1978-1982. Finally, Jean and Rolande Gregoire are a married couple of former "Pieds-Noirs."¹⁶ They lived in Gabon between 1970 and 1985 and were "white immigrants"¹⁷ in the sense that they moved there independently to create their own businesses and planned to stay for a longer period in Gabon.

The third network of individuals I interviewed, is formed by five individuals who lived in either in Port-Gentil or Libreville in the 1980s: the couple Jean and Rolande Gregoire, Jean Claude Bécavin, who worked in the construction business in Libreville, and his daughter Caroline, who was in her late teens at the time, and a relatively high official of the AFD, the French agency for Economic development, based out of Libreville. By the mid-1980s they all had left Gabon. The memoirs I draw on were written by individuals working in the timber industry: Jean Lepissier and his son Patrice who were with the CFG (a processing factory in Port-Gentil) between 1961 and 1972. He was the head accountant.¹⁸ The memoir

¹⁵ See bibliography.

¹⁶ Pieds-Noirs were the French settler communities that were living in Algeria and by extension Tunisia and Morocco.

¹⁷ Murphree.

¹⁸ Jean Lepissier, *De Paris À Port-Gentil* (Blois: Self-published, 2005); Patrice Lepissier, *Moi, L'africain ... Ou, Ma PéRIode Africaine* (Self-Published, 2016).

by Alain Thuillier, who grew up and worked between 1953 and 1971 in Gabon's rainforest as a "Forestier"¹⁹ and can be described as a "Savage Frenchmen,"²⁰ was also helpful. Those working in the timber industry formed a reclusive sub-group of French people that only appeared from time to time in Port-Gentil or Libreville, the other major timber-exporting port of Gabon. I also made use of memoirs of a former aviator and business man who left Gabon shortly after Independence,²¹ and of a former "coopérant" (technical adviser).²²

These sources raise multiple questions. First of all, many of these interviewees are personally connected to me through a familial link: either directly (my grandmother or grand-aunt), or indirectly (their friends). This personal connection makes it even more difficult to balance the other issue I faced: how could I understand and explain what these communities were doing in Gabon, without judging them by a contemporary moral standard that heavily criticizes the system of relationships – of which these expatriate communities were the agents – between French and African elites known as "Françafrique"? Would I offend the Gabonese population who have different understandings and memories of what was happening at that time? The final issue these sources raise is the entangled nature of France's post-colonial relationships with its former colonies from the 1960s onwards through these individuals. Most of them grew up in the 1930s-1950s at the height of the colonial Empire and carried some of the worldviews of this era throughout their lives.

I. The 1960s: the "Heroic Time of Pioneers" or False Independence?

The 1960s in Gabon saw a major increase in the French Expatriate population from a few thousand, around 3,889 Europeans (Frenchmen), to more than 20,000 in the mid-1970s.²³ Port-Gentil's French population followed a similar pattern: from a few hundred in the 1950s to 1,200 in 1965,²⁴ to around 5,000 in the 1970s.²⁵

To live in Port-Gentil in the 1960s was not an easy task for most of the French expatriates who were not used to living in the colonies. Indeed, some expatriates

¹⁹ Alain Thuillier, *Vivre En Afrique 1953 1971 Du Rio Mouni Aux Monts De Cristal Broché* (L'Harmattan, 2008).

²⁰ Jeremy Rich, "Savage Frenchmen: Masculinity and the Timber Industry in Colonial Gabon, Ca. 1920-1960," *Afrique & histoire* 7, no. 1 (2010).

²¹ Jean-Claude Brouillet, *L'avion Du Blanc* (Paris: R. Laffont, 1972).

²² Gérard Sivilia, *Les Tribulations D'un Coopérant En Afrique Noire : Récit*. (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014), 141.

²³ Jean Pouquet, *L'Afrique Équatoriale Française Et Le Cameroun*, vol. 663 (Presses universitaires de France, 1954), 5; David E. Gardinier, *Historical Dictionary of Gabon*, African Historical Dictionaries ; No. 58 (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1981), 4.

²⁴ Jacqueline Bouquerel, "Port-Gentil, Centre Économique Du Gabon," *Les cahiers d'outre-mer* 20, no. 79 (1967): 265-6.

²⁵ Baptiste Sibieude (Interviewer), *Interview with Grégoire, Jean & Rolande (Interviewees) 1941-, 1944-, January 11th, 2016* (2016). The last statistic is a subjective estimation by my interviewees, it cannot be as accurate as proper statistics but it does show a pattern of significant increase.

or “coopérants” were residents in Gabon either as colonial officers or, to use Marshall Murphree’s terminology, as “white immigrants”²⁶ and had decided to stay in Gabon after its independence: in the words of Blandine Sibieude, “they did not



FIGURE 2: ELF-SPAPE APARTMENT COMPLEX FOR ITS EXPATRIATE WORKERS.

drive anyone away at the time of independence.”²⁷ As such, they were more aware of and accustomed to the different challenges of the life in Central Africa than newly arrived Frenchmen.

One theme mentioned repeatedly in the interviews and memoirs relates to the weather, which was rather hot and very humid, making it very uncomfortable.²⁸ Indeed, a major difference in the accounts of those who lived in Gabon in the 1960s and those who lived there ten or fifteen years later concerns access to air conditioning, which was quite limited prior to the 1970s. As a result, in Elf-Spafe’s apartments or in the ones assigned to the “coopérants,” only the bed rooms were air conditioned. Blandine Sibieude, recalling these living quarters (see fig. 2),²⁹

²⁶ A white immigrant is a long term resident of an African colony-country that has emigrated there in the hope of “making it under the sun” to quote an old adage, see a more subtle definition in Murphree, 157-60.

²⁷ Sibieude (Interviewer), *Interview with Sibieude, Blandine (Interviewee) 1935- November 22nd, 2015*.

²⁸ See Rich for an overview of the many memoirs from French expatriates in the timber industry: Rich, and Brouillet for what it was like in a more urban environment (Libreville): Brouillet.

²⁹ François Cavier, *Photos Taken During His Stay in Port-Gentil* (Private Collection, c.1968-1971).

described them as being of quality but also quite austere: she compared them to council estate buildings.

Second of all, even though the period of time from the 1940s to 1970s is considered the era of the rise of modern medicine and the end of the “white man’s grave,” medical conditions could still be quite serious:³⁰ the anti-malaria pills of Novaquine were taken daily.³¹ As Thuillier convincingly describes, the conditions were even more challenging in the forest for the expatriates of the timber industry.³²

Probably for such reasons, French expatriates of later eras, who did not experience the 1960s for themselves, refer to it as “the Heroic times.”³³ It is also around that time that major oil discoveries were made by Elf-Spafe, which really started the “oil adventure” in Gabon: 16 oil deposits were discovered between 1959 and 1972,³⁴ and major infrastructures such as off-shore platforms and the oil terminal of Cap Lopez were built. Interestingly enough, despite all these hardships, all but one of the people recalling their time in Gabon in the 1960s really loved it – we will see later on in this section what that tells us about the French expatriates and how they functioned as a group.

These “Heroic times,” as Jean-Claude Bécavin referred to them, were also the setting for an unambiguous neo-colonial dominance of France and its overseas citizens over Gabon. Under the pretence that Gabon’s population was lacking the experience needed to govern the imported colonial state that France would leave behind in August 1960,³⁵ Gabon was made to accept France’s help through the Cooperation Agreements it signed just before it was granted independence. These agreements were criticized by many scholars and activists as a French imperialist attempt to retain as much influence over Gabon as possible, thus questioning the reality of Gabon’s independence.³⁶

Indeed, France meddled in Gabonese affairs on numerous occasions: during the 1964 failed coup d’état against M’ba,³⁷ in which a few hundred paratroopers landed on Libreville, just two days after M’ba was toppled, to reinstate him. After M’ba fell ill, the French intervened once more, many historians claim, to make

³⁰ Dozon Jean-Pierre, “D’un Tombeau À L’autre,” *Cahiers d’Études africaines* (1991): 141-47.

³¹ Although the brands may have changed and diversified, malaria remains a great concern for every expatriate in a tropical area such as Gabon.

³² Rich; Thuillier.

³³ Baptiste Sibieude (Interviewer), *Interview with Bécavin, Jean-Michel (Interviewee) 1943-November 11th, 2015*.

³⁴ GABON, “Rappel Historique.”

³⁵ This bleak situation of the Gabonese workforce in 1960 was the result of a lack of investment by France in education during the colonial era.

³⁶ Philippe Ardant, “Le Néo-Colonialisme: Thème, Mythe Et Réalité,” *Revue française de science politique* (1965).

³⁷ David E. Gardinier, *Historical Dictionary of Gabon*, ed. Douglas A. Yates, *Historical Dictionaries of Africa*; 101 (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 68-72.

sure Bongo would succeed him.³⁸ What is less known, however, is the role the local French leadership played in this process. In early 1966, the directors of the main industries operating in Gabon met in the house of the French Ambassador at the time, Maurice Delaunay.³⁹ One of the participants recalled that meeting:⁴⁰

“...and so I have participated in the handpick of Bongo, I was involved because Mr. Foccart [...] had asked the ambassador, Mr. Delaunay to consult *les milieux français* [the French economic leaders], to know who they should pick between George Damas (president of the national assembly), Paul Marie Yembit (who was influential in the South) and Bongo. So Delaunay gathered us one morning at his house, not the embassy, and we talked about those three guys. We unanimously concluded that Bongo, who at the time was 32 and had been flight sergeant in the French army, [...] was probably the best choice. So when that was finished... well it was between 11:30am and 12pm, so at this point Delaunay walked towards us, and I can still picture him, a chest of drawers where there was a red phone; he called Mr. Foccart and he said “*les Communautés Françaises préfèrent monsieur Albert Bongo*” [the French communities prefer Mr. Albert Bongo]. Then, as soon as he put down the phone, Mrs. Delaunay came in saying “*le Champagne est servi et le déjeuner juste après*” [Champaign is served and lunch shortly after]. So that’s how we chose Mr. Bongo [laughter]...”

Although it is hard to establish the influence of this meeting, it is interesting to note the ambition of these French industrialists. In the rest of the interview, this individual describes how they had then to “modify the constitution” in order to create a system with a presidential ticket system and how they organised an election before M’ba’s death with Bongo as his Vice-President, securing a smooth succession (following M’Ba’s death, Bongo as Vice-President became automatically President).

This situation, in which France clearly dominated Gabon’s state apparatus and economy, was seen as normal because mentalities inherited from the colonial era still permeated France: most of the officials making the policies concerning Africa had had a connection to the Empire.⁴¹ In the case of French expatriates in Gabon, the continuity in the mentalities was strengthened by the continuity in their social and economic status, as illustrated by the African expression: “les Français étaient

³⁸ Jean-Pierre Bat, *Le Syndrome Foccart : La Politique Française En Afrique, De 1959 À Nos Jours* ([Paris]: Gallimard, 2012); Joseph.

³⁹ The Industries represented were: SANDIMIN (the syndicate regrouping the two main Mining companies: COMUF and COMILOG), Elf-Spafe, Shell-Gabon (who was operating a massive in shore oil deposit in Gamaba, in the South of Gabon), the Office des Bois (who regrouped all the major players in the timber industry and the Chambers of Commerce of both Libreville and Port Gentil).

⁴⁰ Baptiste Sibieude (Interviewer), *Interview with Anon. (Interviewee) 1929- December 18th, 2015*.

⁴¹ The most obvious example is Pierre Messmer, French prime minister, he had had a long career in the colonial administration starting in 1946 until the end of the French empire in Africa in 1960 when all but one colony – Djibouti – gained independence.

[...] has played a particularly inhibiting role in the adjustment of racial attitudes among whites [towards Blacks].⁴³

This situation was further strengthened by the geographical organisation of Port-Gentil that maintained “a form of spatial occupation inherited from the colonial period”.⁴⁴ The city was divided into three main zones along racial and social lines (see Map. 1).⁴⁵ The littoral zone concentrated all the administrative buildings and French expatriates’ living quarters either in small apartment buildings or in “cases” (bungalows). It was commonly referred to as “la Ville” (the city) as opposed to “le Village” (the village) which designated the African quarters. The African and European living quarters were separated by a “buffer zone”, that used to be *non-aedificandi*,⁴⁶ but was now being occupied by the rising local middle class earning more than 25,000 FCFA per month.⁴⁷

This spatial organization was and still is to this day one of the main reasons why “their experience [of whites] with blacks [is] confined largely to contact in the work situation and structured by superordinate/subordinate dimensions”.⁴⁸ When contact happened in the home, it was usually following a similar pattern but enacted this time by wives towards their house staff. Indeed, everyone had a house cleaner or a boy-cook, even working class families, and this was the case as much in colonial times as in the 1980s.⁴⁹

These social practices and ways of understanding the world underpinned French expatriates’ involvement in Gabon’s internal affairs, especially during this 1966 meeting regarding who should succeed M’ba. It is telling that my grand-mother in 2015 believed Gabon was not independent at the time of her sojourn there, even though it had been so for seven years. Her memory could be at fault since these events happened fifty years ago but it does indicate how persistent colonial relations between France, French expatriates and Gabon were in the 1960s.

II. The 1970s: the 1968 generation and the power of petrodollars

As the 1970s unfolded, the colonial mentality, as a dominant system of belief inherited from the colonial era and maintained during the 1960s, remained relatively untouched. Still, the first cracks and challenges were emerging at the same time: a transition had been initiated.

⁴³ Murphree, 163.

⁴⁴ Michel Mbadinga, “Elf Et Port-Gentil (Gabon),” (2000): 1.

⁴⁵ Bouquerel, 261.

⁴⁶ Jules Djeki, “Port-Gentil,” in *Atlas Du Gabon*, ed. Roland Pourtier (Paris: 2004), 62-63.

⁴⁷ Bouquerel, 262-64.

⁴⁸ Murphree, 163.

⁴⁹ Paul Mercier, “Le Groupement Européen De Dakar: Orientation D’une Enquête,” *Cahiers Internationaux de sociologie* (1955): 135.



FIG. 3. CLUB SOGARA BUILT ALONGSIDE THE HOUSING COMPLEX DESTINED TO HOST THE REFINERY'S EXPATRIATE WORKERS.

The colonial mind-set remained powerful among French expatriates well into the 1970s.⁵⁰ The process of socialization was started as soon as new expatriates would land in Port-Gentil's airport: the predecessor and/or the immediate superior of the new-comer would usually be waiting at the airport to welcome him and his family. This was standard practice in the 1960s,⁵¹ and was still happening in the mid-1980s:⁵² "thus, very quickly connections are formed [...] which allow the communities to perpetuate themselves and the newcomer to find some kind of a re-creation of the French social space".⁵³ The effectiveness of such socialization could be seen through the astonishing stability of a whole vocabulary developed during the colonial era that had been shaping French expatriates' social and spatial understanding of their lives in Port-Gentil: "Aviation" designated the airport, the "Village" the African quarters, the "Club(s) SOGARA and/or Elf," whose original models were the colonial officers' mess and the bars reserved for Europeans during colonial times (see fig. 3.),⁵⁴ and finally the "case," which meant "bungalow" and referred to expatriates' houses, from the colonial era well into the post-colonial one.⁵⁵ This vocabulary and its capacity to remain relevant – that is, to still

⁵⁰ O'Brien; Murphree.

⁵¹ Sibieude (Interviewer), *Interview with Sibieude, Blandine (Interviewee) 1935- November 22nd, 2015*.

⁵² *Interview with Bécavin, Jean-Michel (Interviewee) 1943- November 11th, 2015*.

⁵³ Michel Grossetti, "Enseignants En Coopération. Aperçus Sur Un Type Particulier De Trajectoires Sociales," *Revue française de sociologie* (1986): 142.

⁵⁴ See Brouillet's description of a meeting in the mid 1940s in a hotel bar to have an idea of the kind of atmosphere it was: Brouillet, 54-57.

⁵⁵ Throughout his book, Brouillet gives us descriptions of "cases" in urban and rural settings: *ibid.*, 127, 50, 67.

be used by expatriates 25 or 30 years after they left Gabon – shaped how French expatriates made sense of their surroundings and in turn how they behaved.

France, despite the civil and social unrests of May 1968, remained quite conservative and in support of colonialism into the 1970s.⁵⁶ A poll conducted in 1978 by Louis Harris for the weekly *Jeune Afrique* revealed that 53% of the French population thought having colonies was a rather positive thing; and that for another 47%, colonization had been rather beneficial to African countries overall:⁵⁷ “For a majority of Frenchmen, the colonies referred to the good old days. Colonization, this was something done in the interest of the colonized, and since the French have left, it is not doing so well.”⁵⁸

However, if the 1978 poll showed that the French population was overall quite conservative and would be in favour of military action in case any civilians were in danger, it also pointed to a growing generational split: “We find throughout the opinion poll the same consistent influence of age, anti-colonialism being inversely proportional to age”.⁵⁹ This poll is the logical continuation of the generational split starting in 1968. This split, not very significant at first, was to have lasting consequences on the expatriate community in the late 1970s and early 1980s as the new generation replaced a substantial portion of older colonial-minded Frenchmen overseas. Philippe Loisel, when he recalled his first year as financial director of SOGARA mentioned his relationship with his immediate superior, Mr. Michel Laurent, and criticized how colonialist his attitude toward the Gabonese was. He explained his manager’s behaviour as being that of an old-timer finishing his African career, or in other words, one of a world fast disappearing.⁶⁰

The 1970s more generally marked the beginning of a first reassessment of France’s policies of cooperation with Africa and the position the “coopérant” had within the former colonies. Individuals like Denyse Harari, Jacques Bousquet and François de Négroni were quick to criticize the imperialism and domination that was usually underlying “coopérants” experiences (see fig. 4).⁶¹ Such scholarship shows that the debate over France’s involvement in Africa and the role certain groups of Frenchmen were playing in it, had started among officials and academics.⁶²

⁵⁶ The landslide victory of De Gaulle’s party in June 1968 was proof of such general conservatism.

⁵⁷ “Sondage J.A./Louis Harris: Comment Les Français D’aujourd’hui Jugent La DéColonisation,” *Jeune Afrique* 1978, 62, 65.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁶⁰ Baptiste Sibieude (Interviewer), *Interview with Loisel, Philippe (Interviewee) 1942- December 21st, 2015*.

⁶¹ Denyse Harari, *Le Rôle De Coopérant* (OCDE, 1974); Jacques Bousquet “L’expert Contesté,” *Perspectives* VI, no. 4 (1976); François De Negroni, *Les Colonies De Vacances* (Editions L’Harmattan, 1977).

⁶² *Ibid.*

MATCH-DOCUMENT

PARIS MATCH
N° 1474/26 AOUT 1977



Que se cache-t-il derrière la « fraternité » des coopérants français du Tiers Monde ? Pour François de Negroni beaucoup de sentiments troubles.

LES ILLUSIONS PERDUES DE LA COOPERATION

François de Negroni, 33 ans, a passé cinq ans dans le Tiers Monde au titre de la coopération. Docteur en sociologie, il a posé sur l'espèce coopérante, l'impitoyable regard du scientifique et vient de publier « Les Colonies de vacances » (Ed. Hallier) où il livre ses impressions. Jean Cau a interviewé cet explorateur d'un type nouveau, revenu du Tiers Monde. Et de quelques illusions. Il le dit durement.

Francois de Negroni, docteur en sociologie, taille en pièces les coopérants français du Tiers Monde

FIGURE 4. PARIS MATCH COVERAGE OF NEGRONI'S BOOK: "THE LOST ILLUSIONS OF COOPERATION." IT WAS ALSO COVERED IN LE MONDE, LE POINT AND LE FIGARO.

One of the main differences Bernadette noticed between her first (1967-68) and second stay (1975-1981) in Port-Gentil was that the French figure was no longer untouchable: "Now then, a phenomenal change: we had seen traffic lights appear but also annoying policemen who wanted to have a go at some whites, to show them that now they were the one running the show."⁶³ This statement reflects the new relationship between France and Gabon- if in the 1960s Gabonese

⁶³ Sibieude (Interviewer), *Interview with Sibieude, Bernadette (Interviewee) 1945- December 17th, 2015.*

elites' reliance on France was rather clear, in the 1970s the situation was no longer as straightforward. Gabon's elites were starting to assert themselves both on the international stage and in French politics.⁶⁴ As the intellectual and cultural foundations of the superior position enjoyed by French expatriates were challenged at home, their geopolitical and social justifications were also being undermined because of developments in Gabon and the international system.

This evolution in Gabonese attitudes towards France and its representatives on the ground is most likely the result of the 1973-74 Oil Shock.⁶⁵ Gabon's budget went from a mere 20 billion FCFA in 1970 to 255.8 billion in 1977. One can see that the break happened in

1974,⁶⁶ after Gabon aligned its pricing policies with OPEC's in 1973.⁶⁷ 1974 was also the year Gabon renegotiated its cooperation agreements with France, negotiations that resulted in more autonomy for Gabon vis-à-vis France. In his 1st of January address to Gabon's population, Bongo introduced the concept of Gabonization of the economy, which aimed at replacing French engineers and executives by Gabonese-trained ones.⁶⁸

This newfound wealth was used to expand policies and trends that had started in 1960s – especially in the area of education. This rise of education proved, in the long run, to upset French expatriates' positions within Gabon's society and economy. Thus, as the years went by, primary education rose significantly to an 80% schooling rate in 1975.⁶⁹ Efforts were also pursued at the secondary level with more than 20,000 students in 1975,⁷⁰ and at the university level with the creation of the University Omar Bongo in 1970, with its number of students continuing to rise from a few hundred to just under 3,000 in 1988.⁷¹ This was accomplished with France's help through technical assistants sent to the country and large sums of money supplied through Official Development Assistance.⁷²

Ironically, successful cooperation policies in terms of education and training undermined the position of French expatriates, whose role became increasingly obsolete. This proved to be a catch-22 for France since Cooperation as a policy

⁶⁴ David E. Gardinier, "France in Gabon since 1960," *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* 6/7 (1982).

⁶⁵ Sibieude (Interviewer), *Interview with Sibieude, Bernadette (Interviewee) 1945- December 17th, 2015; Interview with Anon. (Interviewee) 1929- December 18th, 2015.*

⁶⁶ "Gabon 1960-1980," *Marchés Tropicaux et Méditerranéens* 1977, 1335.

⁶⁷ Douglas Andrew Yates, *The Rentier State in Africa: Oil Rent Dependency and Neocolonialism in the Republic of Gabon* (Africa World Press, 1996), 67.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Recensements Et Enquêtes Démographiques Dans Les États Africains Et Malgache[S] : Situation Au 1er Janvier 1978*, ed. économiques Institut national de la statistique et des études (Paris: Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques, 1978). Table XIV.

⁷⁰ Roland Pourtier, "Ville Et Espace En Afrique Noire: L'exemple Du Gabon," *Espace géographique* 8, no. 2 (1979): 123.

⁷¹ Louise Avon, "L'aide Française Au Gabon. 1979-1989.," ed. Ministère de la Coopération (Paris 1992), 113.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 50-53, 113.

was devised as one of the main ways for France to retain the influence it had lost during decolonization. The best example of such process is SOGARA's refinery: it was launched in 1967-68 with an almost entirely white workforce from factory workers to higher management. In the 1970s, most subaltern posts were held by Gabonese and some higher management positions were given to Gabonese assisted by French expatriate workers, some of whom were under the orders of these newly trained and promoted Gabonese executives and engineers. This dramatically unsettled the work-place framework identified by Murphree that lied at the heart of the French expatriates' social and racial identity. The refinery eventually functioned without any expatriate workers.⁷³

These increasing numbers of Gabonese accessing primary, secondary and university education, thanks to policies started in the 1960s and expanded in the 1970s, do not tell the whole story. Indeed, this kind of education policy efforts take quite a long time to yield real results, and this is why even though these policies were starting to undermine the colonial mentality, it was not before the mid to late 1980s that a real change occurred. The deferred nature of the results of these policies also explains the following anecdote that Philippe Loisel, financial director of SOGARA, told me:

“...in the late 1970s, refined products generated by SOGARA were regulated by the Ministry of Finance and every month it would issue a decree to adjust the prices. However, because the Ministry of Finance was either under-equipped on an administrative level or it was just careless, I then had to pre-write the decree so that when I would do my monthly visit to Libreville to the Finance Ministry, the minister could sign it. I would then go back to Port-Gentil to print out the different copies that were subsequently disseminated throughout Gabon's administrations and ministries concerned with refined products...”

And as late as 1978, Claude Bouet would diagnose Gabon's educational system as not able to produce enough skilled workers and was recommending further immigration-friendly policies.⁷⁴

To conclude this section, the seeming stability of the colonial mentalities maintained in the 1960s began to come to an end. Within a decade, debates in French society associated with huge newfound wealth had started to undermine the dominating position of French expatriates. However, one must wait till the 1980s to see how the French expatriate communities' positions within Gabon's society were oscillating between the persistence of a number of economic and social privileges and the growing insecurity they were experiencing: both literally as in 1990 anti-

⁷³ Baptiste Sibieude (Interviewer), *Interview with Plasse, Jean-Louis & Béatrice (Interviewees) 1943-, 1945-, January 30th, 2016.*

⁷⁴ Claude Bouet, “Problèmes Actuels De Main-D'oeuvre Au Gabon: Conditions D'une Immigration Contrôlée,” *Les cahiers d'outre-mer* 31, no. 124 (1978).

French riots erupted in Port-Gentil and symbolically in terms of to what extent these privileges were challenged by Gabon's society.

III. The 1980s: the end of an era?

The 1980s witnessed a rather clear continuation of the trends observed in the previous era. However when the 1960s and 1980s are compared, one gets the feeling substantial changes had occurred for French expatriates and with regard to France's position in Africa more generally.⁷⁵ In the early 1980s, a series of events and incidents threatened the generally protected and secure position of the French expatriates. First of all in 1981, to Bongo's great dismay, Mitterrand was elected president of France, and one of his first decisions was to appoint a "third-worldist" to the Ministry of Cooperation: Jean Pierre Cot.⁷⁶ It was as if the progressive anti-colonial ideology identified in the 1978 poll was finally prevailing.⁷⁷ By 1983, this impression would all but fade out: Cot was fired and the old ways were brought back much to the appreciation of Bongo and Houphouet-Boigny of Ivory-Coast.⁷⁸ This first friction between Mitterrand and the old-timers like Bongo and Houphouet-Boigny shows that by this time France was no longer always calling the shots as it used to do in the 1960s. The 1980s were also the decade that saw the number of "coopérants" operating in Africa shrink from 11,000 in 1982 to 3,600 in 1994.⁷⁹

An anecdote recalled by Gregoire is illuminating in terms of how vulnerable certain parts of the French expatriate communities had become. Indeed, I have made few distinctions within expatriate communities throughout this essay because in the 1960s and 1970s the situation was favourable to most expatriate groups, but in the 1980s the independent Frenchmen, the "white immigrants", had become much more vulnerable in Gabon than the expatriate worker coming to Gabon supported by a large infrastructure.

"...Jean Gregoire:

We were always told [...] that when it came to official documents we needed to be very careful [...] and at one point, we were friends with this couple [...], the husband was a baker and he worked for a long, long time for [his cousin] Mr. Delbos [and everything was fine].

⁷⁵ De Guiringaud.

⁷⁶ After his tenure as Minister of Cooperation, he wrote a book looking back at his experiences in the Ministry, Jean Pierre Cot, *A L'épreuve Du Pouvoir: Le Tiers-Mondisme, Pour Quoi Faire?* (Editions du Seuil, 1984).

⁷⁷ "Sondage J.A./Louis Harris: Comment Les Français D'aujourd'hui Jugent La DéColonisation."

⁷⁸ Franck Petiteville, "Quatre Décennies De «Coopération Franco-Africaine»: Usages Et Usure D'un Clientélisme," *Études internationales* 27, no. 3 (1996): 584-85.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 595.

But one day, this Mr. Delbos sold his business to a guy... and this young couple, there was the husband he was asking him “to draft a contract for his residency permit”, “and yes, and no,” so the guy was really stonewalling.

And one day, policemen arrested the wife and asked her for her residency permit. So she told them “well, listen, I do not have it” they told her “How come?” “Because my husband doesn’t have his contract.” “So, send your husband our way then.”

When she came back, she saw her husband and a friend who said, “You know what we’ll do, don’t go with your husband, because he might get into trouble, we will go together tomorrow and see if we can’t work something out.” [...]

The wife went there saying, “Well my husband doesn’t have the document ...” “Come with us then, we are going to prison.” “But to prison? What are you going to do?” And they jailed her, and they shaved her hair, and these are not hearsays, we lived it! And this girl— she was 35!

Baptiste Sibieude:

And she was Gabonese? French?

Rolande Gregoire:

French, French! To be frank that really shook us [...] and especially since this girl she was a mother, a proper woman, not at all a.... She stayed there for a week and then she stood trial and was freed; but still! That takes some doing....”⁸⁰

The timing of this anecdote is crucial to understand again how events unfolding outside of Gabon could intersect with the way French expatriates were treated in Gabon. Gregoire remembered this event dating back to 1983, the same year Pierre Péan published *Affaires Africaines*, a piece of investigative journalism that shed light on “le Clan des Gabonais” [the Clan of Gabonese], which was associated with the dark side of French policies in Africa.⁸¹ One interpretation of such harsh behaviour towards this woman could be that, because Bongo and the Gabonese state were not happy with the way Mitterrand handled the Péan fiasco,⁸² they decided to be less tolerant with French expatriates who infringed the rules.

Just two years after this incident, François Gaulme, in an article reviewing Gabon’s quarter of century as an independent country, noted that “a loss of confidence [had] appeared”.⁸³ His reasons to explain such a development were the new economic problems that Gabon faced because of mismanagement on the one hand, and the oil deposits’ expected depletion – between the late 1970s and 1985

⁸⁰ Sibieude (Interviewer), *Interview with Grégoire, Jean & Rolande (Interviewees) 1941-, 1944-, January 11th, 2016*.

⁸¹ Pierre Péan, *Affaires Africaines* (Hachette Livre, 1983).

⁸² Pierre Péan wrote a book shedding a light on the shadowy links of influence between French and Gabonese officials which created a political scandal in France and damaged Franco-Gabonese diplomatic relations.

⁸³ François Gaulme, “La Fin Des Pionniers: Vingt-Cinq Ans D’indépendance Du Gabon,” *Marchés tropicaux et méditerranéens* 41, no. 2074 (1985): 1975.

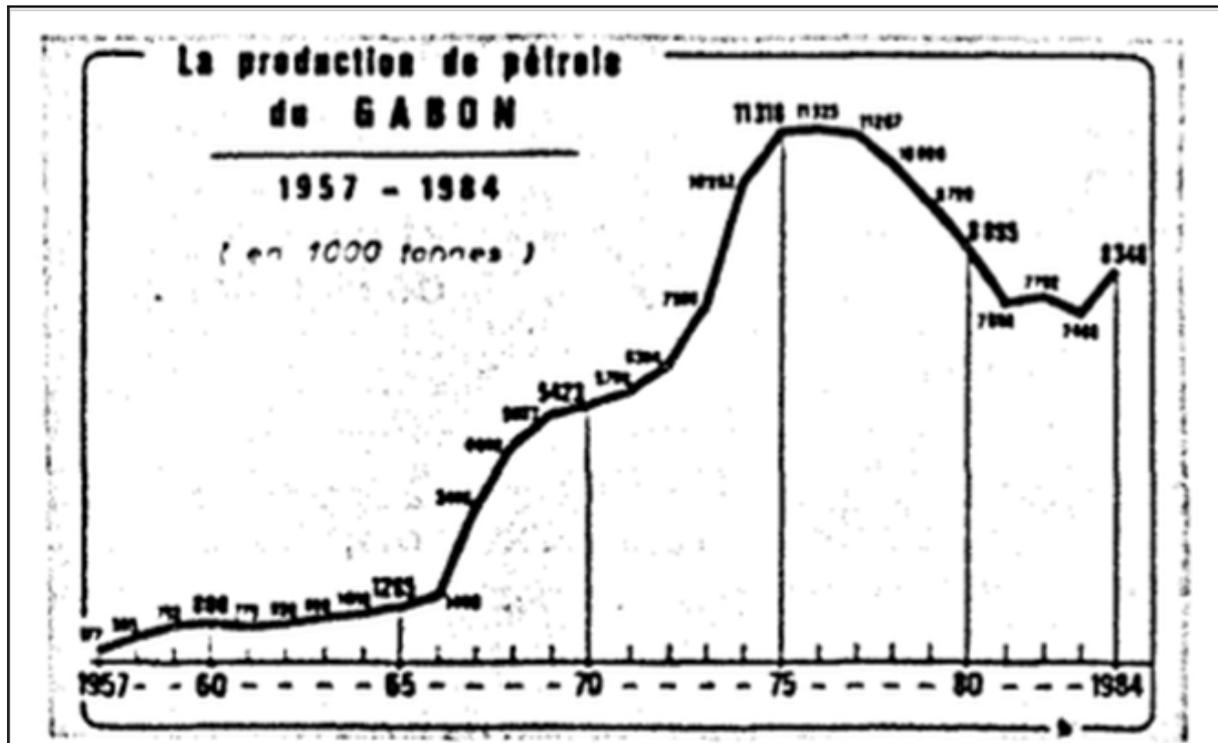


FIGURE 5. GABON'S OIL PRODUCTION, 1957-1984

no further major oil deposit was discovered and the current ones were beginning to show signs of depletion.⁸⁴

The first half of this decade was experienced by Gabonese policy-makers and Elf-Spafe as potentially the end of the oil adventure (see fig. 5 showing the trends in oil production as perceived in the mid-1980s), and this had important repercussions. Indeed, Gabon's economy offered fewer economic opportunities to its citizens just as the education policies were finally starting to deliver their promised workforce. Moreover, in 1986 oil prices started to fall because of market saturation. This created a situation in which Gabon's youth felt marginalized and was in turn one of the main reasons for the 1990 Port-Gentil anti-French riots.⁸⁵ In this case, the disparity of wealth and power between French expatriates and the wider Gabonese population must have proven too wide – especially in times of economic hardship.⁸⁶

Béatrice Plasse, who was living in Gabon with her husband in the late 1970s and early 1980s, analysed this situation as the final break with the old colonial mentality, which was characterised by a certain paternalism, and the ideal of an army of builders. – she grew up in French West Africa because her father, Maurice

⁸⁴ Ibid., 1978.

⁸⁵ François Ngolet, "Fluctuating Anti-French Sentiment in Gabon, 1964-1998," *Etre étranger et migrant en Afrique au 20e siècle* 2 (2003): 463-66.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 465.

Robert,⁸⁷ was a soldier in “la Colo.”⁸⁸ According to Béatrice Plasse, if the colonial officer was the all-powerful figure over his African “dependents”, that gave him also the responsibility to care for them. This paternalistic framework was maintained in the 1960s but by the end of the 1970s the “get-rich-and-get-out”⁸⁹ attitude was the one that prevailed.⁹⁰ This shift in attitudes could be one explanation as to why anti-French sentiments came to a head in the early 1990s.

This decade, culminating in the Port-Gentil’s anti-French riots appears to be a turning point. At this point, what was left of the colonial mentality and system of belief observed in the 1960s was the residual racial condescendence towards the Africans and the racially and socially segregated layout of the city; these residues remained despite the fact that by then, in the 1980s, many French expatriates had not experienced or were brought up in Colonial France.

We have started this article suggesting that to study French expatriate communities in Gabon is essential to understand the relationships existing between Gabon and France. Most expatriates implemented the policies decided in Paris by French policy makers, while also representing the former colonial power with all the political and economic implications this had. The main reasoning behind why these expatriates were sent to Gabon is linked to concerns France had regarding the effects of an independent Gabon, expressed clearly in the Cooperation Agreements signed just before independence was granted. The continuing influence of France over Gabon via its expatriates was undermined when Gabon saw its revenues boom thanks to the 1973 oil shock, further resulting in the ability to invest substantially in education.

This evolution in education undermined the ideological foundations of the colonial mentality that had survived throughout the 1960s based on the “work-place syndrome”: that is, “the Frenchmen expected to direct and the Gabonese to be directed.”⁹¹ By the end of the 1980s, this assumption had been thoroughly challenged both in France and Gabon and French expatriates could not behave as they had in the 1960s.

Fifty years after my grand-parents and their four children stepped on Port-Gentil’s soil for a brief but intense stay, what kind of broader conclusions can we gain from their life histories and the others I collected? Some habits clearly die hard,

⁸⁷ Maurice Robert and André Renault, *Maurice Robert : “Ministre” De L’afrique* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

⁸⁸ Nickname referring to the French Colonial forces

⁸⁹ Maurice Robert and André Renault, *Maurice Robert : “Ministre” De L’afrique* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

⁹⁰ Murphree, 164.

⁹¹ Sibieude (Interviewer), *Interview with Plasse, Jean-Louis & Béatrice (Interviewees) 1943-, 1945-, January 30th, 2016.*

especially when it comes to mentalities. The colonial legacy has remained a consistent feature of post-colonial relations between France and its former African dependencies.

It is this tension between change and stability that lies at the heart of the analysis of these communities. These communities, because they are constantly evolving demographically through arrivals and departures, tend to respond to, or at least engage with, new trends emerging in France. Yet, at the same time, discourses and practices of and towards Africans remained unchanged. Only in the 1980s could one witness a turning point, primarily due to the fact that by then many French expatriates were too young to have known colonization.

Perhaps, the answer to this conundrum of change and stability is simply about demographic renewal, especially within elites in the position to shape public discourses. However, we would need to do more research in order to engage more thoroughly with that question. As we are about to enter the third generation since the end of the colonial era, it remains unclear whether we are living in a post-colonial era, or still transitioning out of the colonial one.