Résumés/Abstracts

Christian Jacob — At the Edge of Humanity: African Landscapes and Peoples in Hannon’s Travels.

The account of Hannon’s Travels, a basic text of Greek anthropology, epitomized the ways of perceiving of the peoples and landscapes of Western Africa. Instead of being an authentic account however, it is a work of fiction that invites readers to gradually experience Otherness. Following a story line more inspired by the Odyssey and myths than by reality in the field, the seduction of discovery precedes the fear of losing one’s sense of identity.

Alain Froment — The Origin and Evolution of Mankind according to Cheikh Anta Diop: A Critical Analysis.

Cheikh Anta Diop has worked out the Africocentrist hypothesis that black Africans are at the roots of modern mankind and of the first human civilization; but major methodological biases (particularly in lexicostatistics and physical anthropology) cast doubt on his work. Although the scientific community has not felt comfortable with his theories, they are popular in Africa, where his political activities have added to confusion in the scholarly debate. Evidence from paleontology, genetics and physical anthropology indicates that the question of origins, whether of humanity or of ancient Egyptian civilization, is much more complex than any answer coming out of a discredited racialist dialectics. Nowadays, primates are thought to have originated in the Americas; Australopithecus, in Europe; and modern man, in Africa or the Near East. As for the population of ancient Egypt, it was quite heterogeneous; and the ‘negroid’ component in it was not dominant. We must avoid fueling this debate with feelings, else research on prehistory and ancient history be taken hostage by conflicting ideologies.


Available data about farmers and farming in Africa must be handled with caution, since they can take on meaning only if placed in a complex framework. Based on a theory of intensification (which has evolved significantly since E. Boserup’s formulation), this framework must also cover a theory of innovation and a model of the productive system in agriculture. Only in this way is it possible to observe several, past as well as recent, African examples of farming innovations that did not involve intensification but had to do with the system of culture (i.e., the combination of speculations made by peasants). Even today, intensification and innovation seldom come together, but promising local examples can be cited. By thus observing and interpreting agricultural trends, we may conclude that farming is not regressing in Africa but that, instead, it constitutes a reserve for the future.

F. Rue — Cocoa Crises: The Bust after the Boom?

Cocoa production follows a boom-and-bust cycle that is partly explained by the ease of planting cocoa and then the difficulty of replanting 20-25 years later. Accordingly, a country remains a major producer by gradually shifting its center of production, as new forests are cleared. However, this deterministic model should be reconsidered in the light of how, from 1988 to 1991, farmers in the Ivory Coast, after a period of doubt when they might have abandoned cocoa production, decided instead to innovate. Three neglected aspects of this innovativeness are pointed out. First, farmers made technical innovations as they planted new trees under less favorable ecological conditions. They also made innovations in food crops since they had to free land for them as they replanted cocoa. Thirdly, they innovating more in 1991 than in 1981 because three major crises (deforestation, the increasing scarcity of land, and the crash of cocoa prices) came together. Given the proven capacity for innovation by family farmers, it is now up to African governments to shore up these innovations so that their countries remain major cocoa producers.

J.-P. Dozon — One Grave Can Hide Another.

Since the first explorations, the West has been both attracted to and repelled by Africa. Coveted, exploited, 'developed', this continent has aroused fear and been rejected for its inability to 'take off' economically. Three major images of illness provide us with clews for understanding this attraction/repulsion. First, the 'white man's grave', an image drawn during the first centuries of the Atlantic trade, was worked out during colonization, when fevers and epidemics repelled colonists. Second, the image of a domesticated Africa took shape during the colonial period and survived following independence: thanks to 'development', which corresponded to advances in medicine and health policy, the continent would be swept up in the trend toward 'universal progress'. Third, an alarming image has emerged of Africa as the place where 'morals' are digging the continent's grave since they are responsible for not only economic failures but also the AIDS epidemic.

C. Freud — The Franc Zone, a Scapegoat for Development Failures.

World Bank experts blame the failure of structural adjustment policies in countries belonging to the West African Franc Zone on the overvaluation of the CFA franc. They advocate, therefore, breaking up this monetary bloc. It is proven that the exchange rate between the CFA and French francs has barely changed over the past 30 years, and that overvaluation does little to account for failed adjustment policies. Examples from countries outside this zone show that devaluation does not inevitably stimulate economic growth. Abolishing the franc zone would probably cause more problems than it would solve. Thanks to this zone, the shocks of economic recession that would have hurt the most underprivileged have been absorbed.

E. Kleemeyer — French Assistance to Kenya: Who Benefits?

France, almost unperceived, has become one of Kenya's top ten donors. The French ministry of Finance handles this assistance, which amounted to $230 million between 1976-1990. The aid, on extremely generous terms, was tied to accepting an equivalent value of commercial credits on onerous terms. French aid thus encouraged the tendency to finance, through commercial borrowing, huge and questionable state
programs, a practice which, in large part explains the current Kenyan financial crisis. As a result, Kenyan—and French—taxpayers have to pay twice the intended price for the Turkwel Dam. Corruption of national decision-makers by foreign firms may be a ‘fact of life’ in the Third World. However, the Hessel Commission, examining development policy at the request of the French government, unambiguously excluded any role for the French ministry of Finance in supporting such perverse operations.

B. JEWSEWICKI — Primitivism, Postcolonialism, Negro Antiques and the National Issue.

Drawing on recent studies dealing with primitivism in art, the intellectual history of Africa and the social history of Western historiography of ancient Greece, this paper explores the relationships between nationalism and colonialism as well as those between modernism and primitivism. The author argues that the invention of ‘primitivism’ in art constitutes an important element in the definition of the West as ‘modern’. He goes on to suggest that colonialism represents the core component of the Western construction of modern nationalism. The paper also discusses the possible relationship between postmodernism and postcolonialism and the nascent interest in non-Western popular arts.

J. S. THAYER — Une approche non-conventionnelle de la culture des Créoles de Sierra Leone.

La plupart des travaux sur les Créoles (Krios) de Sierra Leone mettent l’accent sur le caractère élitaire de ce groupe. Cet article, qui repose sur une recherche de terrain, traite des paysans et des ouvriers créoles vivant dans les villages surplombant Freetown. L’auteur s’attache à étudier plusieurs aspects de la vie villageoise créole, en particulier, l’évolution des conditions économiques, la mobilité ascensionnelle des paysans et des ouvriers créoles de la dernière génération, les relations avec les non-Créoles, l’institution du « tutorat » et la notion de « créolisation » des peuples indigènes. L’enquête révèle que ces différents domaines, qui englobent de larges secteurs de la vie créole, ont été négligés par la plupart des auteurs en raison de l’attention exclusive qu’ils accordent aux cadres et à la classe dominante créoles.