

Dim Delobsom: The native before the colonizer

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Abstract: Dim Delobsom was one of the first indigenous colonial officials in the French administration of Upper Volta. Born in 1897, he rapidly rose through the ranks of colonial administration, becoming a high-level functionary. He also served as the resident anthropologist of the dominant Mossi tribe of Upper Volta, and published several books on Mossi customs. Delobsom fell foul of the colonial administration, however, when he decided to assume the chieftaincy of his natal village upon his father's death. The French colonial officials thought he would be compromised as a bureaucrat-chief, and sought to block his investiture. Delobsom died under mysterious circumstances shortly after being named chief, in 1940. His life reveals some important dimensions of the colonial experience.

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Introduction

Dim Delobsom was one of the first indigenous colonial clerks in the French administration of Upper Volta. He also was apparently the first indigenous ethnographer to publish in French West Africa.

Delobsom fell foul of the colonial administration, however, when in 1934 he became enmeshed in a major dispute over policy towards the Catholic Mission. Shortly after that he tried to assume the chieftaincy of his natal region upon his father's death. Some French colonial officials thought he had intrigued against the Mission and would be compromised as a bureaucrat-chief, and sought to block his investiture.

Delobsom died under mysterious circumstances several months after finally being named chief, in 1940.

A sad fact of Burkina Faso today is that few people have heard of Dim Delobsom, especially young people.¹

The life of Dim Delobsom exposes some key issues and caveats in the standard story of African decline as resulting from colonial legacy, of which Young (1994, pp. 278-81) remains a seminal narration. In his comparative study of the modern dysfunctions of African states, Young argues that the African colonial state was quite different from other states. It was forged in sudden and brutal violence, a Bula Matari 'crusher of rocks', as Congolese subjects referred to Henry Stanley and later the colonial state; it was prone to use new technologies of force to exercise power; it emasculated indigenous institutions by co-optation; and it successfully implanted a deceptively legitimating and paradoxically nationalistic ideology of a benevolent civilizing mission for the state in the brief post-war, pre-independence period. Colonizers then turned over power to their pupils: previously subordinate politicians and functionaries who had bathed in the waters of colonialism. This group of elite inheritors of the colonial state was experientially comfortable in the use of force, especially against leaders of 'traditional' institutions, and believed in the virtues of the higher purpose to be accomplished in the civilizing mission of the state.

But it is clear that this standard story must be more nuanced. Osborn (2003, p. 50) is an excellent analysis focusing on the discrepancy of the Bula Matari story with the lived experience of the indigenous African colonial employees of the colonial state. As she notes in her conclusion: "African colonial employees and their place in the equation of colonial rule reveal that French attempts to reshape African societies into French colonial ones were constantly challenged by the force and resilience of local processes and local relationships." The same was true of other colonial regimes.

Understanding the life of Dim Delobsom reinforces and shapes this conclusion. Delobsom did not purchase Bula Matari's kit and caboodle with his hard-earned education and position. Rather, Delobsom illustrates in sharp detail how a 'native' worked in the interstices of the colonial state. He had one foot firmly planted in pre-colonial institutions of authority-- the traditional chieftaincy of the Mossi empire; one foot planted in new non-state institutions authoring new discourses of legitimation-- the Catholic Church and possibly the Free-Masons and certainly the world of books and other mass produced, globalized cultural output; and a third foot planted in the colonial state itself-- as a high-ranking clerk and widely-praised ethnographer, he was very close to the top administrators of Upper Volta. His two feet became a bit overextended, it is clear, but his potential, or ability, to master, contribute to, and lead all three worlds was never in doubt. His project, cut short by his untimely death, was similar to the project of many of his contemporaries: to amalgamate the various influences on local society. In his actions and words, and those of his contemporaries both French and 'native', we see a reality quite different from the 'crusher of rocks' metaphor that is so evocatively used by Young.

Setting up Delobsom as an exception that disproves Young's thesis is not at all the point. As a matter of methodology, a single case study should not presume so much. As a matter of fairness, it should be noted that Young (1994, p. 157), without discussing Delobsom or going into details, actually uses the conflict of 1934 between state and mission in Upper Volta as an example of an exception to his portrait of a colonial state with an hegemonic cultural project to be transmitted to its pupils!

This paper rather explores, through an examination of two key episodes in the life of Dim Delobsom, the specificities of how an exception to the Bula Matari story actually differs from that story. Each episode illustrates a different dimension that may be pursued in investigating alternatives to the Bula Matari story. The first episode is Delobsom's involvement in a major crisis of legitimacy in colonial Upper Volta, known by the name of *l'affaire Carbou* after the French administrator who, together with Delobsom, struck a hammer blow at the major institutions of the local colonial establishment. What emerges from this story is the possibility of complex alliances among the colonizers and the colonized, for the reality of the colonial project was that power was multipolar, with many different native and French factions competing within a framework that granted legitimacy to the metropole, rather than to the local colonial state. The rules of the game were that political competition and intrigue continued until Dakar or Paris resolved the matter. The second was his quest, over six years from 1934-40, to wear the *bonnet rouge*, the red fez of chieftaincy, available after the death of his father, *naba* of the canton of Sao. The theme of these saga is how alive and important traditional chieftaincy remained, even after forty years of the colonial rule. Rulers of independent African countries who sought to crush chiefs learned to their peril that personal, prebendal rule could not eliminate the demand for chieftaincy, even as it punished the supply of chiefship services.

Dim Delobsom: brief biography

Dim Delobsom was born in 1897 into a complex family and a society on the verge of great change. The French armed forces, under Lieutenant Voulet, had just entered Ouagadougou and imposed a new *Mogho Naba*, or emperor of the Mossi empire, a group of four semi-autonomous kingdoms. Colonial rule would move quickly to direct occupation and last sixty years, and relations with *naba* (Mossi chiefs) were always delicate. Delobsom's father Naba Piiga was the naba of the village and area of Sao, northwest of Ouagadougou. (The name after the title Naba is the 'name of office' that a chief takes, such as 'elephant' or 'granite', while when the term naba follows a place name, such as Sao naba, this indicates the office of

the chiefship for a place, rather than a particular person.) Before ascending to office, he had helped the soon-to-be-deposed Mogho Naba Wobgo (Boukary Koutou) in his battles against the neighboring Lalle naba. Boukary Koutou in return had helped him in the competition to become Sao naba. “The king has returned the favor”, is the meaning of Dim Delobsom's name.

Delobsom's father seems to have been an astute leader, for he spread his investments across a wide range of social forces. He converted to Islam, and maintained prominent Islamic holymen at Sao. But he sent Delobsom off as a young boy to be baptized, and then to be raised in the French colonial schools as a secularist. He also seems to have maintained good relations with traditional diviners.

Upon the completion of his education, Delobsom returned to the colony and took up service as a *commis*, a clerk, in the bureaucracy of the colonial state. He served in a variety of positions, and drew the attention of Robert Arnaud, a colonial official who was to become acting governor of Upper Volta in 1927 and later one of the more prolific and well-known interpreters of the colonial era for the French popular press. Arnaud apparently encouraged Delobsom to write down ethnographic observations and publish them. The results, after a series of academic articles, were two books, *l'Empire du Mogho-Naba* and *Secrets des Sorciers Noirs*, published in the early 1930s. These books are characterized by a lively and intelligent style, with a friendly mix of personal anecdote and serious questioning of Mossi society. They became standard reading material for French colonial officers, and references to them are peppered in the writings of officers. They seem to be the first, or at least the first well-known, books by an African author in the AOF (Pageard 1995, p. 549; Senghor 1947).

Soon after the publication of his books, Delobsom became enmeshed in two conflicts. He was accused of being a lead conspirator in what became known as *l'affaire Carbou*, where the acting head of the circle of Ouagadougou alarmed the government with accusations of meddling by the White Fathers in affairs of state and predictions of bloodshed. Following the mass revolt of 1915-16, which led to hundreds of thousands of casualties among the population (Saul and Royer 2002), the government responded to Carbou's charges with seriousness. Baudu (1957, p. 179-85), de Benoist (1985), and

Ilboudo (Ilboudo 2000, pp. 188-91) all argue that *l'affaire Carbou* was to dramatically redirect the fortunes of the colony and Catholic Mission—the process of conversion to Christianity slowed dramatically, and French suspicion of the Mossi empire as a political unit increased.

While these events were unfolding, Delobsom's father died, and Delobsom tried to gain the title of Sao naba, confronting his brother and French officers in the process. His career seems to have suffered greatly from the fallout of these two battles. He did not publish again (though he may have kept writing, we do not know) and his transfer out of the Ouagadougou area in 1937 was viewed as a demotion and exile by the White Fathers. Although he was finally invested as Sao naba in April 1940, he died in 83 days later without having a chance to fulfill the potential so evident in the early 1930s. He left no recognized children, though rumors circulate of descendants (Pacere 1989, pp. 48-51).

Power and legitimacy in colonial Upper Volta

Upper Volta, established as an autonomous colony in 1919, was soon marked by great uncertainty over fundamental questions of governance and the legitimacy of the French colonial project. The economic development dreams of Edouard Hesling, the first governor of the colony, had not come to pass. His road-building campaign led to roads that young men used to escape the colony rather than remain and be forced to build more roads. The dawning depression of the global economy in the 1930s underlined gross misjudgements about the profitability of the recent export oriented agricultural investments and campaign of forced cotton cultivation undertaken by the colonial administration (Fourchard 2000; Morabito 2000; Schwartz 2000). Unable to collect sufficient tax revenue to justify the administration, the colony was dismantled in 1933 and apportioned to other colonies. Government buildings were vacated.

The early 1930s also saw secularists in the colonial administration, organized through the lodges of the Free Masons, attempting to curtail the influence of the Catholic Mission established by the White Fathers. The Mission had flourished under the charismatic, well-connected, and energetic bishop Joanny Thévenoud, who had served on Hesling's advisory board for the colony of Upper Volta and who could

speak directly with Cabinet-level officials back in Paris (Pauliat 1995a; Sondo 1998). The Mission saw the dismantling of the colony as a major threat; their activities continued to depend on sizable grants and other assistance from the colonial administration, and official discouragement of rival Muslim and Protestant movements. It should be noted that this was not the first time that colonial administrators had tried to curtail the influence of the Mission; ever since the Law of Separation of 1905 which created a secular state in France, institutionalizing the anti-clerical movement, administrators had from time to time encouraged indigenous chiefs to resist and reduce interactions with the Mission.

In this atmosphere of political uncertainty, an experienced administrator named Henri Carbou was posted to Ouagadougou, to serve as an inspector of administrative affairs and also as acting head of the circle of Ouagadougou. Carbou, according to de Benoist (1985, p. 371) had a fine record as commander of the circle of San in neighboring Mali, administrator in Timbouctou, and as administrator in Cote d'Ivoire. He also had published a book in 1912, *La région du Tchad et du Ouadai*. Within one year, Carbou seems to have taken a very negative attitude towards the White Fathers and developed a good relationship with Delobsom.

In July of 1934 Carbou telegraphed Governor Reste in Abidjan noting that there were problems in the Bwa area. De Benoist (1985, pp. 432-8) offers an excellent summary of this 'révolte des enfants des Peres' (revolt of the children of the Fathers) or *nana vo*, as it became known in the local language. Catholic converts were apparently refusing to accept the authority of chiefs imposed by the administration.² Reste ordered inspector Henri Cornet to take a military escort through the area. Cornet replied in the beginning of August that the problem lay with the Mission, which was undermining the authority of the administration. In early August, Carbou sent an urgent telegram to Reste: the Mogho Naba had warned the administrators in Ouagadougou that the Mission was exacerbating tensions in the area and that "...if you do not put a halt to the activities of the Mission, incidents of bloodshed will be sure to follow shortly upon minor provocation."³ The telegram was followed by a report to Reste sent on 11 August, and read by the Governor on the 21st according to a margin note (Carbou 1934a). In the report,

Carbou repeated the assertions of the Mogho Naba, and asked the Governor to interview him directly, in private, when he came to Abidjan with other chiefs to celebrate the inauguration of the new government offices in Abidjan, using Dim Delobsom as interpreter.

Carbou then launched a full-scale investigation into abuses by the Mission, and called a meeting of all the native chiefs of the Ouagadougou area on August 16. At the meeting he reminded them that the Mission did not have authority over them. He encouraged them to come forward with cases of abuse. Thévenoud fired off a warning letter to Carbou the very next day; he knew about the meeting despite its secrecy, knew what Carbou had said, and would use every "legitimate" resource at his disposal to defend the Mission (Thevenoud 1934).

Carbou compiled a dossier of allegations, including a lengthy section on how the mission used converted Mossi as spies on the administration, but mostly concerning women who had left their homes for the Mission against the wishes of their parents or fiancés (Carbou 1934b).

There was no reason to doubt the veracity of the claims that the Mission was harboring women fleeing an oppressive patriarchy. That women were oppressed was not in doubt. Delobsom himself had a lengthy section of his first book devoted to it and did not hesitate to describe the status of women as that of "beasts of burden" compared with men (1932, p. 182). Men controlled all assets, men took decisions within the family, men inherited and not women, women in fact were inherited themselves upon the deaths of their husbands, men had the right to hit their wives, and men could marry off their daughters without needing consent. This sentiment was underscored by Arnaud in his preface to *L'empire* (p.vi), writing on the status of women in more elite household: "And this is why, reduced to penurious work and the status of female donkeys, women constitute, in the houses of war priests, a herd which serves as a kind of currency of exchange used when the occasion demanded, and from which the weak and old were culled without mercy."⁴

Delobsom's writing on the subject of women had an authenticity and weight that made an immediate impact. In his political report of 1932, Lieutenant Gouverneur of Upper Volta Chessé referred

to Delobsom extensively to defend his argument for a more vigorous policy of emancipation of women.⁵ He cited an extract from Delobsom that would be sure to resonate with constituencies back in France: "The customs of marriage constitute a real traffic in women, completely ignoring the rights of parents in the case of *pogsioure* [where a chief marries off young girls] and the consent of young girls to dispose of their own persons. This is like a disguised slavery to which the Mossi women and others like her is still reduced."⁶

There is ample evidence of the prominence of the issue of women fleeing these patriarchal structures by seeking refuge in the Mission in correspondence among and reports of French administrators. Baudu (1957, p. 173) asserted that in Koudougou alone in 1933 more than fifty cases were heard by the commandant concerning the status of girls relating to the Mission.

Catholic historiography of *l'affaire Carbou*, pretty much all that there is, casts the events as a valiant effort by Thévenoud and the Mission to emancipate women of Mossi society from unholy alliance of an oppressive patriarchy that denied them natural rights (Baudu 1957, pp. 82-3; Prost, pp. 123-5; Sondo 1998, pp. 234-41), and an accommodating administrative cabal of Free Masons who did not want to rock the colonial boat's reliance on indigenous chiefs, and would rather shut down the Mission and transfer out indigenous clerks and chiefs allied with the Mission. This is also the summary judgement of Skinner (1970, p. 197). Some commentators have opined, without much evidence, that the struggle that threatened the administration was really a power struggle between Governor of Cote d'Ivoire François Reste and Governor-General of A.O.F. Jules Brévié (Baudu 1957, pp. 180-1; Young 1994, p. 325). Certainly the two held conflicting but confusing opinions over the vexing question of the status of indigenous women who converted to Christianity and evaded the obligations to marry imposed on them by a patriarchal society.

In challenging the Mission, Carbou was not arguing that women should not have rights, but rather whether the Mission had the power to give them those rights. The Mission had been established in Ouagadougou in 1901, but the strong anti-clericalism of many administrators, also Free Masons, meant

that the Mission was viewed by many with suspicion (de Benoist 1985; Pauliat 1995b). There was certainly no shortage of evidence to support charges of damage to the legitimacy of secular colonial administration. Thévenoud was quite controversial. According to Baudu (1957, p. 165), Thévenoud was able through his protestations to have the administrator of Ouahigouya and his assistant removed or transferred from office. This kind of meddling, even the sympathetic Baudu agreed, did not serve the Mission well. His priests were not always well-behaved, and seemed to think that they too could apply the *code d'indigenat*, whereby French administrators applied summary justice when they felt the need. White Fathers demonstrated a readiness to apply *giffles*, or slaps, when crossed by indigenous men over issues ranging from marriage to payment of tax (de Benoist 1985; Ilboudo 2000).

Governor Reste took over personally in September, touring the colony and extracting promises of obedience and loyalty. The Mogho Naba retracted his statements. Reste backed the Mission publicly, but did little to support the Mission materially. Carbou and Delobsom were transferred out of Ouagadougou. Inspection missions had the final words, and this was not encouraging for the Mission. Inspector of Colonies Bagot, in his report of 1935, was to conclude (Bagot 1935): "Even if the reports of ... Carbou contain what I have earlier described as exaggerations or unsubstantiated affirmations, he did signal some complaints that should have been examined at that time and place, regardless of what their real importance might have turned out to be."

The crisis seems to have had profound effects. Catholic success in recruitment declined precipitously as chiefs and secularist administrators apparently concluded that the Mission had lost influence, and became less afraid to assert their influence. French colonial administration was frankly revealed in all its confusion and weakness; authorities openly discussed in official correspondence what their purpose was: civilizing, proselytizing, or exploiting?

One interest for this paper is not in the actual events of the crisis, but rather what historians have had to say about Delobsom, what the silences in the historiography say about Delobsom, and then how

these assertions and silences might reveal some of the workings of the colonial project as it operated in, through and around this one person.

One of the expected but still unsettling aspects of the Catholic historiography of the 1934 political crisis is that all of the commentators uncritically follow Thévenoud in blaming Delobsom for the crisis. Thévenoud indeed seemed to have thought that much of the affair was the work of Delobsom. In a pastoral letter delivered at the Ouagadougou Cathedral in 1948, he observed, in the context of an argument that the White Fathers were not at all the same as the colonial administration (reproduced in Guirma (1991, p. 53)): “Even those of you who are young still remember Dim Delobsom, an intriguer who wanted to implicate the Mission in a rebellion of the population of the Black Volta in 1934. This revolt [was] known by the name of Nana Vo, or, 'end of presents for the whites'. Delobsom conspired with an inspector of administrative affairs, a Free Mason like Delobsom, come from Dakar to investigate the movement. Delobsom's only objective was to take vengeance on one of his traditional wives who had chosen liberty and dignity in coming to the Mission.”⁷

The Catholic historians cite unsubstantiated rumor, or the writings of the White Fathers themselves, for this conclusion. Baudu (1957, pp. 166-7, see also p. 196) makes the following claim: “In August of 1932, two *poughbi* (that is how betrothed girls were called) of Dim Dolebsom [sic] came to the Mission. This Dim Dolebsom was an educated Mossi. Intelligent, he was a clerk in the administration, but with a European grade, a privilege he shared with only two others in Ouagadougou. He was preparing a book, under the guidance of a White, called *Dans l'Empire du Mogho naba*, where all the illustrations were furnished by the Mission. His relations with the White Fathers then were not bad, even for a man who for whatever reason was affiliated with the Free Masons. But this educated man was too proud and was filled with a maddening regret, frightening for the Black that he remained: he did not have children. He expected that someday a woman would make him a father. The entry into catechism of his two promised wives, his *poughbi*, almost at marriageable age, rendered him violent with rage... perhaps the

Fathers did not put themselves on guard because they made an enemy whose implacable rancor would simmer into vengeance...”⁸

Sondo (1998, p. 210-1) discusses Delobsom in the following passage: “... in Ouagadougou for example the hostility of one Dim Dolebsom [sic] is explained by a simple bad will. He was considered to be a Christian first devoted then perverted (the words of the missionaries in his area) who only wanted evil for the Mission. This was certainly the case, and according to one witness it seems his hostility against the Mission came about this way: a Christian, one day Dim Dolebsom was late for mass, he was then publicly humiliated by the priest who slapped him. Nothing like a slap to sour an ambitious and proud functionary of the Whites, grand and respectable in the eyes of his black compatriots and who had influence over the Whites who didn't know the local language and depended on him. One can understand why vengeance was the reply to this unfortunate gesture.”⁹

The more careful of the historians, de Benoist (p. 417) repeats Baudu's interpretation of Delobsom's motives, but cites the Ouagadougou Mission diary, and has this to say: "After some time Dim Delobsom became the avowed enemy of the Mission." and later (p. 442), “Many –and especially the missionaries—believed that he [Delobsom] was at the heart of the actions against the Mission.” De Benoist then reproduces part of the daily record of the Ouagadougou Mission of the White Fathers on the occasion of Delobsom's transfer to Ferkessedougou (Diare de Ouagadougou 18 juillet 1936, as quoted in de Benoist p. 452): “After a time, the administration enquired after this ambitious and infuriated *arrivé* and determined that he was dangerous only to the Mission. He was able to get a free ride then from the administrators....He was the heart of all the flithy manouevers against us for two years. Thanks to his position, he was able to impose himself on many, from those ambitious to those who were fearful. He acted as a chief, affirming that he could suffer no disgrace. So our formidable enemy is now finally distant from us.”¹⁰

One of the reasons for why so many authors have given credence to Thévenoud's views is that they also quickly became the official position. Governor Reste, in his report on the incidents, concluded

(Reste 1934): "I am absolutely certain that the beginning of this whole affair is an intrigue brought about by two men... Dim Delobson [sic]...and Koulouango [the principal interpreter of Ouagadougou]. These two are declared enemies of the Mission." Reste continued, explaining how Delobson wanted to keep his many wives, but the Mission chastised him for this, and convinced then-Governor Hesling to remonstrate him, something that Delobson never forgave the Mission. Reste is at pains to declare in a footnote that he had not spoken with Thévenoud about this, nor with any other White Father, as if to suggest that his information had come from a neutral source. Given the several other stories circulating, this footnote can only be seen as self-serving.

There are a number of odd things about blaming Delobson for the crisis.

(1) Delobson's writings and style and introduction by Randau give no indication of his being a petty, spiteful, vengeful person, and the glowing recommendation by Acting Governor Chessé in his annual report of 1932 certainly contradicts these other characterizations.¹¹

(2) The language of personalization (turning Delobson into a conspiring, vengeful, frustrated and humiliated indigenous person) is in and of itself suspicious. The historiography contains little semblance of having read and engaged Delobson's written work. Again, his written work suggests a very different person than that presented by the Mission and the Catholic historians.

(3) Delobson's analysis in his book *Empire du Mogho Naba* is consonant with the position being advocated by the Mission. He is completely against the oppression of women, and unflinching in his descriptions of the subservient roles played by women in Mossi society.

(4) During the time of the crisis his father is probably dying (he dies in October 1934, just two months after the crisis); would he really undertake this dangerous game at that time? The Catholic historiography contains no mention of Delobson's father's death and subsequent struggle over the chieftaincy, which sheds a very different, and sympathetic light on Delobson.

(5) Delobson's actions, at least as they appear in the colonial and Mission record, and in terms of the actions of his 'co-conspirator' Carbou, appear to have been entirely above board: letters and reports are

filed in a timely manner, and the whole enterprise is conducted, apparently, in a very transparent, bureaucratic manner. In fact, Delobsom spent much of the period of crisis, from 10 August to 3 September, in Abidjan in the circle of Governor Reste! None of the Catholic historiographers mention this, and de Benoist, for example, uncritically reproduces (p. 417) Thévenoud's argument, "... in August 1934, [Delobsom] collaborated openly with the inspector Carbou to constitute a file against the Mission, going in particular to Koudougou to make inquiries." (Delobsom's trip to Koudougou did not take place, apparently, until 1935.)

(6) The historiography contains no critical examination of Thévenoud, who seems to have been fighting a losing battle in the Catholicisation of Upper Volta, and who seems to have been willing to collaborate readily in the colonial enterprise without questioning it or conversion itself, and then to collaborate easily with the Vichy regime during the German occupation. Thévenoud's readiness to take young girls and money from the administration (freed slaves, unwanted children, etc.) and convert them (Baudu p. 82) and his interference with administrators and probably with indigenous chiefs (Baudu p. 165) are also troubling, as they are left unexamined by the historiography.

In the absence of available witnesses, a Catholic historiography that may have been overly reliant on the notes and interpretations of Thevenoud, and the absence of primary source material from non-administrative sources, the true role that Delobsom played in the conflict cannot be ascertained. The only document from Delobsom himself, a remarkable letter written to French administrator Bellieu in 1936, denied any involvement in the crisis (Delobsom 1936). Delobsom, writing in regard to his request to succeed his father as Sao naba, reminded Bellieu of the Carbou affair, noting that he was in Abidjan with the governor during most of August, not in Ouagadougou, and so played no role in the crisis. A note of sardonic humor intrudes, with an aside about how the Mission seemed to think he could be in two places at once, "ubiquitous" is his choice of words.

Nevertheless, Delobsom's 'remembered' role sparks a number of observations regarding the legitimacy of the colonial order.

A most important observation is that the crisis of legitimacy as interpreted by many actors in 1934 has an arbiter, or a procedure of arbitration. Disputes among and within the administration and the major non-state actors were decidable by the metropole. The local colonial state was not the arbiter, but rather one among many players. Everyone understood this. The situation arose because the local state itself was not monolithic. There were sharp differences among the French administrators over their role. But these differences were discussed and debated and criticized through the written word, through reports and opinions on margins of reports. There was a whole set of superiors who have to be informed and persuaded, all the way up to the Minister of Colonies, who in turn answered to the French electorate (which was to dramatically change colonial policy in 1936 with the election of the Popular Front). The internal bureaucratization of the state, a key element of its legitimation, was entrenched in the early 1930s. But, as suggested, the audience for bureaucratization was not the 'customer' of the state, the citizen (or subject!), but rather the metropole.

The crisis makes clear that in 1934, more than three decades into colonial rule, the ordinary 'native' was not the source of legitimation. Nor was the elite 'native' the source of legitimation. The local colonial state did not attempt to 'win the hearts and minds', to apply the current jargon, of the elite, nor did it attempt to legitimate through a crushing of local power. The Mogho Naba, the highest authority in local society, had little idea who his counterparts were among the French, and what they stood for. But he knew he could make the administrators jump. The French administrators, distant from the people they ruled and unable to speak local languages, had little ability to be intelligent to the situation that surrounded them. They were always vulnerable to misinterpretation and manipulation. This may have been especially true in the Mossi case, famous for their silences and nuanced speech (Delobsom 1932, p. 273). But they knew they could arrest and silence opponents. The Mission too knew their power to alter the shape of colonial life, and knew that they competed with Muslim preachers and Protestant movements (Somé 2004). In this mix, the growing confidence of the intellectuals, like Delobsom, as a class indicated

a new source of power. The metropole enforced a cease-fire among competing these powers in the colony. The local state was but one of those powers, and arguably on the decline as early as 1934.

Chiefs and legitimacy

The crucial importance of chiefs in the French administration of Upper Volta has been noted by many commentators (Alexandre 1970; Cohen 1971, pp. 74-9; Delavignette 1950, pp. 71-84). It suffices to recall the words of Hesling, the Lieutenant-Governor, in his political report of 1926 (Rapport Politique Trimstre 1926): "This question of indigenous chiefs is essential and delicate. We command effectively only through the intermediation of the nabas. If we try to control very strictly the means and methods they use to get results, if we pretend to incorporate their actions into our conception of rights, we risk gaining nothing, and undermining customary law and mixing up indigenous society. Our relations with these indispensable intermediaries are above all relations of personal authority, and common sense and restraint."

This accommodating policy was not without its critics, and in 1932 interim Lieutenant-Governor Chessé penned a blistering attack on native chiefs and their role in the administration (Chessé 1932). He urged administrators to immediately tour their administrative areas and make clear to the population that abuses by chiefs would not be tolerated. To set the example, Chessé revoked the chieftaincy of a brother of the Mogho Naba and of the Liptako naba, an important canton in the northern part of the colony.

After the death of his father in October 1934, Delobsom wanted to be Sao naba. The administration did not want him to be chief, and apparently prevented the Mogho Naba from appointing him.

Delobsom, frustrated, wrote a remarkable letter in 1936 to the administrateur Bellieu (Delobsom 1936). He began by suggesting that traditional chiefs were against his accession to the position of Sao naba because they felt threatened by his high salary as an administrative clerk. This initial impediment, he argued, was then compounded by a veritable labyrinth of indecisive bureaucracy, as his request

ascended to the colonial office in Paris only to slowly descend with instructions for a decision at the lower levels. There it sat for months. Delobsom went on to implicate one chief in particular, the Baloum naba, as the obstacle. As a well-known supporter of the Mission, it was then but a small leap to go to the heart of the matter, the Mission's desire for a naba who would support their proselytizing in Sao. Bellieu was reminded of the accusations against Delobsom in the Carbou affair, and how these were unfounded. He closed with a rhetorical flourish, asking how it was that after being taken from his home to be sent to school, and then spending twenty-three years of service to the colonial administration, illiterate chiefs could have more sway over the commandant than his plain reason, and could lead to his younger brother named Sao naba?

The background to this chieftaincy debate is interesting. On Delobsom's book *L'empire du Mogho Naba*, much commentary agrees that a most controversial stance is taken in regard to the relations of authority in the Mossi empire (Pacere 1989; Pageard 1995, pp. 550-9; Piriou 1995, p. 565).

Delobsom argued for the power and legitimacy of the *kombemba*, the canton chiefs, against that of the *kug-zidba*, or *nesomba*, the ministers of the court of the Mogho Naba.¹² Of these ministers, four are typically taken to be those most important, Ouidi naba, Laralle naba, Baloum naba and Gounga naba. Pageard (1995, pp. 550-1) recalls that this argument against the ministers was strongly criticised by the Laralle naba in 1960 when Pageard met with him to discuss Delobsom's book. The Laralle naba argued that the opposite was the case: the ministers exercised considerable and non-negotiable oversight over 'their' *kombemba*. The Laralle naba further argued that Delobsom's position was self-serving. Delobsom was not friendly with the Baloum naba, the minister overseeing the Sao chieftaincy and who had converted to Catholicism in 1927 and was a strong ally of the Mission and Thévenoud. Hence, according to the Laralle naba, the argument that *kombemba* were not really subject to the oversight of the ministers.

In his letter to Bellieu, Delobsom noted the vexation he would suffer were his younger brother named Sao naba. It was not a question of injured pride; he surely intended his reader to remember a startlingly personal passage (p. 55) in *Secrets des Sorciers Noirs*, published in 1934, where the *kingirga*

diviner hinted at his poor relations with his younger brother. In the book, Delobsom went on to explain that the diviner's hints were exactly right: one of his brothers was plotting and intriguing against him.

Indeed, in 1936 his younger brother Zang-Ne was invested as Sao naba by the Mogho Naba. According to Pacere (1989) Delobsom was not informed of the decision, and immediately protested. Zang-ne had argued that his older brother was not interested and would not want to resign his position. More discussion was contained in the Rapport Politique of the colony of Cote d'Ivoire, of which Upper Volta had become part in 1933. The 1936 reports Delobsom was still a candidate opposed by the administration (Rapport Politique Annuel 1936, pp. 56-7). His brother Zang-ne was meanwhile fulfilling the role on an interim basis, according to the report. Delobsom, the report suggested, had asked to be transferred to Abidjan to represent the Mossi population in Cote d'Ivoire; decision on this request was postponed until Delobsom returned from his leave. Delobsom was indeed transferred, but to the circle of Bobo Dioulasso on 5 October 1937. He apparently was posted to Ferkessedougou (Pacere 1989, p. 45).

The 1938 Annual Report contains a lengthier discussion of the unresolved controversy (Rapport Politique Annuel 1938, pp. 81-7). It is not clear who the ultimate responsible author of the report is (Governor of Cote d'Ivoire Bressoles ended his term on 27 January 1939, succeeded by Crocicchia) nor to whom it is directly addressed (at one point deviating from an impersonal report to directly address an unnamed reader), but the author is clearly opposed to Delobsom's nomination. The report noted that the Baloum naba was firmly opposed, and praises the naba for his circumspection. The 1937 report of inspector Itier, critical of Delobsom, was cited. The issues of Delobsom's loyalty-- was he an agent, or did he control the Mogho Naba himself?-- and intentions-- why did he want so badly to be a chief?-- were raised. The author added that he had demanded answers to the numerous questions about Delobsom from the resident administrator of Upper Cote d'Ivoire, presumably Edmond Louveau who was the resident administrator in Ouagadougou beginning in 1938.

The 1938 annual report does not note that the Sao canton was reassigned in 1938 to the oversight of the Laralle naba. It is not clear what the basis or motives for this transfer were. The winds may have

been changing. Louveau was happy with Delobsom (Benga 1999, p. 983 n33). The Moro Naba may have been on the ascendant with the posting of Louveau as resident administrator. Perhaps the more sympathetic position towards Delobsom of the Laralle naba encouraged Delobsom to resign from the administration on 16 May 1939, with the title “d’agent intermédiaire chargé d’assurer l’exécution des opérations budgétaires” (Pacere 1989, p. 46).

A year later, on 21 April 1940 Dim Delobsom was invested as Sao naba, after the Mogho Naba and his counselors reversed their earlier decision to invest Zang-ne. Strange reversal, and so far it is impossible to know what prompted it. There are a number of possibilities to speculate on. One is that Delobsom, having resigned his position, was no longer opposed by the administration, and so the Mogho Naba, already well-disposed towards him, could reverse the earlier decision, justified as temporary. Another is that the German invasion of France, and rapidly approaching armistice, enabled Delobsom and the Mogho Naba to convince Louveau that Delobsom would be more loyal and more powerful than Zang-ne. Could Louveau have already been laying the groundwork for his pro-de Gaulle declaration, which he was to make on June 22 1940?

As it was, Delobsom died suddenly 83 days after the ceremony. According to Pacere (1989, p. 165), Delobsom had received a number of bottled alcoholic beverages on the occasion of the 14 July celebrations. He perhaps consumed one of these poisoned bottles, is the conspiracy theory. Poisoned by whom? An enemy of his, such as the Baloum Naba? An enemy of Louveau, who two weeks later was to be escorted to Dakar, arrested, and sent to prison in Vichy France? His own brother? Of course, the possibility of tragic and sudden natural death cannot be ruled out either. This mystery will not be resolved in the near future.

Delobsom’s long march to the chieftaincy, and the bitterness that his candidacy evoked, is remarkable. After forty years of colonial rule, the most modern and cosmopolitan of all the *évolués* of Upper Volta still insists on the importance of traditional rule. Delobsom’s lone surviving photograph, reprinted in his book, displays a young man in impeccable European white suit against a mud brick

building. His self-assured pose, and the confidence of his writing, suggest a character who could have lived a rich mental and material life without being chief. He chose to be chief; he wanted to be chief; he thought being chief was the right thing to do.

As many commentators have observed, colonial administrators never succeeded in elevating their barely legitimate institution-- the local state-- as the higher allegiance of the land. Instead, competing orders of the same level of allegiance persisted and sometimes even grew, during the colonial period and after (Geertz 1973). In many colonies this competing order was the system of chieftaincy, or traditional authority (for Upper Volta, see Madiéga (1995) and). Much contemporary scholarship demonstrates the enduring power of chiefs (Mback 2002). In other colonies, secret societies, church groups, and Islamic movements mobilized populations and controlled violence in ways totally unavailable to the state. Again, the Bula Matari story nuanced in a different direction.

Concluding comments

The irony of Delobsom's life was that Joanny Thévenoud ended up on a stamp of the independent Upper Volta, and has been lionized through several books (Baudu 1957; de Benoist 1985; Sondo 1998), while Delobsom faded into collective unconscious of the Burkinabe elite, with brief negative characterizations in the aforementioned books enduring despite the recent efforts of Pacere (1989), Piriou (1995) and Benga (1999) to rectify the situation. A school and avenue named after him remain just names, no more evocative than those of obscure colonial explorers.

Nevertheless, an exploration of the major events of his life reveals the character of the colonial project that shaped an independent Burkina Faso. Colonial regimes in Africa deserve extremely careful analysis, if only because the trick in prescribing for reversal of African decline is to examine carefully the real choices made by political actors as they constructed and evaluated their careers and goals during a period when, for all its faults, discourses of popular sovereignty and human rights, improvements in living standards along a range of measures, and economic growth, were tangible and achievable. Only

by a deep, textured understanding of lived biographies can future political actors learn from and avoid the same mistakes and temptations, and can ordinary citizens be inspired by a past worth remembering.

In this regard, Young's 1994 narrative has inspired a new generation of research into how the colonial legacy influenced contemporary economic and political decline.

This new work has pursued three different strands. One strand has tried to quantitatively measure the institutional legacy of colonial states, and see whether it is indeed correlated with subsequent economic performance in countries around the world (Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2001; Englebert 2002)

A second strand has asked how it was that the readiness to use force, and belief in the primacy of the state in its modernizing project over other legitimate institutions of colonial society, came to be part of the world view of the independence elites that inherited political power. This work bores down on the lives of subjects of colonialism and new rulers of independence. While Young's work is remarkably devoid of individual African actors- only Blaise Diagne's voice is heard, for colonial sub-Saharan Africa- subsequent work suggests that there is plenty of evidence that more than one African colonial civil servant and politician "remained enclosed within the imposed metaphors of the colonial order and the circumscribed future that Bula Matari offered," to use Young's phrasing (1994, p. 227). Sharkey (2003), for example, finds abundant evidence in the written legacy of Sudanese colonial clerks and colonially-educated nationalists of these "imposed metaphors".¹³

A third strand has focused on some less psychological and more structural legacies of the colonial order. Herbst (2000) and Englebert, Tarango, and Carter (2002), for example, focus on the geography of African states and the populations their borders enclosed. *Contra* Young, they argue that the fundamental weakness of African states as coherent political entities stems from the boundaries inherited from the colonial project, and the post-colonial international order which prevent alteration of boundaries.

But while each of these three strands explores and amasses evidence *consistent* with Young's broad comparative thesis on the exceptionalism of African states, there is not so much work exploring

and amassing evidence that is *inconsistent* with the thesis. In a comparative perspective, inconsistencies would be findings that African states were not so different from other states. While the work noted above suggests that African states were indeed different, it must be remembered that this work has been conducted by Africanists primarily interested in finding differences. One must assume some self-selection of the measures used to measure state characteristics. Do studies by Latin Americanists looking at their region in comparative perspective find that African states are different? Perhaps not, for example, on dimensions of state enforcement of unequal distributions of property.

At the case study level, inconsistencies with the view of the importance of the colonial legacy of Bula Matari stedom would draw attention to continuities with the pre-colonial system of informal and multiple authority structures, to changes that would have probably happened even under very different colonial state structures and perhaps even in the absence of colonial state, or that were happening despite the deliberate obstacles of the colonial state. These include the spread of literacy by missionary schools, the spread of discourses of legitimation emanating from popular sovereignty, the suppression of the slave trade, and the integration into the global economy. Case studies might also present more sophisticated and nuanced analyses of the character of the colonial state. Perhaps the time has come to ask how influential were liberal reforming expatriate colonial officers such as Robert Delavignette in shaping the tenor of the state (Mouralis, Piriou, and Fonkana 2003). On the other side were the indigenous colonial employees, who certainly helped define popular perceptions of the state.

Many indigenous actors, such as Delobsom, were actively engaged in creating, practicing and theorizing the amalgamation of these institutions. It is not clear that this legacy is such a specifically colonial legacy, nor whether this legacy of dynamic institutions was a 'problem' (and most African states had no trouble continuing economic growth for almost two decades after independence). Institutions were changing before, during and after the colonial period. The standard story of African decline as rooted in a colonial legacy of a perverse state needs some updating.

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Notes

¹Pacere (1989) made the same observation almost 15 years ago. His entry in the historical dictionary of Burkina Faso is somewhat misleading and unsubstantiated- it reads (McFarland and Rupley 1998, p. 39): "In 1934 Dim Delobsom was leader of an attack on the activities of the Catholic missionaries in behalf of Voltaic women because he felt such activities destroyed traditional culture. He was transferred out of Ouagadougou, but was appointed chief of Sao district by the Moro Naba."

² There were similar, though less coordinated, conflicts in the Mossi area. Iboudo (2000, p. 147) reports that the *commandant* of the circle of Ouagadougou spent considerable time in 1934 and 1935 resolving a dispute between Mossi Christian converts and their chief, in the village of Koasênga.

³"...si vous ne mettez pas un terme aux entreprises des Peres, des incidents sanglants se produiront sous peu."

⁴"Et c'est pourquoi, devoulées aux travaux pénibles et ravalées au rang de femmes, les femmes constituaient, chez les chefs de guerre, un troupeau qui, à l'occasion, servait de monnaie d'échange entre les groupes, et d'où l'on éliminait sans pitié les faibles, les vieilles."

⁵

⁶"La coutume regissant le mariage constitue un véritable trafic de femmes, au mépris des droits des parents dans le cas du pogioure et du consentement des jeunes filles à disposer leur personne. Tel est donc l'esclavage déguisé auquel est encore réduite la femme mossi et bien d'autres avec elle."

⁷"Les plus jeunes avaient encore le souvenir récent de Dim Dolobsom [sic] intrigant pour impliquer l'Eglise dans une rébellion des populations de la vallée de la Volta Noire en 1934. Cette révolte était connue sous le nom de <<mouvement du nana Vo>>, c'est à dire <<fin des cadeaux au Blanc>>. Dim Dolobsom avait bénéficié de la complicité d'un inspecteur des affaires administratives, franc-maçon comme lui, venu de Dakar pour enquêter sur ce mouvement. Son unique objectif était de se venger de l'une de ses épouses coutumières qui avait choisi la liberté et la dignité en venant se réfugier à la mission catholique."

⁸ En août 1932, ce furent deux <<poughbi>> (ainsi nomme-t-on les filles promises) de Dim Dolebsom [sic] qui vinrent à la fois se faire inscrire [à la Mission]. Ce Dim Dolebsom était un Mossi évolué. Intelligent, il était commis à l'Administration, mais au titre européen, privilège qu'il ne partageait alors qu'avec deux autres à Ouagadougou. Il se préparait à faire paraître, guidé par un Blanc, un livre intitulé *Dans l'Empire du Mogho naba*, dont toute l'illustration lui avait été fournie par la Mission. Ses relations avec les Peres n'étaient donc pas mauvaises, quoique homme passât, à tort ou à raison, pour être affilié à la franc-maçonnerie. Mais cet évolué, d'un orgueil maladif, était, par ailleurs, rongé par un regret, affreux pour le Noir qu'il restait: il n'avait pas d'enfant. Il espérait qu'à la longue une femme finirait par le rendre père. L'entrée au catéchisme de ses deux <<poughbi>> presque en âge d'être mariées l'indisposa violemment... peut-être les Peres ne prirent-ils pas suffisamment garde alors qu'ils se faisaient la un ennemi acharné dont la rancune implacable saurait patiemment élaborer une vengeance...

⁹"...à Ouagadougou par exemple l'hostilité d'un Dim Dolebsom [sic] s'expliquait autrement que par un simple mauvaise volonté. Baptisé, il était considéré comme un chrétien "devoyé et pervers" (termes des missionnaires à son endroit) qui ne voulait que du mal à la Mission. C'était exact, mais après un témoignage, un fait semble être à l'origine de ce retournement haineux pour la Mission: chrétien, Dim Dolebsom arriva en retard à la messe; il fut publiquement humilié par le prêtre qui lui donna un gifle. Rien de tel pour aigrir un ambitieux et fier fonctionnaire des Blancs, grand et respectable aux yeux de ses compatriotes noirs et qui avait de l'influence sur les Blancs qui ne connaissaient pas la langue du peuple et comptaient sur lui. On comprend dès lors que la vengeance soit la réplique de ce malheureux geste."

¹⁰ Depuis quelques temps, l'administration enquêtait sur cet ambitieux forcené et elle s'est aperçue qu'il n'était pas dangereux que pour la mission. Il saute donc par mesure politique... Cet évolué fut l'âme de toutes les manœuvres ourdies contre nous depuis deux ans. Grâce à sa situation, il s'imposait à beaucoup, soit ambitieux, soit craintifs. Il se donnait pour chef, affirmant que nulle disgrâce ne pouvait l'atteindre. C'est donc notre ennemi le plus redoutable qui s'éloigne

¹¹"La section d'appurement du bureau des finances du gouvernement de la Volta est uniquement constituée d'éléments indigènes. Son chef, M. Dim Delobsom pur Mossi devenu récemment Citoyen français, s'y révèle un excellent professionnel, dépassant en valeur bon nombre de fonctionnaires européens. Loin de se confiner dans les arcanes de la comptabilité, il cherche à étendre sa culture générale et s'est essayé dans la littérature documentaire..."

14MIOM/1745 1932 (Chessé) p. 208.

¹² This issue remains of importance and the subject of considerable discussion for many commentators of the Mossi empire. See, for example, Izard (1973, pp. 202-3.)

¹³ It is hard to resist being a little snide, unseemly in view of Young's really admirable work, but irresistible: when the metaphors are self-imposed, what to make of Young's point?