

“Evolution Revolution” and the Journey from African Colonial Subject to French Citizen

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Soon after Marc Kojo Tovalou Houénou hurried from his tour of the United States to the French West African colony of Dahomey in 1925 to be at his dying father’s side, the French governor there launched an inquiry to find out whether Houénou was the French citizen he claimed to be.¹ Houénou had been born in Dahomey in 1887, but had spent most of his life studying and residing in France. Although he had only returned to Dahomey briefly in 1921, with his father’s death in 1925, Houénou wanted

1. Dépêche Télégraphique, Lieutenant-Gouverneur à Gouverneur-Général Afrique Occidentale Française (hereafter AOF) (Telegram, Lieutenant Governor to Governor General of French West Africa), March 13, 1926. Dossier Marc Tovalou Quénou (Marc Tovalou Quénou File), 8G 1, 14 MIOM 2146, Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer (hereafter ANOM) (National Overseas Archives). Governors of the French colonies officially held the title of “lieutenant-governor.” The head of the French West African federation of colonies (AOF) held the title of “Governor General.” French documents often referred to Houénou using the Portuguese-influenced spelling of this name, “Quénou,” despite his preference for “Houénou.” All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

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to claim what he saw as his rightful position as *chef de famille* or head of his extended family in Dahomey. With this title, Houénou would have gained administrative control over his father's expansive wealth in land and property in several towns in Dahomey, and would have been the official representative for his family, especially in interactions with the French colonial government.² However, Houénou was already emerging as a thorn in the side of French colonial authorities because of a series of critical articles he had written in Paris about French colonialism. Therefore, when Governor Gaston Fourn found that Houénou had, in 1915, obtained his French citizenship rights, literally permission "to enjoy (*jouir*) the rights of French citizen," why was the governor relieved?³

A few years earlier, Fourn had taken advantage of the vague legal language that granted French citizenship to Africans, often described as the "quality (*qualité*) of French citizen," to strip another elite Dahomean of an indigenous title.⁴ He used similar logic to argue that Houénou was

2. The *chef de famille* was a recognized figure in Dahomey customary "native" law. The French colonial administration would become involved when there were disputes over the succession. *Coutumiers Juridiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française: Mauritanie, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire, Dahomey, Guinée Française, Tome III* [*Customary Law of French West Africa: Mauritania, Niger, Ivory Coast, Dahomey, French Guinea, Volume III*] (Paris: Larose, 1939), 484, 500, 502. The disputed will of Houénou's father, Tovalou Quenum, outlined some of his land and property holdings. "Volonté de Tovalou Quenum exprimée à Me. Germain Crespin en janvier et février 1925 pour le cas de décès," Fonds Ministerielles, Affaires Politiques ("Last will and testament of Tovalou Quenum, as expressed to attorney Germain Crespin in January and February 1925," Ministerial Collection, Political Affairs) (hereafter FM AFFPOL) 575, ANOM.

3. "Décret No. 24217, Président de la République Française par l'application de l'article 1^{er} de la loi du 25 mars 1915: Le Sieur Quenum dit Tovalou Quenum (Marc-Tovalou-Joseph), 11 juillet 1915," ("Decree No. 24217, President of the French Republic by the application of the First Article of the law of March 25, 1915: Mr. Quenum, known as Tovalou Quenum (Marc-Tovalou-Joseph), July 11, 1915,") *Bulletin des Lois de la République Française, Partie Supplémentaire, Tome XV* [*Bulletin of Laws of the French Republic, Supplemental Section, Volume XV*] (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1916), 147.

4. Lieutenant-Governor Fourn had used this tactic in the case of Jean Adjovi of the powerful and wealthy Adjovi family. Jean Adjovi served in the French military after having taken the title as *chef de famille* in 1913. After Adjovi obtained his French citizenship in 1918, Fourn reputedly forced him out of his position as *chef de quartier*, leader of one of the neighborhoods in Ouidah, a title that he had assumed when he became *chef de famille*. Patrick Manning and James S. Spiegler, "Kojo Tovalou-Houénou: Pan-African Patriot at Home and Abroad" (paper presented at the African Studies Faculty Seminar African Social History Workshop, Stanford University, 1991), 5. Adjovi originally began his application for citizenship in 1916 but suspended his application, notably before submitting his renunciation of personal status. He successfully reapplied in 1918, again with the formal renunciation of status still missing from his application. He only submitted that document on March 1, 1918 after having been awarded his citizenship rights in January 1918. The cable awarding citizenship in the file is dated January

not eligible to be a candidate in the succession dispute because the legal proceedings involved the “native” court system and Houénou could not hold French and indigenous status at the same time.⁵ But the citizenship laws were unclear on several levels. What did it mean for Africans to “enjoy the rights of French citizen” in practical terms? To obtain the “quality of citizen” was not a synonym for naturalization even though contemporary officials at the time, and scholars more recently, have used the terms interchangeably.⁶ And, the specific statute Houénou used to win his citizenship rights was unusual in that it did not formally state that individuals had to cede their personal or civil, often read as “native,” status.⁷ Throughout his life and career, Houénou purposefully self-identified as French, African, black, and *évolué* (“evolved,” referring to elite, educated Africans). Houénou had not chosen between being either African or a French citizen in the ways that Fourn claimed. He embodied much more.

I argue that the early citizenship laws relating specifically to West Africa, promulgated in the shadow of World War I, defined rights in indeterminate ways that ultimately threatened to broaden the meaning of “Frenchness.” This issue of citizenship related to questions of constitutional order for France and its empire, even as populations in different regions possessed or lacked certain rights. Houénou and others attempted to occupy new legal spaces as French politicians, jurists, and colonial

20, 1918. “Décret No. 27892 Président de la République Française par l’application du décret de 25 mai 1912: Adjovi, Jean-Akanwanou, 30 janvier 1918,” (“Decree No. 27892 President of the French of Republic by the application of the decree of May 25, 1912: Adjovi, Jean-Akanwanou, January 30, 1918,”) *Bulletin des Lois* [*Bulletin of Laws*] (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1918), 178.

5. Lieutenant-Gouverneur à Gouverneur-Général AOF au sujet de la succession de feu Joseph Tovalou Quénum (Lieutenant Governor to Governor General of French West Africa regarding the succession of the late Joseph Tovalou Quenum), February 26, 1927. Fourn referred to the Adjovi case in his letter to the Governor General, 8G 1, 14 MIOM 2146, ANOM.

6. Ruth Dickens, “Defining French Citizenship Policy in West Africa, 1895–1956,” (PhD diss., Emory University, 2001), 21. Laure Blevis, “Les avatars de la citoyenneté en Algérie coloniale ou les paradoxes d’une catégorisation,” [“The Avatars of Citizenship in Colonial Algeria or the Paradoxes of a Categorization”] *Droit et Société* 48 (2001): 567–69.

7. “Loi relative à l’acquisition de la qualité français par les sujets français, du 25 mars 1925,” (“Law relating to the acquisition of the quality French status by French subjects, from March 25, 1925,”) *Bulletin des Lois* [*Bulletin of Laws*] (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1915), 445–46. The declarations renouncing native status may have still been demanded from applicants using this law, as a matter of course. Fourn actually referred to the wrong statute when he claimed that Houénou forsook his indigenous status upon applying for French citizenship. Lieutenant-Gouverneur à Gouverneur-Général AOF (Lieutenant Governor to Governor General of French West Africa), April 1, 1927, 8G 1, 14 MIOM 2146, ANOM.

administrators tried to muddle and limit what it meant for Africans (as well as for Asians and Arabs) to be French.⁸ Houénou and other Africans who preceded and followed him, constructed this idea of “Frenchness” in a colonial context upon a history of legal pluralism in which metropolitan, customary, military, and, sometimes, Muslim laws coexisted.⁹

African colonial subjects and sometimes their counterparts in the Antilles (Caribbean) also recognized racial difference or “blackness” in defining what it meant to be French. Although French officials often rejected the explicit use of racial categories, they often hinted at race, in terms of culture and custom, and then used such language to deny that Africans, Antilleans, Asians, and Arabs could really be or become French. By evoking the ideals of French universalism alongside their own sense of racial difference, Africans ultimately turned core French revolutionary rhetoric on its head. The title of this article draws on such an instance from a speech Houénou made in Paris in 1924. In his lecture, Houénou argued that France should “aid in the evolution of populations,” echoing French policy makers who touted French superiority to justify colonial rule. But Houénou quickly noted the lack of actual freedom in the colonies. He then suggested that such hypocritical policies invited “the first stage of evolution toward revolution,” poetically rendered as “evolution revolution” in the English translation.¹⁰ Even though Houénou sought to emphasize the plight of mass populations in the colonies, his play on words also evoked the image of *évolués*. Elite, educated Africans often stood, among others, at the forefront of these historical and legal processes that questioned and tested the limits of “Frenchness” and citizenship during empire.¹¹

8. For a short insightful commentary on the “dialectical relationship” between control, contest, and disinterest on the part of colonial authorities, see Sally Merry Engle, “Colonial Law and Its Uncertainties,” *Law and History Review* 28 (2010): 1067–71.

9. On legal pluralism in colonial empire, see Lauren A. Benton, *Law and Colonial Cultures: Legal Regimes in World History, 1400–1900* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). On legal culture of empire in Africa specifically, see Kristin Mann and Richard Roberts, *Law in Colonial Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991); Martin Chanock, *Law, Custom, and Social Order: The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Margaret Jean Hay and Marcia Wright, *African Women and the Law: Historical Perspectives* (Boston: Boston University, African Studies Center, 1982).

10. Prince Kojo Tovalou-Houénou, *Le Problème de la Race Noire [The Problem of Negroes in French Colonial Africa]* (Paris: Editions de la Ligue Universelle pour la Défense de la Race Noire, 1924), 9, 19.

11. The historiography on black citizenship and French empire has expanded greatly in recent years. For recent overview and edited volumes see, Pascal Blanchard, ed. *La France Noire: Trois Siècles de Présence [Black France: Three Centuries of Presence]* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 2011); and Trica Danielle Keaton, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Tyler Edward Stovall, *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

Houénou was born in 1887 on the eve of formal French colonialism across much of West Africa, and he died in 1936, approximately two decades before a road map to decolonization emerged. Colonialism was the only reality that Houénou ever knew, even as he endeavored to change it. Sent for schooling in France from Dahomey when he was thirteen years of age, Houénou lived for several years in Bordeaux, where he received a missionary school education and pursued studies in law. During World War I, he enlisted and served in the medical corps at a Parisian military hospital.¹² Therefore, when Houénou successfully applied for French citizenship in 1915, he had lived more than half his life in France, and used his educational background coupled with his military status to support his case. In 1921, Houénou published an esoteric linguistic study before returning to Dahomey for several months for the first time in approximately two decades. Within a couple of years after his return to Paris in the early 1920s, he became a popular figure on the Parisian social and political scene, organizing soirées and founding a newspaper. The pinnacle of his notoriety was in 1924–25, when he traveled to the United States under the auspices of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and visited several United States cities with prominent African American communities including New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Detroit. Upon his return to Dahomey in 1925, when he tried unsuccessfully to assume the title of *chef de famille*, Houénou came into direct conflict with French colonial authorities as well as with family members and other prominent members of Porto-Novo society, itself a complex community of educated elites, Brazilian returnees, African immigrants, and Muslims. So began his decline.

Houénou’s contentious bid to be *chef de famille* brought to light bank fraud charges and the revelation that he had been disbarred, leading to his arrest in Lomé, Togo, and his imprisonment in Dahomey for several months. He tried to have the family inheritance case heard before the Appeals Court in Senegal in December 1927, although the court came to focus on the fraud charges against him. He then stayed in Senegal to help some Senegalese colleagues campaign in the local election.¹³ He

12. Emile Derlin Zinsou and Luc Zouménou, *Kojo Tovalou Houénou: Précurseur, 1887–1936: Pannégrisme et Modernité [Kojo Tovalou Houénou: Precursor, 1887–1936: Pan-Africanism and Modernity]* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2004), 57, 65–66.

13. “Marc Tovalou Quénum dit Kodjo Tovalou Houénou,” Extrait des Minutes du Greffe de la Cour d’Appel de l’Afrique Occidentale Française (“Marc Tovalou Quénum, known as Kodjo Tovalou Houénou,” Excerpt of the Minutes of the Clerk’s Office of the Appeals Court of French West Africa”), December 14, 1927, 8G 1, 14 MIOM 2146, (ANOM). “Tovalou,” Direction des Affaires Politiques, 1er Bureau (“Tovalou,” Head of Political Affairs, First Office”), Paris, May 12, 1928, 8G 1, 14 MIOM 2146, ANOM.

returned to France in 1928, but scandals dogged him in the last years of his life. He mostly stayed out of the public eye in France until 1932, when his marriage to a black American singer brought more accusations of fraud from a former lover, resulting in more jail time.¹⁴ Houénou still was able to travel to West Africa with his new wife in 1933 to settle some business dealings. Never able to shake the legal problems that began in Dahomey, he soon tangled with his rivals there, and after relocating to Senegal in an attempt to practice law, he faced new charges and found himself in a Senegalese prison, where he died in 1936.¹⁵

Approximately a decade before his death during the height of his public visibility in the mid-1920s, Houénou, who had always proclaimed his loyalty to France, had proposed a “home rule” model that would have given France’s colonies representation in the French government as an integral part of the French nation. Many have focused on the fact that he contrasted “complete assimilation [*assimilation intégrale*]” with “full autonomy [*autonomie absolue*],” read as “independence.” But his description of autonomy provided for elected African representatives serving in the metropole. Ten years after he died, what he had suggested as “home rule” and had imagined as “one France indivisible,” theoretically took some shape in the form of the French Union.¹⁶

Houénou’s remarkable biography, with his dramatic rise and fall, intersects with the three main parts of this article on legal debates over African

14. “Un prince dahoméen épouse à Paris une Américaine,” (“A Dahomean Prince marries an American in Paris”) *Dépêche coloniale*, October 9, 1932. Clipping in 8G 1, 14 MIOM 2146, ANOM. “Au sujet Tovalou,” Le Ministre des Colonies à M. le Gouverneur de l’AOF (“Regarding Tovalou,” Minister of Colonies to Governor of French West Africa), January 17, 1933.

15. The most complete biography of Houénou’s life is Zinsou and Zouménou, *Kojo Tovalou Houénou*. The co-authored unpublished paper by Patrick Manning and James Spiegler also provides a thorough account of Houénou’s life as a descendant of the African landowning elite in Dahomey. Manning and Spiegler, “Kojo Tovalou–Houénou: Pan-African Patriot at Home and Abroad,” 1–30. Also see Spiegler, “Aspects of Nationalist Thought Among French-Speaking West Africans, 1921–1939,” (PhD diss., Oxford University, 1968), 50–80.

16. Tovalou–Houénou, *Le Problème*, 11–12. Houénou’s formulation was confusing as it seemed, on the one hand, to contrast assimilation, “home rule,” and autonomy but, on the other, presented the concepts as variations on a theme. Spiegler, “Aspects of Nationalist Thought,” 68–70. Similar debates occurred around the French Union. Frederick Cooper, “From Imperial Inclusion to Republican Exclusion? France’s Ambiguous Postwar Trajectory,” in *Frenchness and the African Diaspora: Identity and Uprising in Contemporary France*, ed. Charles Tshimanga, Didier Gondola, and Peter J. Bloom (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2009), 91–119. The quote about “one France indivisible” was said to come from a speech during the 1928 electoral campaign in Senegal. Zinsou and Zouménou, *Kojo Tovalou Houénou*, 202.

rights to French citizenship. First, I examine key nineteenth and twentieth century legislation relating to France’s colonies in general and to West Africa in particular. Most scholars concentrate on the two unique situations from Senegal and Algeria that led to very different realities on the ground. Residents in the Four Communes of Senegal (Gorée, Saint-Louis, Rufisque, and Dakar), recognized between 1848 and 1887, had political voting rights but retained their Muslim civil status, whereas in Algeria, indigenous Muslims were deemed French nationals without any citizenship rights. I focus on the political implications of an admittedly small group of early successful twentieth century applications for French citizenship from men who mostly, like Houénou, hailed from Dahomey.¹⁷ The second section of the article examines Houénou’s writings, including his obscure 1921 linguistic study, as part of a larger body of writing by Dahomey activists, dedicated to legal questions and political rights. But the citizenship laws were ambivalent. Therefore, rather than see these legal debates as part of an “empire of law,”¹⁸ this article considers how West Africans participated in these discussions as part of the broader intellectual currents moving around a “Black Atlantic,” or more specifically, “Black Paris.”¹⁹ Finally, I examine Houénou’s activities as a form of “legal posturing.”

17. The dissertation by Ruth Dickens refers to several elite Dahomeans and describes the community in Porto-Novo but is a more general study of citizenship throughout the twentieth century. Dickens, “Defining French Citizenship.” The comprehensive article by Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch on African accession to French citizenship provides background on the period before World War II but mostly focuses on the period after 1935 and on *originaires* from Senegal. Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, “Nationalité et citoyenneté en Afrique occidentale française: Originaires et citoyens dans le Sénégal colonial,” [“Nationality and Citizenship in French West Africa: Native Residents and Citizens in Colonial Senegal”] *Journal of African History* 42 (2001): 285–305.

18. The phrase “empire of law” comes from Emmanuelle Saada, “The Empire of Law: Dignity, Prestige, and Domination in the ‘Colonial Situation,’” *French Politics, Culture, and Society* 20 (2002): 98–120. For a critical view on the concept of “colonial law,” see Gregory Mann, “What Was the *Indigénat*? The ‘Empire of Law’ in French West Africa,” *Journal of African History* 50 (2009): 331–53.

19. The phrase “Black Atlantic” so associated with Paul Gilroy’s important work, is used here as a shorthand. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). The phrase “Black Atlantic” was originally used by the Africanist art historian Robert Farris Thompson as part of his definition of a “black Atlantic visual tradition.” In Thompson’s formulation of the Atlantic world, African practices and ideologies play an integral role. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-Americans Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage, 1984), xiv. By contrast, Gilroy’s conceptualization of the Atlantic world largely omits Africa. Among other critiques of Gilroy, see examples from a special issue of *Research in African Literatures*. Simon Gakandi, “Introduction: Africa, Diaspora, and the Discourse of Modernity,” *Research in African Literatures* 27 (1996): 1–6; Joan Dayan, “Paul Gilroy’s Slaves, Ships, and Routes: The Middle Passage as Metaphor,” *Research in African Literatures* 27

Lauren Benton uses this term, mostly for an earlier period of empire, to describe the legal rituals that merchants, administrators, pirates, and subjects performed to reinforce ties to a distant sovereign.²⁰ When Houénou represented himself as a French citizen in legal disputes during and after his claim to the title of *chef de famille* in 1925, he consistently tried to bypass the local colonial authorities for metropolitan officials in Paris. His attempts to become a defense lawyer in Cotonou or a delegate on the Superior Council of the Colonies also exposed the boundaries of what African French citizens could do, and had the potential to expand those limits. In 1925, at the beginning of his decline, he was attempting what was legally so elusive and at the heart of his activism: to be fully African and fully French at the same time.

Law and the Subject of the Citizen in French Colonial West Africa

Napoleon's 1803 Civil Code did not appear to be explicitly about the colonies, although it was promulgated as France was on the verge of losing its most prized colonial possession of Saint-Domingue. The new Civil Code, often referred to as the Napoleonic Code, was revolutionary on many levels, not the least for establishing a uniform set of laws and for influencing the legal system of nations all over the world.²¹ It also introduced a separation between civil and political rights that had a profound effect on how colonial populations would be granted citizenship in the twentieth

(1996): 7–14; Ntongela Masilela, "The 'Black Atlantic' And African Modernity in South Africa," *Research in African Literatures* 27 (1996): 88–96. Also see, Laura Chrisman, "Rethinking Black Atlanticism," *Black Scholar* 30 (2000): 12–17; Charles Piot, "Atlantic Aporias: Africa and Gilroy's Black Atlantic," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100 (2001): 155–70; and Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "Rewriting the African Diaspora: Beyond the Black Atlantic," *African Affairs* 104 (2005): 35–68. The classic works on Black Paris, specifically, include Michel Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840–1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); and Tyler Edward Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996). More recently, see Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

20. Lauren A. Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For an example of these types of rituals in South Asia during British colonial rule, see Mitra Sharafi, "The Marital Patchwork of Colonial South Asia: Forum Shopping from Britain to Baroda," *Law and History Review* 28 (2010): 979–1009.

21. For a recent thorough examination of shifts in legal meanings of citizenship and territory, see Miranda Frances Spieler, *Empire and Underworld: Captivity in French Guiana* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

century. During the debates over the Code, Napoleon and other jurists and politicians actually were worried about the status of French people abroad or about other Europeans living in France. Therefore, the Napoleonic Code marked a two-pronged shift that, first, tied “Frenchness” to birth to a French father (*jus sanguinis*) rather than to birth and residence on French soil (*jus soli*).²² Second, it separated civil status (in terms of inheritance or marriage, for example) from “quality of citizen” (*qualité de citoyen*), which came to be seen as political rights, such as voting, which were determined by constitutional law. Patrick Weil’s foundational study of French nationality highlights the ambiguities of the new concept of nationality during the nineteenth century, as laws shifted from defining “Frenchness” by blood in the 1803 Napoleonic Code, to the 1889 nationality law that reaffirmed citizenship based on birth on French soil. A new nationality law in 1927 appeared to open up the process of naturalization in new ways, but most African colonial subjects were explicitly excluded.²³

The hard-fought battle for access to citizenship by colonial subjects was neither a triumphalist story of a “color blind” France, nor a simple confirmation of French fears and racism toward colonial populations.²⁴ Lauren Benton’s work demonstrates that empires have long operated with plural legal orders that legitimized various legal claims. Africanist scholars of law and empire have also recognized what Richard Roberts has referred

22. On citizenship based on place of birth (*jus soli*) versus blood descent (*jus sanguinis*) in British colonial Africa, see Christopher J. Lee, “*Jus Soli* and *Jus Sanguinis* in the Colonies: The Interwar Politics of Race, Culture, and Multiracial Legal Status in British Africa,” *Law and History Review* 29 (2011): 497–522.

23. On the debates over the Civil Code, see Patrick Weil (Catherine Porter, trans.), *How to Be French: Nationality in the Making since 1789*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 19–29. Other key texts on French citizenship and immigration include Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Peter Sahlins, *Unnaturally French: Foreign Citizens in the Old Regime and After* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 2004). The final article of the 1927 law stated that it applied to Guadeloupe, Martinique, Reunion, and Algeria, except for most indigenous Algerians. *Loi sur la nationalité suivie des décrets et instructions relatifs à l’application de la loi du 10 août 1927* [Nationality law followed by the decrees and instructions related to the application of the law of August 10, 1927] (Paris: Imprimerie Berger–Levrault, 1927), 8.

24. For general overviews on race in France, see Sue Peabody and Tyler Edward Stovall, *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); and Herrick Chapman and Laura L. Frader, eds., *Race in France: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Politics of Difference* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004). More specific case studies also try to move beyond triumphalist or accusatory narratives. For example, see Richard Fogarty, *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914–1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); and Jennifer Anne Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis: The Urban Grounds of Anti-imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010).

to as a “hybrid” judicial system, with multiple layers of courts, authorities, and codes that played out in various and, sometimes, unintentional ways.²⁵ That same legal pluralism also revealed the dynamic process of negotiation between colony and metropole, and facilitated debate among subjects and administrators, among women and men, among generations within communities, and across colonial spaces, or “transcolonially.”²⁶

Cathérine Coquéry-Vidrovitch and Mamadou Diouf emphasize different consequences shaped by legal pluralism in the Four Communes of Senegal in West Africa, in particular. Gorée and Saint-Louis first sent representatives to the National Assembly in 1848, but both small islands off the Senegalese mainland were only officially recognized as French communes in 1872. The same rights were extended to Rufisque and Dakar in 1887. However, the Four Communes in Senegal were still not quite fully French. Coquéry-Vidrovitch argues that the practice of awarding citizenship (political rights) rather than nationality (political rights and civil status) to Africans in the Four Communes meant that Africans in other colonies also would only have the possibility of obtaining citizenship rights rather than French nationality through naturalization. Mamadou Diouf highlights the social and cultural innovation in the Four Communes. He describes the resulting social landscape as one where “political rights. . .express[ed] an identity connected with a special status that safeguard[ed] a unique civility.”²⁷

During the nineteenth century, Muslim *originaires* (the term for residents of the Four Communes in Senegal) argued for their unique civil standing by citing the Algerian example in which indigenous Algerians retained their Muslim status. However, the 1865 *Sénatus-consulte* actually made indigenous Algerians into French nationals without citizenship rights, and indigenous Algerians had to renounce their Muslim status to obtain political rights to vote.²⁸ Following protest, petition, and appeals

25. Richard Roberts, “The Case of Faama Mademba Sy and the Ambiguities of Legal Jurisdiction in Colonial French Sudan,” in *Law in Colonial Africa*, ed. Kristin Mann and Richard Roberts (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991), 187.

26. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, “Introduction: Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally,” in *Minor Transnationalism*, ed. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 1–23.

27. Coquéry-Vidrovitch, “Nationalité et citoyenneté,” 285–305; and Mamadou Diouf, “The French Colonial Policy of Assimilation and the Civility of the Originaires of the Four Communes (Senegal): A Nineteenth Century Globalization Project,” *Development and Change* 29 (1998): 685.

28. “No. 13504 – Sénatus-Consulte sur l’état des personnes et la naturalization en Algérie, 14 juillet 1865,” (“No. 13504 – Decree of the Senate regarding personal status and naturalization in Algeria, July 14, 1875” *Bulletin des Lois [Bulletin of Laws]* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1865), 177–78. For a classic study of colonial Algeria, see Charles Robert

dating from the middle of the nineteenth century through World War I, Muslim residents of the Four Communes managed to retain the status of citizen with local voting rights and reserve the right to resolve civil cases in Muslim courts.²⁹ It was only in the era of World War I that a series of laws known as the “Blaise Diagne laws of 1916,” named after the Senegalese deputy who introduced them, reaffirmed the citizenship of all *originaires* and their descendants. The 1916 declaration of citizenship in the Four Communes was made explicitly in relation to the obligation to military service under French law. The link between citizenship and military service had a long history in France and elsewhere.³⁰ Therefore, although the Four Communes were a unique context in French colonial West Africa, they shared the histories of debate, protest, and pluralism with other sites of empire.

In the aftermath of World War I, in the 1920s, as demands for more rights multiplied from West and North Africa, and even Indian Ocean islands, French politicians and jurists were forced to spell out French policies on accession to citizenship for colonial populations.³¹ Alice Conklin

Ageron, *Les Algériens Musulmans et la France (1871–1919)* [*Algerian Muslims and France*], 2 vols. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968). Also see Bleviss, “Avatars de la citoyenneté,” 557–80.

29. Diouf, “French Colonial Policy of Assimilation,” 686–93. The decree of 1870, named for French Jewish legislator Adolphe Cremieux, granted Jewish Algerians French nationality.

30. “Loi No. 10286 étendant aux descendants des originaires des communes de plein exercice du Sénégal les dispositions de la loi militaire du 19 octobre 1916,” (“Law No. 10286 extending to descendants of native residents of the fully-fledged communes of Senegal the provision of the military law of October 19, 1916”) *Bulletin des Lois* [*Bulletin of Laws*] (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1916), 1650. Military duty was integral to the initial decree of mass emancipation in Saint-Domingue during the Revolution in 1793. But unlike the 1916 law on the *originaires*, emancipation was a “reward” for past military service to the French. See Lorelle D. Semley, “To Live and Die Free and French: Toussaint Louverture’s 1801 Constitution and the Original Challenge of Black Citizenship,” *Radical History Review* 115 (2013): 71. This type of reasoning was also at the heart of the 1918 citizenship law for veterans from French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa discussed in the pages that follow. Generally on military service and French citizenship see, Jennifer Ngairé Heuer, *The Family and the Nation: Gender and Citizenship in Revolutionary France, 1789–1803* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005). On the United States Civil War, see Stephanie McCurry, “War, Gender, and Emancipation in the Civil War South,” in *Lincoln’s Proclamation: Emancipation Reconsidered*, eds. William A. Blair and Karen Fisher Younger (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 121–50.

31. For example, on Algeria, see “Avis de M. Berthélemy, doyen de la faculté du droit sur la question de la représentation des indigènes de l’Algérie au parlement français,” “Compte rendu de la séance du 30 mai 1923,” Commission Interministérielle des Affaires Musulmanes, Annexe à la séance du 22 février 1923 (“Opinion of M. Barthélemy, Dean of the law faculty on the question of the representation of native Algerians in the French

notes that the French response was cloaked in the language of reactionary, racialized ideologies of difference, pointing out that at the same time the 1927 nationality law was being devised, legal experts in the Superior Council of the Colonies were reporting on the incompatibility of Africans to French culture, civilization, and thereby citizenship.³² The 1927 nationality law, often seen as a response to postwar fears of depopulation with its provisions on naturalization, was specifically designed to incorporate European immigrants more quickly into the nation. Such debates over rights among colonial populations in North and West Africa also resonated in Africa's Asian colonies. Emmanuelle Saada's work on the status of mixed-race children in Indochina (Vietnam) reveals a code promulgated in 1928 that first deployed the term "race" to discuss citizenship; it would inspire similar codes across the French empire in subsequent years.³³ Despite the rhetoric of universalism, French laws on citizenship did deliberate on and incorporate notions of difference, and even race, across the empire.

At the same time, West African men such as Houénou, who resided outside of the Four Communes, confronted an alternative, narrower path to citizenship for themselves and, sometimes, their families, although it was tied to familiar themes of citizenship such as loyalty, "civilization," and military service. Most other French colonial subjects in other parts of Africa and in Asia fell under similarly worded statutes.³⁴ Although West Africans, like others in most of the rest of the colonial world, had to

parliament," "Report of the session of May 20, 1923," Interministerial Commission on Muslim Affairs, Supplement to the session of February 22, 1923"). On the Indian Ocean, see "Un Important Jugement: Les Saint-Mairiens ne sont pas indigènes," ["An Important Judgment: Saint-Mairians are not natives"] *La Dépêche coloniale*, October 10, 1923. Clipping in 17G 47 verso 17, Archives Nationales du Senegal (National Archives of Senegal) (hereafter ANS).

32. Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 67–68, 165, 174–211.

33. Emmanuelle Saada (Arthur Goldhammer, trans.), *Empire's Children: Race, Filiation, and Citizenship in the French Colonies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

34. For example, the much earlier decrees for places such as Madagascar, Vietnam, and Tunisia, officially a protectorate, were similar, but, even then, the term "naturalization" was misused. "Décret No. 212 fixant les conditions d'accèsion des indigènes de Madagascar aux droits de citoyen français, le 3 mars 1909," ("Decret No. 212 setting the conditions of accession to the rights of French citizenship by natives of Madagascar, March 3, 1909") *Bulletin de Lois* [*Bulletin of Laws*] (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1909), 402–3. "Décret No. 10806 relatif à la naturalisation des Annamites, 25 mai 1881," ("Decree No. 10806 relative to the naturalization of Annamites (Vietnamese), May 25, 1881") *Bulletin des Lois* [*Bulletin of Laws*] (Paris, 1881), 54–56. "Rapport et Décret No. 19504 relatif à la naturalisation en Tunisie, le 29 juillet 1887," ("Report and Decree No.

renounce their civil status, the difference between other West Africans and the *originaires* of the Four Communes seemed stark, because *originaires* technically could (although only a fraction did) vote for a representative in the National Assembly. Without something tangible such as voting rights, the privileges of citizenship rights remained less clear. To obtain citizenship brought prestige and potential access to different courts and job opportunities, but it could also invite animus from local colonial authorities.³⁵ Even though Houénou argued that he suffered abuse under the rule of law in the colonies, citizenship status was supposed to protect him from arbitrary jailing and fines under a regime of administrative sanctions reserved for “natives” and known as the *indigénat*.³⁶ Above all, the renunciation of civil status still did not mean that Africans were naturalized as French nationals, because the Four Communes and Algeria served as different models for offering some rights while denying full naturalization.³⁷

Still, the statutes promulgated on March 25, 1912; May 25, 1915; and January 14, 1918 were not exactly the same, garnering different types and numbers of successful applicants. The numbers were small, and they fluctuated, but in 1923—coincidentally the same year individual citizenship decrees moved from the supplement of *Bulletin des Lois* to the *Journal Officiel de la République Française*—a series of strikes rocked Dahomey, and, in general, overall numbers declined in the years that followed. A few men, and sometimes their families, from Dahomey and other parts of West and West Central (Equatorial) Africa did accede to citizenship rights through the mid-1920s to the early 1930s, but never at the annual rate of 1920, when twenty men from West and Equatorial Africa obtained their citizenship, eleven of them from Dahomey. After several years in the low double digits in the early 1920s, in 1924, only five men from West and Equatorial Africa acceded to citizenship rights, and only one of them was from Dahomey.³⁸ Then in 1930, a project to create a

19504 relative to naturalization in Tunisia, July 29, 1887”) *Bulletin des Lois* [*Bulletin of Laws*] (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1887), 1132–33.

35. Dickens, “Defining French Citizenship,” 132–34.

36. Manning and Spiegler, “Kojo Tovalou-Houenou: Pan-African Patriot,” 23. Mann, “What Was the Indigénat?,” 331–53. Mann argues that the infamous and inscrutable *indigénat* undermined the concept of rule of law in the colonies even as it was at the core of the exercise of power by local French officials or *commandants*.

37. Coquery-Vidrovitch, “Nationalité et citoyenneté,” 297; Blevis, “Avatars de la citoyenneté,” 567.

38. “Rapport au Garde des Sceaux, Ministère de la Justice, Naturalisations aux Colonies et dans les Pays de Protectorat,” (“Report to Attorney General, Ministry of Justice, Naturalizations in the Colonies and in Protectorate Countries” *Journal Officiel de la République française, Lois et décrets* [*Official Journal of the French Republic, Laws and Decrees*] (hereafter *JORF*), April 25, 1921, 5429. gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale

special statute for elite Africans was abandoned by the Governor General of French West Africa. Its defeat definitively signaled that the French colonial administration formally rejected the idea of codifying a special status for elite Africans, between that of subject and those with “quality of French citizen.” Later laws that revised accession to citizenship in 1932 and 1937 became more stringent, requiring that entire families meet certain standards of “education, lifestyle, and social habits.”³⁹ Although the absolute and average numbers for the period between 1936 and 1949 are higher at 257, or approximately seventeen a year, most of those occurred during key moments during the socialist government in the mid-1930s and after World War II.⁴⁰

Therefore, in the initial “heyday” of African accession to French citizenship between 1912 and 1923, I found decrees for 120 men, women, and children in a variety of colonies in West and West Central Africa in coastal

de France, October 20, 2013. “Rapport au Garde des Sceaux, Ministère de la Justice, Acquisition de la nationalité française,” (“Report to the Attorney General, Ministry of Justice, Acquisition of French Nationality”) *JORF*, May 7, 1925, 4377. For 1921 and 1922, there were 12 and 16 successful applicants respectively. “Rapport au Garde des Sceaux,” (“Report to the Attorney General”) *JORF*, June 3, 1922, 5816. “Rapport au Garde des Sceaux,” (“Report to the Attorney General”) *JORF*, June 15, 1923, 5649. gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France (National Library of France), October 9, 2013.

39. “Le Gouverneur Général de l’AOF à M. le Ministère des Colonies au sujet d’un statut des indigènes d’élite,” (“Governor General of French West Africa to Minister of Colonies regarding a statute for elite natives”) 17G 47 versement 17, ANS. “Accession des indigènes de l’Afrique occidentale française aux droits de citoyen français,” Ministère des Colonies, (“Accession to French rights of citizenship by natives of French West Africa,” Colonial Ministry”) *JORF*, August 25, 1932, 9291–92. gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France (National Library of France), October 9, 2013. Coquéry-Vidrovitch, “Nationalité et citoyenneté,” 294–95.

40. Coquéry-Vidrovitch, “Nationalité et citoyenneté,” 294–99. Coquéry-Vidrovitch counts naturalizations and accessions together for this period; naturalizations often referred to Europeans or others who were not African, who acquired French nationality while in French West Africa. For Dahomey specifically, for the late 1920s through the early 1950s, I did find approximately 150 applications for citizenship, mostly using the 1932 and 1937 statutes, but the outcomes for many case files were unclear. Many applications were “deferred” (*ajournement*) because they were “unlikely to be successful” (*pas susceptible d’être accueillie*). It is impossible to know if these were all of the applications submitted, given the incomplete nature of many of the files. However, if fifty-six Dahomeans plus nineteen women and children acceded to citizenship over the course of only 9 years between 1914 and 1923, the number of applications and successful decrees seems to have declined greatly by the 1930s and 1940s, given that more people would have had access to education, resources, and information about citizenship laws over time. “Naturalisations, Accessions, Dossiers Individuels,” (“Naturalizations, Accessions, and Individual Files”) 1F, especially 1F 54, Archives Nationales du Bénin (National Archives of Benin) (hereafter ANB).

cities as well as interior posts (Table 1).⁴¹ Although only a minuscule fraction of a percent of the population of France’s African colonies, the range of successful applicants (the number of applications denied is unknown), suggests that ideas about citizenship already had spread beyond the coast, and also among women, and, potentially, children. Houénou’s call for general citizenship for Africans was far too bold for its time, but French politicians and administrators who claimed that the process of awarding French citizenship rights to Africans was becoming too common and widespread overstated the situation. Still, the idea of citizenship and rights was not contained in the ways that the French colonial administration or even other African elites thought.

Given the limited citizenship rights cases and the inability to know the full number of potentially failed applications, numbers alone cannot tell the full story. What did the statutes and successful applications convey about assumptions and beliefs? For example, more than 60% of the successful applications occurred under the 1912 decree which candidates used for the whole period from 1914 to 1923. The decree based the award of citizenship to colonial subjects, specifically of French West Africa, on tripartite rules of:

1. loyalty and service to the French colonial administration
2. the ability to read and write French
3. financial stability and good character

Colonial intermediaries such as interpreters, telegraph workers, and agents, such men and their families, especially from Dahomey, dominated among successful applicants throughout this period. Although the decree initially only pertained to individuals (unlike the 1918 one) several women and children were listed as “follow[ing] the condition” of the husband or father. The generally broad nature of the statute may explain its popularity until it was revised in 1932. Although most successful applicants were born or resided in coastal cities, a small number were born in or still lived in the interior, suggesting that knowledge of the access to citizenship spread through these networks of mobile Africans linked to the colonial administration.

Although Houénou was well-educated, he failed to obtain citizenship under the 1912 decree because as a student of law and medicine living

41. Raymond Buell counted eighty-eight applications for the period between 1914 and 1925, with fourteen former soldiers among them. My numbers are comparable at ninety, if the thirty named wives and children that Buell apparently did not count are removed. Of the 120 decrees I found, fifteen concerned former soldiers who were specifically *tirailleurs sénégalais* (infantry recruits from West and Central Africa), although there were a few others who were in the artillery or other regiments. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize*, 167.

in Bordeaux, he had not demonstrated loyal service to French colonial interests.⁴² He succeeded using the 1915 law that read as though it was written with someone like him in mind, which, in fact, it was. The piece of legislation in 1915 emerged from complaints by the growing number of students and soldiers living in France and elsewhere in the French empire who could not obtain French citizenship because the decrees all assumed that applicants resided in their home country. When Houénou's close friend and associate Ouanilo Behanzin found out that he could not practice law without proof of citizenship, both men found that were ineligible for citizenship under the 1912 decree. Presaging how he would address correspondence in later years, Houénou contacted a senator from Guadeloupe and the Ministers of Colonies and Justice to plead his case. The law passed, because it was timely and supported by colonial authorities in the metropolis who originally also looked favorably on well-educated elite Africans such as Houénou.⁴³

The 1915 law, which was employed to obtain citizenship slightly less often than the 1918 decree (twenty versus twenty-five times), differed from both the 1912 and 1918 decrees on several accounts. First, it was a law debated in the Assembly and the Senate rather than a decree issued by the president. Second, unlike the 1912 decree that had been written only for subjects of French West Africa, the 1915 law could be taken advantage of by those who were not originally from Algeria, Tunisia, or Morocco who, like Houénou, lived in France or any country that was not their place of origin. Therefore, colonial subjects from Equatorial Africa as well as from East Africa or South East Asia could make use of the statute. One of the most notable differences between the successful applicants using the 1915 law versus the those using the 1912 or 1918 decrees was the dominance of those from other colonial territories in French West Africa outside of Senegal and Dahomey, and especially the presence of West Central (Equatorial) Africans. There were also fewer teachers and interpreters. Given the residence requirement outside one's country of origin, Africans with more mobile positions and careers, such as members of the expeditionary corps, often sought citizenship under this statute. Finally, the law did not explicitly state that applicants had to renounce their personal or civil status and it did not refer to previous statutes requiring such an act. It also included an unusual provision for those who had married a French woman and resided with her for one year.

42. Lieutenant-Gouverneur du Dahomey à M. le Gouverneur-Général de l'AOF au sujet des demandes de naturalisation (Lieutenant Governor of Dahomey to Governor General of French West Africa regarding demands for naturalization), October 18, 1913, 23G 29, ANS.

43. Dickens, "Defining French Citizenship," 162–71.

Table 1. Citizenship Decrees for French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa, 1914–23.

Place of Birth Colony/ Territory	Citizenship Based on 1912 Decree	Citizenship Based on 1915 Decree	Citizenship Based on 1918 Decree	Total
Congo Français	1	6	0	7
(women)		(1)		
(children)		(1)		
Côte d’Ivoire	3	0	0	3
(women)				
(children)				
Dahomey	53	3	0	56
(women)	(6)			
(children)	(13)			
Gabon	0	5	0	5
(women)		(2)		
(children)				
Guinée Français	2	3	3	8
(women)		(1)	(1)	
(children)			(1)	
Haut-Sénégal-Niger ^a	2	2	8	12
(women)			(2)	
(children)			(1)	
Sénégal	9	1	8	18
(women)			(3)	
(children)			(2)	
Soudan Français	3	0	4	7
(women)			(2)	
(children)				
Other Locations	2 (Lagos-w)	0	2 (Casablanca-c)	4
w = women,	(Gold Coast)		(Madagascar-c)	
c = child				
Total	75	20	25	120
(women)	(8)	(3)	(8)	(19)
(children)	(13)	(2)	(6)	(21)

Source: Chart based on author review of *Bulletin des Lois de la République Française, Partie Supplémentaire* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale), 1914–1923.

^aGiven that a fair number of successful candidates resided or worked in a location that was not their place of birth, I identified applicants by where they were born. On accession decrees, the place of birth for several applicants was listed as “Haut-Sénégal-Niger” even after Haute-Volta (Burkina Faso) was separated out in 1919 and Haut-Sénégal et Niger took the name “Soudan Français (Mali)” officially after January 1, 1921.

However, up until 1927, French women followed the nationality of their husbands, and racial intermarriage, especially with white French women, was not encouraged in France or the colonies at any time, even though it was occurring more visibly in France by the interwar period.⁴⁴ In the end, perhaps the most striking aspect of the 1915 law was that it seemed to extend portable citizenship rights to successful applicants who were not necessarily tied to a specific colony.

If the 1912 decree seemed tailor made for intermediaries and the 1915 law seemed tailor made for expatriates, the 1918 decree explicitly set out to appeal to former World War I soldiers. The 1918 statute began by stating that any former soldier and his family from French West Africa or French Equatorial Africa could never be subjected to administrative sanctions under the *indigénat*, as if that was the main purpose of the statute. Secondly, it listed how applicants, but only those who had been highly decorated soldiers, could assemble a file for submission for this “exceptional” consideration. The requirements did appear more rigorous, with more emphasis on morality and evidence of a past without any anticolonial activity. Because only decorated soldiers could use the 1918 statute to obtain citizenship, many former soldiers from Dahomey continued to use the 1912 decree, even after 1918, to accede to citizenship rights. Therefore, taken together, the three different statutes demonstrated how French authorities imagined that urban elites, colonial employees, and soldiers were ideal candidates for citizenship. However, some Africans off the beaten track, in interior locales or in French Equatorial Africa, also sought out these rights for themselves and their families, believing that they, too, had a right to such privileges.

Given that these extremely low rates of citizenship continued through the 1920s, French officials’ concerns that African citizenship had exceeded the intended “limit to an elite access” seem unfounded. French authorities often complained about those presenting themselves as *évolués* claiming that some of these Africans were not “assimilated” enough, as if some

44. On French women’s civil status, see Elisa Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race: Immigration, and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 127–30. On the little-known ban on racial intermarriage in early nineteenth century France, see Jennifer Heuer, “The One-Drop Rule in Reverse? Interracial Marriages in Napoleonic and Restoration France,” *Law and History Review* 27 (2009): 515–48. On the shift from approval to condemnation of what Owen White calls “temporary marriages” between French men and African women often described in regions of West Africa as *mariage à la mode de pays* (country-style marriages), see Owen White, *Children of the French Empire: Miscegenation and Colonial Society in French West Africa, 1895–1960* (Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1999), 17–26. Also on interracial marriages, see Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race*, 147–50; and in Paris, in particular, see Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis*, 37–75.

maintained too many “African” ways. However, the term “assimilated” seemed to be a coded word for “loyal” or “submissive.”⁴⁵ Throughout the history of empires, when elites cultivated to serve a colonial state demanded too much, authorities responded by withholding privileges, by buttressing opponents to elites, or by enforcing more violent measures.⁴⁶

But focusing on elites such as Houénou or his compatriots in Dahomey, or signaling alarm over several hundred citizens among several million subjects, did not capture the real implications behind this very small group of men, women, and children across West and West Central Africa who had come to see themselves as French citizens. Some Africans recognized that one could become French in a variety of ways relating to work, service, marriage, or filiation, even if the laws varied and the process often depended on the personal good will of colonial administrators on the ground. Also how did neighbors, friends, local leaders, and kin recognize the French citizenship status of the few among them? In the end, Africans were learning about the meanings of French citizenship from these new citizens who were perhaps more diverse than the vocal elites whom French administrators saw as so dangerous. Similarly, when Houénou came to focus on citizenship as a theme in his own politics, it was the citizens and subjects of Dahomey who inspired him. His activist path was neither evident from his earliest writings nor sketched out for him through contacts in Paris or black intellectuals from the Americas. It was not the people or the politics of the Latin Quarter in Paris or of Harlem in New York that first moved Houénou; he arrived at his political vision via the colonial capital of Porto Novo in Dahomey.

From Involution to Revolution and the Idea of Black Citizenship

If Houénou is famous for anything, it is for being thrown out of a bar in the Montmartre neighborhood of Paris in 1923 after an American couple refused to sit near him.⁴⁷ His tour of the United States under the auspices of the Marcus Garvey’s UNIA a year later also is a well-known feature of

45. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize*, 166–68.

46. For an overview of empires across history, including the role of elites, see Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). Also, see Engle, “Colonial Law,” 1067–71.

47. J. Ayodele Langley, *Pan-Africanism and Nationalism in West Africa, 1900–1945: A Study in Ideology and Social Classes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 75; Manning and Spiegler, “Tovalou-Houénou: Pan-African,” 8; Christopher L. Miller, *Nationalists and Nomads: Essays on Francophone African Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of

his biography. Highlighting these aspects of Houénou's life overemphasizes the influence on him of American politics born of the Harlem Renaissance. His overtly political writings, which all date from the period after his 1921 visit to Dahomey, reveal a primary concern with the idea of citizenship for Africans across the continent. Although there were some African intellectuals, such as Blaise Diagne who fought for rights for the residents of the Four Communes of Senegal, or other activists and journalists in Dahomey who argued for greater access to citizenship for elites, few could have imagined whole communities of Africans across the continent voting for representatives in the National Assembly. Houénou also promoted and celebrated African cultural practices as an integral part of French political and civil rights. He was not only interested in plural legal orders but also in new ways of thinking about who was French. He would have wanted the American couple in that bar in Montmartre in 1923 to recognize that he was not only a black man but also a French man.

It is fitting that Houénou's first, limited foray into the public eye in 1921 occurred through an esoteric linguistic study entitled *L'Involution des métamorphoses et des métempsychoses de l'univers* [Involution of Metamorphoses and Metempsychosis of the Universe] that says very little about Africa or his ideas about citizenship. Instead, the text, which should be considered in its own intellectual light, shows his thorough engagement with a variety of themes including structural linguistics, humanism, republicanism, religion, and mysticism. Many scholars examine *Involution* in relation to Houénou's other works, deeming it fairly apolitical or as an "analogy" or "screen" for a more political statement against racial hierarchy in Europe.⁴⁸ Taking a middle ground toward *Involution* can provide the reader with insight into Houénou's politics without dismissing or overextending the meanings behind the text. As a start, Houénou defined his key term "involution" as a process of bringing "the irreducible individualities of the evolutionary system back to homogeneity, to their original identity [sameness]. . . to God, the infinite source who serves as their original and creative involution."⁴⁹ Literary theorist Christopher Miller views the study as a "convoluted allegory concerned with African participation

Chicago Press, 1998), 51; and Philippe Dewitte, *Les Mouvements Nègres en France [Black Movements in France], 1919–1939* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1985), 75.

48. Zinsou and Zoumènou, *Kojo Tovalou Houénou*, 104; and Miller, *Nationalists and Nomads*, 52. Manning and Spiegler declare the text "apolitical." Manning and Spiegler, "Tovalou-Houénou: Pan-African," 2, 6. Langley cites a few excerpts to argue that the text was a "plea for racial equality." Langley, *Pan-Africanism and Nationalism*, 72–73.

49. Kojo Tovalou Houénou, *L'involution des métamorphoses et des métempsychoses de l'univers [Involution of Metamorphoses and Metempsychosis of the Universe]* (Paris: chez l'auteur, 1921), 6.

in the world order.” For Miller, Houénou’s notion of “involution” “works toward the elimination of all difference in a final singularity.”⁵⁰ But Houénou’s own later activism showed that he did not seek to establish an “essential base” or “final singularity” in an effort to deny or eradicate differences. Instead, his politics recognized variation between and among social groups, including people of African descent. The underlying concepts within the linguistic study thereby elucidate some of Houénou’s ideas and tactics, operating as an introduction and metaphor for Houénou’s broad, eclectic, and creative use of politics and the law.⁵¹

With the term “involution” invoking return or regression to an original state, Houénou proposed to investigate language as a shared site of humanity.⁵² Rather than view his perspective in terms of an “assimilationist” approach defined by a desire to adopt “Frenchness” wholly, a more appropriate term may be, “universalist,” evoking the underlying ideas of wholeness, inclusion, and equality implied by and promised by the French Enlightenment and Revolutionary tradition.⁵³ Houénou also endeavored to reduce differences brought about by change to “homogeneity” or a “primitive identity” found in grammar and phonetics, linking this concept to a metaphysical and spiritual argument. The other important term in the title, “metempsychosis,” referred to transmigration, or the passage of the soul into another body at death.⁵⁴

However, buried deep within this phonetic study married with spiritual mysticism, Houénou also subtly engaged with ideas about freedom and hierarchy that could implicate questions of race. In the midst of his study of vowels, he wrote of the challenge of liberty: “Freedom is invincible until it triumphs over itself. . . .it creates its own obstacle: the will. Thus the master, chain, and slave are forged of the same metal: freedom.” He then continued, weaving in and out of his linguistic analysis: “Since the beginning when man could use his muscle, man beautifully articulated, man eloquently translated into a living and harmonious language all joy and sadness. The supposed grunts of the caveman seem to me to be the grunts of my savage Europeans.”⁵⁵ Taken together, the two passages

50. Miller, *Nationalists and Nomads*, 91.

51. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for critiquing some of my initial interpretations, and for encouraging me to engage in a more rigorous analysis of Houénou’s text.

52. Tovalou Houénou, *L’involution des métamorphoses*, 5–6.

53. Miller also analyzes the universalist tendencies in the text but sees universalism as denying difference rather than accepting it. Miller, *Nationalists and Nomads*, 52–54, 91.

54. Metempsychosis is associated with Greek religion and the philosopher Pythagoras, but more importantly, transmigration appears in Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Buddhist teachings deny the existence of the permanent soul or self, and propose instead in the rebirth of the ever-changing character or “karma.”

55. Tovalou Houénou, *L’involution des métamorphoses*, 49–50.

reflected on the limits of freedom and universality, juxtaposing master and slave, and casting the European (as opposed to the African) as the primitive savage. The sincere exploration of language and spirituality thus opened possibilities for subtle, almost veiled, social commentary.

A substantive section of the thin and opaque book features a series of what Houénou called “truisms,” including pithy sayings and passages on a range of historical and cultural subjects including the war, labor, and religion. With his emphasis on emotion, the transcendental, the rawness of terror, and the individual experience, Houénou engaged republicanism, yet critiqued aspects of it that eschewed religion and spirituality. He waxed poetically that, “Moral progress is a painful climb in darkness of night; in the morning, one arrives at a high peak, the whole countryside revealing itself below. Reason is the supreme sensation that organizes the others into a hierarchy. Every sense reveals God to us, by revealing the sensuous pleasure of infinity.”⁵⁶ This personal and intellectual struggle with faith and the divine in the wake of World War I was not uncommon, and Houénou sometimes returned to these religious themes in his later writings, even as some French authorities accused him of fraternizing with Communists.⁵⁷ Through his recourse to linguistics, religion, classics and philosophy, he could paint a vast vision of all humanity, challenging the idea of racial hierarchy that permeated Western philosophy, increasingly by the eighteenth century.⁵⁸ Historian and biographer Luc Zouménou cautions against critiquing Houénou’s early text for lacking “recognizable elements of African origin,” praising Houénou instead for bringing together diverse philosophical and scientific elements “in the search of a new definition of man.”⁵⁹ Houénou’s ability to think broadly beyond, yet within, Western frameworks

56. *Ibid.*, 62.

57. “Notes sur la propaganda révolutionnaire intéressant les pays d’outre mer,” Directeur Affaires Politiques au Ministère des Colonies aux M. les Gouverneurs des Colonies et Commissaires de Togo et Cameroun, May 31, 1924 (“Notes on the revolutionary propaganda involving overseas territories,” Director of Political Affairs in the Colonial Ministry to the Governors of the Colonies and the Commissioners of Togo and Cameroon). The author of this secret report explicitly stated that the editors of *Les Continents* were not Communists. S.A.R. Prince Kojo Tovalou Houénou au Ministère de la Justice, September 1, 1926, 8G 1, 14 MIOM 2146, ANOM. In this letter, Houénou denied rumors that he was a Communist.

58. For example, see William B. Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530–1880* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); Sue Peabody, *There are No Slaves in France: The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Regime* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Andrew S. Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

59. Zinsou and Zouménou, *Kojo Tovalou Houénou*, 107.

characterized his political activity and self-fashioning. More importantly, his early attempt to reconcile his spirituality and rationality and secularism ultimately may have helped him to navigate between support of France and critique of French empire in his later work.

Houénou’s views on French colonialism only publicly came to light after his visit to Porto-Novo in August 1921 just after the publication of his book; it was his first time back in Dahomey since he had left as an adolescent. Arriving in a cosmopolitan town with diverse ethnic groups and Muslims, a community of Brazilian returnees, and connections to neighboring British-controlled Nigeria, Houénou found a lively political scene. There was an active, local newspaper, *Le Guide du Dahomey*, founded in 1920 by Dorotheé Lima who had obtained his citizenship in 1916. Jean Adjovi, the returned soldier and *chef de famille*, who lost one of his indigenous titles after obtaining his citizenship in 1918, was also said to be involved with the paper that featured regular critiques of specific French colonial policies. In the months before the spring 1921 tour of Dahomey by the Governor General who oversaw all the colonies of French West Africa, *Le Guide du Dahomey* ran several articles critiquing colonial policies including the abuses of the *indigénat*; local “chiefs;” and the need for expanded education, medical facilities, and other resources. Editorials expressed disappointment in Dahomey’s Governor Fourn and explored questions of racism in French colonial policies. Therefore, well before Houénou’s visit in the late summer of 1921, the situation in Dahomey would have already been politically charged.

In the early 1920s, there was already a tradition of Dahomean journalism, often traced to the influential work of Louis Hunkanrin, who began clandestinely publishing and writing for newspapers as early as 1912. Almost immediately after finishing school in Senegal in 1907, he fell out of favor with the French colonial administration. By 1914, facing various charges, Hunkanrin went into exile in Nigeria for four years, but he would then volunteer and serve in the French military from 1918 to 1920, followed by a brief and notable sojourn in Paris between 1920 and 1921, when he published half a dozen issues of a journal called *Le Messenger Dahomeen*. The dates and timing remain significant, because Hunkanrin and the other African writers for *Le Messenger* consistently argued for citizenship rights for Africans, not unlike the way that Houénou would a few years later. What is interesting, however, is that Houénou did not yet publicly espouse such sentiments while in Paris before 1921, when Hunkanrin was active there. And although Hunkanrin did arrive in Dahomey in December of 1921 during Houénou’s visit there, it was to face trial and serve a jail sentence. James Spiegler analyzes Hunkanrin’s writings calling for African citizenship and for the end of

indigénat as foundational to nationalist thought in newspapers and organizations in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s. Spiegelger traces those same themes in Houénou's writing, although he doubts that Hunkanrin and Houénou met in those early years, if at all.⁶⁰ Rather than read Hunkanrin, Houénou, and later activists as a progression toward more radicalism, all of these intellectuals engaged colonial policies specific to France, particularly laws of accession to citizenship. More specifically, during that pivotal period before and during Houénou's (or Hunkanrin's) arrival in Dahomey in 1921, the authors of *Le Guide* had been publishing their articles, editorials, and open letters critiquing French colonialism for several months. They seem to have influenced Houénou rather than vice versa.⁶¹ In this instance, the exchange of ideas was not originating in the Americas or Europe but in Africa itself.

One of the most striking features of the articles from *Le Guide* and other forms of correspondence and petitions during this time period was how Dahomeans used colonial rhetoric, specific statutes, and even official speeches and publications to argue their positions. In an open letter to the governor general of French West Africa during his visit to Dahomey, the editor(s) of *Le Guide* began by challenging the colonial administration not to let the "beautiful Republican formulation: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity exist here only as an empty phrase." In the course of the letter, the editors evoked the *indigénat*; referred to the three citizenship statutes of 1912, 1915, and 1918 as well as the 1912 decree reorganizing "native law" (*justice indigène*) in French West Africa; favorably mentioned a French colonial administrator known for his infamous "pacification" campaigns in Indochina (Vietnam) and Madagascar; and quoted one of the Governor General's own speeches. At several junctures, the editors revealed their specific interests in the situation of elites, referring to those without official citizenship as half-free (*demi-liberté*) and suggesting that the application of the *indigénat* and customary "native" law should include "procedures matching the degree of actual advancement of residents." The power of illiterate chiefs and native judges over elites especially offended the directors of *Le Guide*. But, in the case of hospitals and schools, French administrators and officials appeared to be the problem, denying medical services to Africans or turning away the brightest students. In the end, the letter ostensibly written in the interest the social

60. Spiegelger, "Aspects of Nationalist Thought," 17–22, 34–44, 49n1. Spiegelger contrasts the themes of the African contributors to *Le Messager* with that of Antillean writers such as Guadeloupean Max Bloucourt. For more on Hunkanrin, see the volume, Guy-Landry Hazoumé et al., *Le Vie et L'Œuvre de Louis Hunkanrin [The Life and Work of Louis Hunkanrin]* (Cotonou, Benin: Librairie Renaissance, 1977).

61. Zinsou and Zouménou, *Kojo Tovalou Houénou*, 118.

and economic situation of Dahomey actually was concerned very much with protecting the status of elites. To that end, the writer(s) implored the Governor General to apply pressure on the local administration to undertake reforms; the end of the letter retreated from the demanding tone, ending with a declaration of “filial attachment” to France.⁶²

When Houénou began writing more pointed political pieces a few years later, he picked up on and recast the themes and the tone of *Le Guide du Dahomey*, at once indignant and seeming to feign submission. Upon his return to Paris, Houénou’s first article appearing in January of 1923 in a Malagasy publication reiterated much of his thinking in *Involution* on “diverse civilizations on the surface of the globe: [which] must marry, interpenetrate, and expand in order to become a worldwide and truly human civilization.”⁶³ In the same article, the only coded reference to themes featured in *Le Guide* was the following: “The evolution of European civilization... was a series of sudden and often violent revolutions, the last being in 1789. [France] recognized the rights of man... We carried out the ultimate duty during the war when we recognized the most basic rights of citizens. Without the status of citizen there is only the shameless exploitation of miserable slaves in the colonies.”⁶⁴ Houénou evoked the rights to citizenship, but like the editors of *Le Guide du Dahomey*, emphasized a particular group of deserving candidates, in this case, war veterans. More importantly, the sweeping connections from the 1789 Revolution, to the specter of slavery, to citizenship rights, placed France on a pedestal while making demands at the same time.

Then came a series of strikes in Porto-Novo in 1923 that pushed Houénou to criticize the French colonial regime more directly. In Porto-Novo in February and March 1923, the “incidents,” as French officials described them, involved a complex set of events and interest groups. First, residents in Porto Novo, in Cotonou and surrounding areas, were responding to a sharp decline in export prices and revenue followed by an increase in tax rates imposed by the colonial regime. The financial difficulties, in turn, exacerbated existing tensions and alliances between different African groups and the French colonial administration.⁶⁵

62. “Lettre Ouverte à Monsieur le Gouverneur Général,” (“Open Letter to the Governor General,”) *Le Guide du Dahomey*, 2:20 (April 23, 1921), 1–3.

63. Zinsou and Zouménou, *Kojo Tovalou Houénou*, 120. From an article entitled “Etrennes d’un indigène à ses frères” [“New Year’s Gift from an African to his brothers”], appearing in the Malagasy newspaper *Le Libéré*, probably in January 1923 or 1924 though Zinsou and Zouménou date it to January 1922; Jean Ralaimongo founded *Le Libéré* in 1923.

64. Zinsou and Zouménou, *Kojo Tovalou Houénou*, 121.

65. Patrick Manning, *Slavery, Colonialism and Economic Growth in Dahomey, 1640–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 243–46.

Then, a visit by a French representative of the Superior Council of Dahomey, who was supposed to be representing the interests of the African residents of Dahomey, apparently triggered a month-long protest. Illiterate political leaders, educated elites, diverse Muslim factions, market women, and dock workers across the southern part of the colony met clandestinely and refused to pay taxes or go to work or to the market. Some even called for a renegotiation of a nineteenth-century treaty between the Porto-Novo kingdom and the French colonial administration to give more political autonomy to the local African leadership. In response, the French colonial regime put down the strike, forcibly collected taxes, confiscated firearms, gathered men fleeing military recruitment, and destroyed some particularly recalcitrant villages. French colonial reports issued after the events portrayed the strikes as the isolated activities of “dissident” Muslims and members of the local African intelligentsia. However, the sudden coincidence of several groups and causes among the diverse Porto-Novo population suggested a deeper political crisis.⁶⁶

Back in Paris, Houénou responded to the events occurring in Porto Novo in March 1923 by sending a letter to the newspaper *Les Annales coloniales*, which outlined, for the first time, specific critiques of the French colonial administration for “a series of administrative errors.” He denied that the events represented “sedition” or “revolt.” Instead, he emphasized that it was a local strike in response to poor French colonial policies. Each of the “errors,” Houénou outlined, including higher taxation, military conscription that weighed heavily on farming communities, insufficient medical facilities, and the *indigénat*, had been featured earlier in the Dahomean press as well as in the writings of Louis Hunkanrin, but it is unclear how much attention Houénou’s letter on the Porto-Novo strikes initially received.⁶⁷

Given the focus on the infamous bar incident that occurred a few months later in August 1923, it is revelatory that Zinsou and Zouménou suggest that Houénou may have orchestrated his own ejection from the Parisian bar for media attention. Houénou had been forced to leave an establishment at the request of white Americans offended by his presence some months earlier. With the second August incident he was able to stir up public outrage toward the behavior of the French bar manager who denied him service. Capitalizing on the moment in the public eye, Houénou published several articles in the left-leaning newspaper *L’Action coloniale*, obtained

66. Jacques Ballard, “Les Incidents de 1923 à Porto-Novo: La Politique de l’époque coloniale,” [“The Incidents of 1923 in Porto-Novo: The Politics of the Colonial Era”] *Etudes Dahoméennes* New Series 5(1965): 69–87.

67. Prince Kojo Tovalou Houénou, “Sur les incidents du Dahomey,” [“On the incidents in Dahomey”] *Les Annales coloniales* 23, 47 (March 20, 1923), 1.

a university appointment, and embarked on a political career that increasingly critiqued French colonial policy in West Africa. Given this perspective on these pivotal events, it would be simplistic to correlate Houénou’s experience of racism in Paris at the hands of Americans to his new radicalism, especially as so much of the focus of Houénou’s activist message addressed corruption and violence in France’s administration of its West African colonies.⁶⁸ If there was any transformative event that reshaped Houénou’s political vision, it was his exposure to Porto-Novo politics in person in 1921 and from afar during the 1923 strikes.

Appreciating the centrality of Dahomey and French colonial policy generally in Houénou’s political vision after 1924 clarifies the shift in his language and activities from what I have termed a “universalist” message to one that most scholars recognize as more explicitly “Pan-Africanist” and, presumably, influenced by Garvey and others. At some point during this time, he also took to referring to himself as a prince, for which he was mocked in some circles and possibly later rebuked for by some of his own family members.⁶⁹ The use of the title added to this “Pan-Africanist” allure and his conference speech on “Le Problème de la race noire” [“The Problem of the Black Race”] at the Interallied School of Higher Social Studies in Paris in February 1924 did forcefully bring together threads of arguments that he had been making in *Les Continents*, and showed a shift in his rhetoric. The English version of the title of the talk, translated as “The Problem of Blacks in French Colonial Africa,” actually was a more telling and accurate one, which suggests a different reading of the Pan-Africanist “turn” in Houénou’s political work. Houénou took France’s disastrous colonial policy as a starting point, while viewing the situation in Africa as indicative of the challenges facing black people in general. He insisted on separating the innocent French “Motherland” from “her children” who represented France in the colonies, “inaugurat[ing] in the Colonies an era of veritable savagery and true barbarism which is carried out with science and premeditation, with all the art and all the refinement of civilization.”⁷⁰ Ostensibly proposing reform in the colonies, he also laced his speech with violent, suggestive imagery. In reference to the history of African slavery in the Americas, he evoked, “this Africa, with whose unhappy history you are acquainted, but which, some day, one of her sons will outline for you in darts of fire.” As a solution to the corruption

68. Zinsou and Zouménou, *Kojo Tovalou Houénou*, 132–36.

69. Manning and Spiegler, “Tovalou-Houénou: Pan-African,” 1. Houénou claimed the title through his mother, who was the granddaughter of a former king of the Dahomey kingdom.

70. Tovalou-Houénou, *Le Problème*, 7–8. Hunkanrin expressed similar views. Spiegler, “Aspects of Nationalist Thought,” 41–42.

in the colonies, he devised an elaborate metaphor about amputating a limb infected with gangrene, warning that without quick action “the disease gains ground, then an ignorant adventurer takes a scalpel and wounds the healthy organ, while attempting to remove the affected member.” Playing on the ideal of the “evolution” of colonial populations—the hypocrisy of the French “civilizing mission” that promised to introduce civilization and progress but did not—Houénou warned of “revolution” if France did not reform its colonial policy: “Now if we are not careful, unfortunate events will occur in the Colonies.”⁷¹

Houénou could make such threats because he cast the colonies (and the administrators serving them) as occupying a separate social, cultural, and legal space and reality from the one that the audience (and he, himself) lived in Paris. And, in the process, he could draw similarities between the cruel treatment of black people in other European colonies and in the Americas. The underlying message in this speech was the shared humanity and rights to citizenship, especially as espoused by the French Revolution. Thus, he presented this choice to the French: “Absolute autonomy for the Colonies, with representation in the Metropole on general issues; or otherwise total, complete assimilation without boundaries—without any distinction of race.” However, the language in the passage was more ambivalent than a clear option between “assimilation” and independence. His call for “complete assimilation without boundaries” sounded like what was supposed to happen under the French Union after World War II, when France technically transformed its former colonies into integral parts of the nation, but what he described as “home rule” or “autonomy”—and it was unclear whether or not those concepts were one in the same—actually sounded what occurred as the French Union was put into place. His notion of “autonomy” involved representation in the metropolis by Africans elected by Africans, but he already anticipated concerns about the proportion of representation and suggested a reduction in the number of African deputies.⁷² Many scholars have viewed his use of the term “autonomy” as a call for independence that was the result of American Pan-African influence, and as contrary to his true wish for “assimilation.”⁷³ There were few calls for immediate African independence

71. Tovalou-Houénou, *Le Problème*, 8–9.

72. Similar debates characterized the French Union during the Fourth Republic. Cooper, “From Imperial Inclusion to Republican Exclusion,” 97–105.

73. Manning and Spiegler, “Tovalou-Houénou: Pan-African,” 18; J. Ayo Langley, “Pan-Africanism in Paris,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 7 (1969): 72–75; Zinsou and Zouménou, *Kojo Tovalou Houénou*, 139–41; and Melvyn Stokes, “Kojo Tovalou Houénou: An Assessment,” *Transatlantica* 1(2009): 5.

before World War II, even among the most ardent Pan-African activists,⁷⁴ and Houénou seemed to be presenting “complete assimilation with representation,” “home rule,” and “autonomy,” each as some form of broader access to citizenship for Africans and as versions of the same “solution to the colonial problem.” Therefore, Houénou did not suffer from a lack of vision in proposing what he called “assimilation” or “autonomy;” he had envisioned the future.

Houénou saw the “problem of the black race” in terms of a *longue durée*, dating to European occupation of the Americas and African enslavement there. But he was speaking from the perspective of Africans in the colonies, with specific experiences of the *indigénat* and military recruitment, rather than to the different, sometimes related, concerns of other members of the African diaspora. He also imagined himself as part of and as separate from an African reality shaped by the continent’s engagement with Europe. He ended his speech with the following imagery harkening back in some ways to his earlier rhetoric from *Involution*, but with Africa as an explicit player in a human universe. Throughout his closing statement, however, Houénou tellingly shifted his position back and forth from a shared African identity to a French or, perhaps, even a Parisian one, ending with the idea of the fundamental right to citizenship:

*[Africans] have less instruction, education, and adaptation to European civilization, but they have kept, more than we have, the true and solid qualities of which human worth is formed, and we benefit by their conscience, their knowledge, and their experience. They have lived in simple surroundings where human sentiments bloom spontaneously. . . . They have kept all the simplicity, all the sweetness, all the joy of life. . . . This is what we do in Africa We only wish that since you have come and conquered us, you should live in peace with each other, and that we be not always called upon to become your cannon fodder. We wish you to recognize our right to citizenship – elementary rights of man. . . .*⁷⁵ (emphasis added)

With a different perspective on Houénou’s political thought through 1924 as deeply embedded in the experience of French colonialism in Africa, it is possible to reconsider his relationship with Garvey, and with a Black Atlantic intellectual tradition more generally. If the incident at the Montmartre bar has been seen, erroneously, as the catalyst for

74. The Manifesto to the League of Nations drawn up after the Second Pan-African Congress on 1921, which took place in Britain, Belgium, and France, called for eventual self-government for “mandated areas.” Those mandated areas in Africa were just the few German colonies and territories, including Togo and Cameroon in West Africa. Jessie Fauset, “Impressions of Second Pan-African Congress,” *The Crisis* 23 (1921): 18.

75. Tovalou-Houénou, *Le Problème*, 13.

Houénou's shift in political vision toward a Pan-Africanist one, his contact with Marcus Garvey and his tour of the United States in the summer and fall of 1924 is seen as the culmination of his transformation. However, Houénou participated in the creation of the Ligue Universelle pour la Défense de la Race Noire (Universal League for the Defense of the Black Race) (LUDRUN) and laid out his ideas in his speech at the Interallied School in April 1924, several months before the trip to the United States. Some point out that the stated goal of the Ligue, "developing the links of solidarity and universal brotherhood between all members of the black race; bring them together to redevelop their homeland: Africa," sounded similar to core ideas in Garvey's UNIA and his call for "Africa for the Africans." Still, Houénou's League also sought to "make it so that they [members of the black race] are treated around the globe as free men enjoying the inalienable rights of citizen," leaving space for citizenship within empire.⁷⁶ Houénou's support of a "universal black struggle," too, has been interpreted as an explicit nod to Garvey, perhaps even with his League acting as a type of chapter of the UNIA. However, Houénou's writing continued to draw on his critique of French colonial policy, which he referred to in a series of articles as "colonial slavery" [*esclavagisme colonial*] in his articles on West Africa in *Les Continents*, during his United States tour.⁷⁷ *Les Continents* and the soirées sponsored by the League and advertised in the newspaper were designed to support financially the League and Houénou presented his tour of the United States as a quasi-research trip.⁷⁸

Recognizing Houénou's activities as part of a specific agenda shaped by his experiences casts his depiction of Paris as the "heart of the black race" in his controversial speech before the UNIA in New York in a different light. He imagined his organization at the center of a black international

76. Bulletin d'Adhesion, Ligue Universelle pour la Défense de la Race Noire (Membership form, Universal League for the Defense of the Black Race), *Les Continents* 1, 1 (May 15, 1924): 4. With a committee composed of several men from West Africa, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guyana, and Haiti, the organization replicated its stated international vision of the African diaspora. Zinsou and Zouménou, *Kojo Tovalou Houénou*, 142–44.

77. Kojo Tovalou Houénou, "L'Esclavagisme colonial: nous ne sommes pas des enfants," ["Colonial Slavery: We are not children"] *Les Continents* 1, 4 (July 1, 1924): 1.

78. S.A.R. Prince Kojo Tovalou Houénou au Ministère de la Justice, (His Royal Highness Prince Kojo Tovalou Houénou to the Minister of Justice) September 1, 1926, 8G 1, 14 MIOM 2146, ANOM. Zinsou and Zouménou, *Kojo Tovalou Houénou*, 141–49. By December 1924, Houénou had traveled to the following cities, many of them with important black communities: New York, Philadelphia, Buffalo, Detroit, Gary (Indiana), Cleveland, and Chicago. "Notre Directeur en Amérique: De New York à Chicago," ["Our Director in America: From New York to Chicago"] *Les Continents* 1, 15 (December 15, 1924): 1.

cooperative venture as he proclaimed: “[The Universal League] will unite all of our organizations in a federation; it will be in charge of presenting our demands to the League of Nations.” The criticism of Houénou, perhaps then, but certainly in the secondary literature since, has centered on Houénou’s praise of France and its “Rights of Man without any distinction of race or nation.”⁷⁹ Some assume that Garvey’s relationship with Houénou soured because of Houénou’s positive depiction of France, Houénou’s own aspirations for his own organization, and Houénou’s contact with Garvey’s rival W.E.B. Du Bois.⁸⁰

However, a closer look at a series of letters between Du Bois and Houénou near the time of Houénou’s visit to the United States demonstrate that Houénou had a sense of his own activism and of the potential of collaboration; Houénou saw himself as a leader in a transnational movement, not as a follower. Du Bois originally arranged to meet with and sponsor Houénou during his tour of the United States but got cold feet, not only because he heard that Houénou was fraternizing with Garvey, but also when one of Houénou’s associates René Maran, the famous Antillean writer, informed Du Bois of some of the criminal charges that were circling Houénou. These same issues would lead to Houénou’s later legal troubles in Dahomey. But Houénou pushed back when Du Bois withdrew his offer to meet him, and rejected the idea that he had to choose between Du Bois and Garvey, declaring, “I am not looking to sit on the fence and I am not trying to attempt an impossible reconciliation. My attitude is not impartial, it is not neutral. I am for all parties interested in Negroes [*noirs*], thus I am partial.”⁸¹ Then Houénou clarified his own position, undercutting the depictions of him as a docile or naïve dandy, and eschewing any idea that he was simply a disciple of Garvey: “The problem of the black race

79. Houénou, “Paris, Cœur de la Race Noire,” [“Paris, Heart of the Black Race”] *Les Continents* 1, 10 (October 1, 1924): 1. Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 100–2; Miller, *Nationalists and Nomads*, 50–51; and Zinsou and Zouménou, *Kojo Tovalou Houénou*, 149–50.

80. Zinsou and Zouménou, *Kojo Tovalou Houénou*, 149–50; and Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 103–104. Another issue is the image of Houénou as just a “front-man” for Maran’s projects. Alice L. Conklin, “Who Speaks for Africa?: The Rene Maran–Blaise Diagne Trial in 1920s France,” in *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*, ed. Sue Peabody and Tyler Edward Stovall (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 302–37.

81. Letter from Prince Kojo Tovalou Houenou to W.E.B. Du Bois, September 3, 1924. W.E.B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries (hereafter UMass SCUA), <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b026-i430> (October 9, 2013). Edwards interprets Houénou’s statement as a reflection of his “ideological innocence.” Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 103.

makes me aggressive and radical [*revolutionnaire*]. History shows us that all of the social reforms have been obtained by war, external war and internal war. This is called revolution. There is no negotiation, no compromise possible with European and American thieves and crooks. It is a question now of making them return their ill-gotten gains, but how? If we must die, let us do so giving our all for a good cause. Enough of this magnanimity that gets us kicked in the ass or lynched.”⁸²

And in the end, Houénou returned to the image of Paris as a “heart of the black race,” not because of French exceptionalism, but because of the intellectual work that Houénou and other Africans and African diaspora blacks could undertake in that central location. He wrote to Du Bois: “In our association The Universal League for the defense of the Black Race, we strive for, instead, unity, the federation of all existing societies. A centralization in Paris allows action in London, Brussels, and Geneva and throughout all of Africa. This concentration, this convergence, this coordination of all Negro forces is possible; history will make it so.”⁸³ Therefore, the relationship with France for Houénou and for so many others was multilayered. In his analysis of the relationship between Houénou and Garvey, Brent Edwards also emphasizes that Garvey, too, had an ambiguous relationship with France, and himself imagined a dialogue with the African diaspora in France. When Garvey briefly visited Paris in 1928, his situation resembled Houénou’s in New York four years earlier. His speech did not go over well. It was before the diverse Club du Faubourg (1918–1939) where conferences featured lively debates with the audience that included some pro-French supporters of colonialism, Communists, and others who sanctioned the policy of assimilation. Garvey’s English had to be translated simultaneously and he was challenged from different sides about his call for Negro self-government and resettlement in Africa. René Maran in particular attacked Garvey’s “black nationalism” and simultaneous praise of the French. A reporter from the *Pittsburgh Courier* claimed that most blacks in the audience disagreed with the proposal of self-government in Africa, except for Houénou, who reputedly supported such an idea. Another asked, perhaps sarcastically, why blacks did not just immigrate to the French colonies and “become French,” if the French treated blacks so well. After all, Garvey had begun his speech by echoing Houénou’s earlier rhetoric, noting that France alone “offer[ed] to the Negro legal equality and the humane rights of citizenship.”⁸⁴

82. Houénou to Du Bois, September 3, 1924, UMass SCUA.

83. *Ibid.*

84. Robert A. Hill, ed. *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers, Volume VII (November 1927–August 1940)* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of

Houénou definitely differed from Garvey, but the nature of their interaction and collaboration, no matter how ephemeral, remains instructive because of the tendency to portray historical actors one dimensionally. Because Houénou consistently tried to work within the French system, he has been characterized as a “reformist” and especially as an “assimilationist.”⁸⁵ However, it was his experiences within that French world, his education, and his travel in France and West Africa that helped him develop a political vision that was critical of French colonialism while seeking to be part of its reform. Houénou’s anger and disappointment at the French colonial system were as profound and real as his love of what France was or was supposed to be. At the same time, for Houénou and many of his contemporaries (and successors) a central tension emerged from competing “local” concerns—in Houénou’s case, Francophone, West African, or Dahomean—and a broader diasporic, black perspective. As an African and as a member of the Francophone elite living in Paris, Houénou wrote and acted with what Robin Kelley has referred to as a (black) “global vision.” Brent Edwards writes of the differences between these “global visions” of blackness and diaspora among the African diaspora as a problem of “translation” or *décalage* (a gap), which is a fundamental strength and weakness of black diaspora thought and activism. Black people could imagine countless similarities with one another but could not always reconcile the divergences between black communities and individuals.⁸⁶ Such rifts could also occur within one person’s experiences. In the case of Houénou, he saw connections among his Dahomean, Parisian, West African, and black identities, and tried to occupy all of these spaces before the law. In doing so, he was practicing a type of pluralism and, I would argue, legal posturing, that could not be tolerated. Despite the scholarly image of him as “less radical” and “assimilationist,” French authorities saw him as a threat, leading to his eventual demise.

California Press, 1990), 278–80; Joel Augustus Rogers, “Garvey Gets ‘Uproarious’ Reception in Paris, White Women Protest, Race Man Ejected,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 25, 1928 as reprinted in Robert A. Hill, ed. *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers: Africa for the Africans, 1923–1945, Volume X* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 475–77. Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 104. Edwards notes that Houénou also was reported to have been in attendance. Dewitte, *Les Mouvements Nègres*, 238.

85. Dewitte, *Les Mouvements Nègres*, 81–89; Spiegler, “Aspects of Nationalist Thought,” 78; Miller, *Nationalists and Nomads*, 29, 54; and Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 7.

86. Robin D.G. Kelley, “‘But a Local Phase of a World Problem’: Black History’s Global Vision, 1883–1950,” *The Journal of American History* 86 (1999): 1045–77; and Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 7, 13–15.

The Limits of Legal Posturing in Houénou's "Evolution Revolution"

Houénou's attempt to assume the title of *chef de famille* marked a turning point in his career, crystallizing his political vision and leading to his downfall. When he entered into the dispute over the *chef de famille* title upon his father's death, Houénou came into conflict not only with his extended family and with Senegalese mixed-race lawyer Germain Crespin who represented his father's estate, but also with the French colonial administration. Houénou was offended that his own younger brother Georges claimed to be head of the family, and he resented the French colonial administration's intervention in what he saw as a "family matter." In response to the situation, Houénou decided to place himself in direct contact with the upper echelons of the colonial administration, sending letters and cables directly to the Minister of the Colonies in Paris. He also tried to redefine himself professionally and politically by seeking to be a defense lawyer in Cotonou in 1925 upon his arrival. In 1933, he tried to run for the position of representative on the Superior Council of the Colonies, a position normally held by white French men. In his 1924 speech in Paris, he had complained about the role of Europeans established in the colonies who were appointed to the Superior Council, supposedly to represent the interests of colonial populations.⁸⁷ During the title dispute and all of these ill-fated moves to plead his case or change his position in society, he came up against the "dual" status that he occupied as an African man and a French citizen, not so much by navigating around them as occupying them both at once.

During the *chef de famille* dispute, Houénou regularly wrote letters or dispatched telegrams directly to the Minister of the Colonies in Paris pleading his case, denouncing Governor Fourn of Dahomey, and generally representing himself as a model French citizen. Placing himself in direct contact with higher authorities, Houénou forced the governor of Dahomey and even the Governor General of French West Africa based in Dakar to respond to him. In a letter to the Minister of the Colonies, Houénou declared, "I have lived in France 25 years, I am a citizen, former wounded soldier from the war. I like a fight but the campaign undertaken by the French against me is deplorable. As a result, not only Dahomeans, but any African who isn't a fool will ask himself if France isn't the declared enemy of all of those who are evolved and assimilated to French culture." But for all of his positioning as an *évolué*, he repeated a request, that he had made in an earlier telegram to the minister, to

87. Tovalou-Houénou, *Le Problème*, 11.

allow a ritual funeral procession of princes and priests from the former kingdom of Dahomey to honor his father. Switching tones again, as he wrote his letter from neighboring Lomé, Togo, where he was attempting to practice as a defense attorney, he complained that he had not yet been authorized to practice, and requested that the Minister intervene. He then mentioned how his travels in the United States had deepened his loyalty to France: “as a French citizen, I do not hesitate to battle bad Frenchmen in this honest and loyal struggle but I avoid any offense to the Motherland with great care.”⁸⁸ At every turn, Houénou attempted to displace the authority of others as he asserted himself as French citizen, African family representative, defender of African culture, representative of France in the United States, and as keeper of French values in the corrupt colonies. The concept of legal posturing is a useful way of understanding and describing Houénou’s actions, not only because of the way he presented himself in multiple ways to authorities but also how he tried to make use of the law and court system, even if he was unsuccessful.⁸⁹

As Houénou was attempting to assume the title of *chef de famille*, he was apprehended on charges stemming from bad checks that he issued in Paris that led to his disbarment. He was arrested for the fraud relating to the checks and for his self-representation as an attorney in Dahomey, especially as he had applied to be a defense lawyer and had begun practicing in Togo. There were also claims that he was not a physician, as he had also represented.⁹⁰ Houénou served several months in prison in Dahomey and complained that the legal charges against him had not been officially stated, but when he later traveled to Dakar, it was to attend the appeals hearing of the official division of the family. The appeal focused instead on the earlier

88. S.A.R. Prince Kojo Tovalou–Houénou à M. le Ministre des Colonies, (His Royal Highness Prince Kojo Tovalou–Houénou to the Minister of Colonies) April 17, 1926, FM AFFPOL 575, ANOM. Houénou included among other documents copies of cables he himself had forwarded to the minister, the Governor of Dahomey, the Governor General of French West Africa, and other local officials in Dahomey. For his part, Governor Fourn of Dahomey wrote several cables complaining about Houénou’s direct correspondence with the Minister of Colonies and denied the charges that Houénou made. Copie de Cablogramme Officiel à Gouverneur Général, August 15, 1927, FM AFFPOL 575, ANOM.

89. For similar limits in what she calls “forum shopping,” see Sharafi, “Marital Patchwork of Colonial South Asia,” 979–1009.

90. Houénou had a medical degree from the University of Bordeaux but his citizenship decree described him as a medical student serving as a soldier in a nursing unit at Val-de-Grace military hospital. Zinsou and Zouménou, *Kojo Tovalou Houénou*, 57, 65–66. Houénou’s 1915 citizenship decree stated that he was a medical student serving as a nurse in Val de Grâce military hospital in Paris. “Décret No. 24217, Tovalou Quénum (Marc-Tovalou-Joseph), 11 juillet 1915,” (“Decree No. 24217, Tovalou Quénum (Marc-Tovalou-Joseph), July 11, 1915”) *Bulletin des Lois* [*Bulletin des Lois*], 147.

fraud charges from France, and accusations that he had slandered the Senegalese lawyer Germain Crespin.⁹¹ Whatever the official decision on the title of *chef de famille*, it appears that part of the family wealth was divided among certain individuals. The French colonial administration preferred personal property ownership to the idea of collective holding, and the Quenum/Houénou family consisted of more than 3,000 people.⁹²

In the end, when Governor Fourn disqualified Houénou for the title of *chef de famille* based on Houénou's citizenship status, he actually quoted the wrong decree, citing the section of the 1912 decree, even though Houénou had obtained his citizenship using the 1915 law.⁹³ It is unclear why Houénou, a trained attorney, would not have brought this discrepancy to the attention of authorities. First, Houénou was *not*, in fact, naturalized, but only had political rights. More pertinent was that the 1915 statute actually had no official provision requiring renunciation of personal/civil status, even though it appears that French officials may have still demanded such a letter, as they assumed that it was *pro forma* in citizenship applications.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, when most Africans and other colonials renounced their personal status, they did not appear to acquire French civil status in some official way. Instead, they seemed to acquire something akin to "non-native" status.⁹⁵ Still, Houénou may have wanted things both ways, having

91. "Marc Tovalou Quénom," Extrait des Minutes ("Marc Tovalou Quénom," Excerpt from the Minutes"), December 14, 1927, 8G1, 14 MIOM 2146, ANOM. Manning and Spiegler, "Kojou Tovalou-Houénou: Pan-African Patriot," 23.

92. "Au Sujet Succession Quénom," Governor General AOF à Lieutenant Governor Dahomey ("Regarding the Quénom Succession," Governor General of French West Africa to the Lieutenant Governor of Dahomey"), December 31, 1926, 8G 1 14 MIOM2146, ANOM.

93. Lieutenant-Gouverneur à Gouverneur-Général AOF (Lieutenant Governor to Governor General of French West Africa), April 1, 1927, 8G 1, 14 MIOM 2146, ANOM. There is even a typographical error in the year, listed as "1922" rather than "1912."

94. In the case of Pierre Maka, originally of Gabon, who was stationed in Guinée with the post and telegraph services, the governor general demanded a more formal letter renouncing his personal status as part of the application process for the 1915 statute. However, there was later some confusion about whether Maka was using the decree from 1912. But being born in Gabon in West Central (Equatorial) Africa, Maka could not use the 1912 statute because it only applied to those born in French West Africa. Governor-General AOF à Lieutenant-Gouverneur de Guinée au sujet de demande de naturalisation Maka (Governor General of French West Africa to Lieutenant Governor of Guinea regarding the naturalization application of Maka), May 3, 1918.

95. I found two extraordinary exceptions. Louis-Alix-Hector do Sacramento, his wife, and three children were naturalized as French based on the February 7, 1897 citizenship decree. Sacramento is listed as having been born in Lagos, Nigeria of a British father. His wife Virginia Moreira Pinto was born in Porto-Novo. "Décret No. 30779 Président de la République Française par l'application du décret du 7 février 1897: Do Sacramento, Louis-Alix-Hector ayant trois enfants mineurs; Pinto, Virginia-Moreira, 9 août 1919,"

French citizenship and flexibility under customary law. Several times in West Africa and in France, Houénou made calls to respect African “traditions,” and the coalition from the members of the extended Houénou family to support his candidacy purposefully included senior women and men, as a nod to “tradition” and the power of elders. He adamantly insisted on ritual funeral rites for his father, against the wishes of some of his family members, and perhaps, even against the wishes of his deceased father.⁹⁶ There may have been some romanticism lurking in Houénou’s position, sentiments such as those expressed back in 1921 in *Involution*. But it is significant that he maintained the image of “African-ness” alongside French citizenship, rather than suggesting that people would abandon local practices for “Frenchness,” and what many presumed was modernity.

The height of Houénou’s expression of simultaneous “African-ness” and “Frenchness” came during the 1928 electoral campaigns in Senegal after the bruising jail sentence and the appeals hearing in Dakar. After the hearing, Houénou stayed in Senegal to campaign against the candidacy of Blaise Diagne, the Senegalese deputy who had brought libel charges against his journal *Les Continents*, causing the journal to fold.⁹⁷ In speeches that he gave during the campaign that were apparently published, Houénou called forcefully for autonomy of French West Africa and the full application of the French republican constitution. He refused to see France

(“Decree No. 30779 President of the French Republic by application of the decree of February 7, 1897: Do Sacramento, Louis-Alix-Hector having three minor children; Pinto, Virginia-Moreira, August 9, 1919) *Bulletin des Lois [Bulletin of Laws]* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1919), 661. The autobiography of a descendant of the Sacramento family suggests that Sacramento was a black Brazilian. Ange Miguel do Sacramento, *Neither Black Nor White: An Unconventional Life* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2011). Also see “Décret No. 30337 Président de la République Française par l’application du décret du 14 janvier 1918: Kaniba Diakite, femme Keita (Moriba),” (“Decree No. 30337 President of the French Republic in application of the decree of January 14, 1918: Kaniba Diakita, wife of Keita (Moriba)” *Bulletin des Lois [Bulletin of Laws]* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1919), 1381. The decree stated that Diakite, the wife of Moriba Keita, who was also given citizenship rights with, presumably their two children, were to be able to “enjoy civil rights administered in the future under French law.” The unusual wording makes it seem as if she had acquired a status more akin to naturalization.

96. Generally, on the power of elders and women in this region of West Africa, see Lorelle D. Semley, *Mother Is Gold, Father Is Glass: Gender and Colonialism in a Yoruba Town* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011). Prince Kojo Tovalou Houénou à Dakpe Possy Berry, (Prince Kojo Tovalou Houénou to Dakpe Possy Berry) January 11, 1926, FM AFFPOL 575/6, ANOM. Some members of the Tovalou Quénum family disavowed Houénou’s actions, especially his antagonism of Governor Fourn. Dépêche Télégraphique “Famille Tovalou Quénum, (Telegram “Tovalou Quénum Family”) April 8, 1926, FM AFFPOL 575/6, ANOM.

97. Conklin, “Who Speaks for Africa?,” 302–37.

and its empire as separate entities. He wrote, “In this France of 100 million, you have beside your Victor Hugo... a humble Senegalese, Sudanese, or Malagasy soldier ensuring the integrity of the nation, or the peasant in Normandy... whose labor like that the black farmer creates the richness... of one France indivisible.”⁹⁸ For Houénou, citizenship in the French empire was a right for Africans as Africans, not only as Africans striving to be French. In the end, could one be modern, African, and European at once?

Houénou tried one last time to do so in the last years of his life after living quietly in Paris from 1928 to 1932 and after announcing his marriage to a black American singer named Roberta Dodds Crawford that year. But many of his problems and his own behavior from the mid-1920s resurfaced again. Within months of his wedding, the Argentine widow of his former associate Ouanilo Behanzin, a prince of the former Dahomey kingdom, successfully sued him for fraud, leading again to his arrest. The trial occurred amidst rumors that Houénou and the woman had had an affair.⁹⁹ It was also near that same time that he attempted to campaign for a delegate seat on the Superior Council of Dahomey, against a French official. He apparently requested funds from his extended family members, but unable to obtain the financial support (it was the period of a worldwide economic depression), he abandoned his bid. He returned to Dahomey in 1933, claiming to have arrived to “fight against the authorities and defend the local populations,” and a few months later French colonial officials complained that he was trying to agitate rural populations in the interior of the colony. And before arriving in Dahomey, he engaged in writing letters and cables to claim relationships with metropolitan authorities and displace the power of officials in the colonies over him.¹⁰⁰ Revisiting all of his old haunts in West Africa, he filed fraud charges against his old nemesis Germain Crespin, and wound up in a courtroom scuffle with him. When Houénou moved to Senegal to try to practice law, he was arrested

98. Zinsou and Zouménéou, *Kojo Tovalou Houénou*, 202.

99. “La veuve et la belle-fille de Behanzin parties civiles contre le prince Kaja (sic) Tovalou,” [“The widow and daughter-in-law of Behanzin in a civil suit against Prince Kaja (sic) Tovalou”] *Les Annales coloniales* 32, 121 (November 19, 1932): 2; “L’heritage de Behanzin et le prince avocat Kojo Tovalou,” [“The Heritage of Behanzin and the Prince Lawyer Kojo Tovalou”] *Les Annales coloniales* 32, 131 (December 13, 1932:2; and “Kojo Tovalou ira en prison,” [“Kojo Tovalou is going to prison”] *La Dépêche coloniale et maritime*, December 12–13, 1932, 2.

100. Information au sujet de Marc Codjo (sic) Tovalou Houénou, sans date et confidentiel (Information on Marc Codjo (sic) Tovalou Houénou, no date and confidential). 1E 18 2/8, ANOM.

for his involvement in the altercation with Crespín; he died in July 1936 in prison in Dakar, Senegal, apparently a broken man.¹⁰¹

Scholars have presented Houénou with diverse interests, implying that his French, pan-African, or Dahomean identities and alliances were in conflict with one another and the source of his problems. However, Houénou thought of himself as *simultaneously* French, Dahomean, African, and black. Black British author Caryl Phillips, born in St. Kitts, reared in England, and resident in the United States, has spoken of “inhabit[ing] two cultures or more” rather than being “between two cultures.”¹⁰² I prefer this formulation to what Salman Rushdie has referred to as his own “double unbelonging.”¹⁰³ At multiple points in his life, Houénou asserted that he “belonged” as a French citizen, as an African, as a writer/activist, and as a lawyer. In 1926, in the midst of his battles with the French colonial regime over his rights to the leading title in this family, Houénou himself wrote in a letter to his arch-rival Crespín: “I am French because of Dahomean [sic] and my loyalty toward my first homeland is the best guarantee of my fidelity to the second.”¹⁰⁴ And 2 years later in the midst of the Senegalese election campaign, he is reported to have said, “Dahomean I am, I am African, like you, and consequently Negro [black].”¹⁰⁵ Given his ongoing difficulties leading a few years later to his tragic end, it is possible to question whether he was so avowedly loyal to France and still separating an idealized vision of the metropolis from what he saw as the corrupt colonies.¹⁰⁶

It was during Houénou’s 1933 visit to Dahomey that Emile Zinsou, future president of Dahomey, then a teenager, recalled a conversation that suggested that Houénou’s position had hardened in relation to France. A young Zinsou eagerly proclaimed that France should send Africans to France for education so that Africans could occupy positions held by the French in the colonies. Houénou decried Zinsou’s naïveté, declaring that the French would not support such activities, adding bitterly,

101. Lieutenant-Gouverneur Fourn à Gouverneur Général de l’Afrique Occidentale Française (Lieutenant Gouverneur Fourn to Gouverneur General of French West Africa), May 1, 1935, 8G 1, 14 MIOM 2146, ANOM; Manning and Spiegler, “Tovalou-Houénou: Pan-African,” 24.

102. Pico Iyer, “Caryl Phillips: Lannan Literary Videos (1995),” in *Conversations with Caryl Phillips*, ed. Renée Schattelman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 39–40.

103. Salman Rushdie, *East, West: Stories* (New York: Random House, 1994), 141.

104. Marc Kojo Tovalou Houénou à Germain Crespín (Marc Kojo Tovalou Houénou to Germain Crespín), February 8, 1926, FM AFFPOL 574/7, ANOM.

105. Zinsou and Zouménou, *Kojo Tovalou Houénou*, 200.

106. Stokes, “Kojo Tovalou Houénou,” 6.

“You are lambs going to the wolves for help.”¹⁰⁷ To paint a trajectory of increasing radicalism and disillusionment oversimplifies the complexity of Houénou’s intellectual and political activity, working both within and against the law and French colonialist ideologies. It is easy to both underestimate and overestimate the radicalism of his ideas. The consistent portrait of Houénou as an “assimilationist” or “reformist” undervalues the profound intellectual challenge that Houénou mounted to French notions of republicanism and citizenship when he played metropolitan ideals against colonial realities. Houénou was not simply naïve or “duped” by French rhetoric, he was actively exposing a naked truth of French imperialism. Focusing on his interactions with Garvey or the black cultural events he sponsored in Paris overstates a certain type of Pan-Africanism in his activities, without recognizing how Africans living on the continent also engaged in influential forms of critique and activism. Recalling his earliest writings in *Involution*, Houénou’s valorization and sometimes romanticization of African culture was based in universalist ideologies as much as, if not more than, a belief in some racialized essence.

Transcending these core tensions between the specificity and universality of “blackness” and “Frenchness” has been an ongoing struggle for intellectuals, activists, and scholars. Even if Houénou’s star was already waning in 1931, it is impossible not to wonder if he met Aimé Césaire, the future Martinican writer and politician, who arrived in Paris as an eighteen-year old student that year. During his much longer and more influential career, Césaire attained French department status, albeit fraught for Martinique, and remained committed to the idea of a blackness that was universal. Césaire remarked in an interview in 1997 that, “The West told us that in order to be universal we had to start by denying that we were Black. I, on the contrary, said to myself that the more we were Black, the more universal we would be.”¹⁰⁸ Like Houénou, Césaire’s conceptualization of a universal blackness was shaped by the specificity of his experience in a French Atlantic world.

When Houénou left Paris in 1933 to pursue a declining political and legal career in Dahomey and Senegal, perhaps he believed he had already seen both the possibilities and the limits of fusing blackness, citizenship, and the ideal of the universal in the crucible that was interwar Paris. But what if he could have seen this different world after World War II when

107. Zinsou and Zouménou, *Kojo Tovalou Houénou*, 10.

108. Annick Thébica Melsan, “The Liberating Power of Words: An Interview with Poet Aimé Césaire,” *Journal of Pan African Studies* 2 (2008): 5. Also, see Euzhan Palcy, *Aimé Césaire: Une Voix pour l’Histoire* [*Aimé Césaire: A Voice for History*] (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1994).

the former African colonies became part of a French Union? Would he have supported this vision so close to what he himself had described in the 1920s? One can imagine that Houénou, who was so willing to accept many forms of pluralism and who was able to occupy multiple social and legal spaces at once, would have supported these measures, piecemeal and problematic as they were. And then, like so many others, he would have been vigilant and prepared to struggle for much, much more.