

## REVIEWS OF BOOKS

### A MAN OF HIS AND OUR OWN TIMES

*Yves Person, un historien de l'Afrique engagé dans son temps.*

Edited by Charles Becker, Roland Colin, Liliane Daronian, and Claude Hélène Parrot.

Paris: IMAF/Éditions Karthala, 2015. Pp. 520. Paperback, no price given (ISBN 978-2-8111-1412-1).

doi:10.1017/S0021853716000724

**Key Words:** West Africa, biography, colonial administration, military, oral sources, precolonial, war.

Yves Person – Breton, Socialist, and pioneering historian of Africa – passed away in 1982 at the age of 57. He had published the third volume of the *thèse d'état* he modestly entitled *Samori, un révolution Dyula* a mere seven years earlier; this was hardly enough time for his 2,400-page *magnum opus* to be read, much less digested. Some three decades later, some of Person's former students and colleagues organized a conference on his work and intellectual legacy at Paris's Institut des Mondes Africains (IMAF), formerly the Centre de Recherches Africaines, which he directed for many years. The volume under review is the fruit of that conference. However, in order to appreciate Yves Person the 'engaged historian', and *Yves Person* the book, one must first appreciate *Samori*.

One struggles to describe *Samori, un révolution Dyula*. It is more than magisterial; it is almost literally show stopping. Person's pursuit of Samori (d. 1900) led him across much of Guinea, northern Côte d'Ivoire, and southern Mali, during which time he conducted some 900 interviews and plumbed multiple archives. In the wake of this sweeping and comprehensive research, only the bravest and most dedicated historians have ventured onto his terrain, which nonetheless constitutes fertile ground for some of the most vital questions in West African history. Person understood Samori as both a brilliant individual – in political and military terms – and as a radical element within a *longue durée* structure that relied on stranger-host relationships to preserve peace between ethnic groups exercising complementary socioeconomic monopolies. Samori's 'Dyula revolution' upset that tradition as Muslim merchants seized political power from their hosts. The thesis is powerful, but the work itself is both exhaustive and exhausting; in the volume under review, Bertrand Hirsch offers a useful and somewhat disheartening analysis of *Samori's* reception, or relative lack thereof.

Until the publication of *Yves Person*, it has been difficult for historians of succeeding generations to assess the full weight of Person's contribution to the historiography of Africa, which extends well beyond *Samori*. *Yves Person* is divided into five distinct sections, but a quick tour of the table of contents gives a better idea of the scope of Person's interests and the impact of his teaching and scholarship. One finds illuminating papers on the interface between Islam and its conceptual counterparts in West Africa; on the defense of minority languages and cultures; on relationships between warriors and clerics; on trade union activism; on Togo, Burundi, and Porto-Novo; and, particularly

on oral history. An extensive bibliography of Person's publications figures amongst the many invaluable elements of this volume, as does a description of his personal archives, which are catalogued and accessible at the IMAF.

As the title of *Yves Person* suggests, Person was a man of his time and place. The son of a career officer in the French colonial military, in 1945 he enrolled in the *classe préparatoire* at the prestigious Lycée Louis-le-Grand. He went on to win admission to the Ecole Nationale de la France d'Outre-Mer (ENFOM, formerly the Ecole Coloniale), where Léopold Sedar Senghor was one of his instructors. On graduating, he worked directly under François Mitterand, then Minister of Overseas France, and developed durable ties to both Mitterand and the Socialist party. His Parisian education in the centralized French empire therefore enabled him to frequent both future heads of state. It also inculcated in him a commitment to socialism that would distinguish him from some of his Marxist and Communist peers in the French Africanist milieu. One imagines that his awareness of his Breton identity – his parents did not speak the language at home – must also have been shaped by both the deadly predicament of national minorities during his adolescence and the complex, inclusive political architecture of the emergent French Union that first brought him to Africa.

Person began his administrative career as a '*petit commandant*' in Northern Dahomey (now Benin), but he would soon use his administrative postings to pursue research into Samori and his empire. In the early 1960s, as his administrative career drew to a close, he was recruited into the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS). He had the privilege to work at, and briefly to chair, the celebrated history department at the Université de Dakar. In 1968, he would defend his *thèse d'état* under the supervision of Georges Balandier, a key figure in the creation of modern African studies in France. Person, in turn, would go on to direct the studies of such influential African historians as Iba Der Thiam, Bintou Sanankoua, Boubacar Barry, Thierno Mouctar Bah, Ismaël Barry, and Mamadou Diouf. Not incidentally, several of them were Guineans in exile from Sékou Touré's regime, for which Person shared their contempt.

Person's significance was not limited to the Samorian terrain on which he left his indelible mark. He was an early champion of oral sources for African history, publishing on the subject in 1962 (a mere one year following Jan Vansina's path-breaking *De la Tradition Orale*). He was a partisan of the labor movement, a fervent Breton nationalist, and a comparatively early practitioner of women's history. Given that Person's signature intellectual and political commitment was to national and linguistic minorities, and against the hegemony of the nation-state, one wonders how this pioneering historian of Africa might be read today, when such questions continue to weigh so heavily on African-descended and Muslim minorities in France and beyond. In helping to make such reflections possible, all those who contributed to *Yves Person* deserve our thanks.

GREGORY MANN  
Columbia University