Joseph Ki-Zerbo and CAMES

A Pan-African story of self-recovery

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Abstract

This article analyzes the eminent role played by historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo in the 1968 creation of a pan-African epistemic community at the very dawn of independence: the African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education (CAMES). Ki-Zerbo's role cannot be understood by ignoring the historical context of the post-war period, when the battle to end the remnants of subjection was in full swing with the end of an African university under the Western academic mantle. This is why my theoretical approach crosses the paths of institutional history (the CAMES) with the biography of an individual to understand the overall history of a society or institution. To fuel my analysis, I draw mainly on the Cames archives, academic works devoted to Ki-Zerbo, his own sketches of ego-history and my book on the history of the CAMES.

Key words

Joseph Ki-Zerbo, African independences, African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education (CAMES), African University, ego-history

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Introduction

He was the man who didn't want to sleep on other people's mats and he had the lofty voice and incisive pen to proclaim it to all and sundry. Joseph Ki-Zerbo, eclectic thinker, integral transmitter, fertile and talented historian, pioneer in various fields of African historiography, convinced pan-Africanist and uncompromising African patriot, left an irreversible mark on the African epistemic and political community of his time. If his memory remains vivid sixteen years after his death on December 4, 2006 in Ouagadougou, it's because this man was both a man of deep thought and a man of concrete commitment, in constant search of a way of thinking that was suited to action. The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) made no mistake when it described him on his death as “the great Iroko”, king of the African rainforest, standing tall in his dignity and majesty (CODESRIA, 2006), making him, after South Africa's Archie Mafeje and Kenya's Ali Mazrui and Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, a life member of this pan-African institution. If his long intellectual and political career has been sufficiently studied, the return to Ki-Zerbo aims to explore new, meaningful cognitive horizons. The Burkinabe historian's major role in the creation of the Council for Higher Education in Africa and Madagascar (CAMES) is a case in point, little studied by those who strive to assess his intellectual and political work. This article which aims to bridge this hermeneutical gap, begins by recalling some of the features of Ki-Zerbo's anti-imperialist struggle and his pan-African convictions which lay the foundations for the creation of Cames in January 1968. Once this link has been established, I endeavor to situate his leading role in the creation of this autonomous institutional police force, the Cames. Finally, I conclude with an inventory of the institution's achievements after the Ki-Zerbo years.

Joseph Ki-Zerbo, historian and uncompromising pan-Africanist

Joseph Ki-Zerbo, born on June 21, 1922 in Toma, Upper Volta, was part of the first generation of African historians trained according to the standards of French universities. On the subject of his vocation as a historian, Joseph Ki-Zerbo recounts in a kind of ego-history where one's own life is placed on the historian's workbench[1], in other words, where the historian narrates himself:

> I chose history because my father lived a long time. He was a man of history. He had carried a part of our local history, since he was the first Christian in Upper Volta, and he loved to tell stories. His education prepared me for the profession of historian. I also believe that history is the ‹teacher of life' (historia magistra vitae). (Ki-Zerbo, 2013).

1 Patrick Boucheron, “Georges Duby: Ego-histoire. Première version”, in Pierre Nora (ed.) *Le débat*, May-August 2011, no. 165, Paris, Gallimard, p. 101.

Emmanuel Mounier is also, along with Alfred Diban, Ki-Zerbo's father[2], one of those who influenced his conception of history. A Christian philosopher, Mounier retained many elements of the European tradition of critical thinking and the struggle to liberate the human person from all forces of oppression and obscurantism (Ki-Zerbo, 2013). Ki-Zerbo's shift to Mounier and Marxist ideology thus reflects an ethic of political commitment made necessary by his vocation as a historian. A disciple of the great masters of historical and political science such as Pierre Renouvin, André Aymard, Fernand Braudel and Raymond Aron whose contribution was decisive in his intellectual training, Joseph Ki-Zerbo in fact, draws on several registers to forge his personality, which, as he himself admits, has "set out by opposing" (Ki-Zerbo, 2013). Like so many others of his generation such as Cheikh Anta Diop, his years of academic and political training were marked by what Malagasy intellectual and politician Jacques Rabemananjara (1956) called the “detoxification period” that had begun for many Africans on the benches of Paris universities.

Joseph Ki-Zerbo had a solid training as a historian, as evidenced by the diploma of Aggregation he obtained in 1956. He also forged a pan-African conscience by being active in numerous student associations and by working officially or informally with a number of leaders on the African independence project, including Kwamé N'krumah, Sékou Touré, Modibo Keita, Amilcar Cabral, Jomo Kenyatta, Tom Mboya, Julius Nyerere and others (Nyamnjoh, 2007). From then on, the historian was committed to political action. One of his long-standing friends, the Senegalese academic and politician Assane Seck, points out that no “African renaissance” is either conceivable or possible without real political independence, enabling the people to decide for themselves and their fate. Joseph Ki-Zerbo began his political struggle in this way (Seck, 2006). So, as soon as Guinea Conakry proclaimed its independence in September 1958, Joseph Ki-Zerbo decided to take part in a contingent of volunteer teachers organized by the Syndicat des professeurs africains du Sénégal (SPAS) to help the country overcome the difficult task of replacing French civil servants who had been summarily recalled by their homeland. But Joseph Ki-Zerbo did not stay long in Guinea as the totalitarian regime adopted by the rulers was not to his liking (Seck, 2006). Was it this disappointment that prompted him to explore his own path? In 1958, he founded the Mouvement de Libération Nationale (MLN) with a number of young freedom-loving African intellectuals, thus, as Roland Colin (2006) points out, staying away from traditional political parties. The MLN opted for immediate independence, the creation of a United States of Africa, and a socialism that was resolutely humanist and rooted in African values, while embracing modernity. In the concrete conditions of the process underway, the MLN, like Kwamé N'krumah, opted for independence first, as privileging unity would have rejected independence towards an unpredictable horizon since the work of division had already dismantled the colonial blocs (Afrique-Occidentale Française - AOF and Afrique-Équatoriale Française - AEF) (Diagne, 2006). This concrete commitment was served by a vitriolic pen denouncing Paris's desire to keep its grip on Africa. His text from the early 1950s, published under the title “Le devoir de décolonisation” (The duty of decolonization) caused a

2 Born around 1875, Alfred Diban, to whom his son Ki-Zerbo dedicated a book, is considered to be the first Christian in Upper Volta, whose Christianization he helped to bring about, particularly in the Samo country from which he came after a long period of captivity in Timbuktu. In 1975, he went to Rome and was presented to Paul VI. He died in 1980 in Ouagadougou during the visit of John Paul II. For further details, see Joseph Ki Zerbo, *Alfred Diban premier chrétien de Haute-Volta*, Paris, Le Cerf, 1983, 148 p.

stir in ordinary colonial circles (Colin, 2006 p. 16). But Joseph Ki-Zerbo didn't care. He drove the nail in the coffin in 1956, reacting to French delaying tactics aimed at pushing back the liberation of Africa through the famous *loi-cadre* or Gaston Deferre law of the same year:

> At a time when the wall of colonization is cracking on all sides, Negroes, who have more reason than anyone else to hasten its collapse, would be criminals to give it the slightest support, even in the form of a parliamentary ballot paper. It is with all our might [he continues] that we must hasten this collapse. (Ki-Zerbo, 1958).

When independence came in 1960, the activist Joseph Ki-Zerbo continued to stand as a sharp point of resistance against the vestiges of the colonial past. His battle for Africa's intellectual autonomy is an extension of his pan-African and anti-imperialist struggle to achieve true freedom for Africa, a prerequisite for its rebirth. His political struggle is, so to speak, behind the project to create the CAMES.

CAMES: when the historian writes history

The battle for the intellectual autonomy of the University was, one might say, an extension of Joseph Ki-Zerbo's political action to liberate Africa from French tutelage. The establishment of a school system, often in the hands of Catholic or Protestant missions, and the access of a minority to secondary and higher education, raised a Westernized intellectual elite, especially in West Africa (Droz, 2006). In the exact opposite of the colonial project of subjection, the latter wanted to take part in what Ashis Nandy (2007) calls “the moral and cognitive adventure against oppression”. For many African intellectuals, the demand for self-appropriation at the heart of the decolonization project meant putting an end to Western tutelage over cognitive processes. In other words, to get rid of the lingering smell of the father (Sarr, 2016) by leaving what Valentin Mudimbe calls the “colonial library[3]”. This is one of the reasons why education, including higher education, was one of the major demands of the nationalist movement (Mamdani, 1994) and Tanzanian economist Issa Shivji (2005) adds: “Through the university, we asserted our right to freedom of thought, the foundation of the right to self-determination”, all of which made the existence of an African university under the Western academic mantle incongruous. However, this model was the rule, as the metropoles, in this case France, tried to perpetuate their domination. Everywhere in Africa under French domination, institutes of higher education or universities, emerged at that time, subservient to the French language and mode of operation, prolonging a relationship of subordination (Cissé, 2018). Against this tendency to maintain the old structure, the French-speaking countries of Africa were lagging behind the English-speaking ones, who had been making this demand since the end of the 19th century, culminating in the period of independence. The question of inter-university cooperation for example, was the focus of a seminar held in Freetown from December 11 to 16, 1961. Funded by the Sierra Leone Ministry of Education, the meeting brought together some 42 participants (English and French speakers) who were invited to reflect on the challenges of creating the West African Intellectual Community. Nigerian Saburi Biobaku's (1962) proposal was decidedly more avant-garde. He proposed the creation of the Association of

3 Valentin Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa. Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988.

West African Universities. This would have an executive committee comprising mainly the heads of West African universities and would meet at one of these universities every two years.

Joseph Ki-Zerbo was one of the leading figures when this issue became an important one in the French-speaking West African public arena and his numerous positions were constant and uncompromising. As early as 1961, he set the tone by calling for the Africanization of teaching programs:

> The importance of chapters such as glacial erosion should be greatly reduced, while African issues such as tropical erosion should be given greater prominence" (Ki-Zerbo, 1961).

In 1963, at the invitation of the International Meetings[4] on the theme of "Dialogue and Violence", he established himself as a forerunner in the fight against the African brain drain to the West. He was convinced that:

> "To persist in expatriating Africa's intellectual youth for five, seven or ten years to the four winds of space, and thus prepare a showdown through the return of these young people, instead of agreeing to help Africans establish autonomous centers of higher education on a regional scale, is to prepare violence in Africa, not dialogue (Ki-Zerbo, 1963).

For this pragmatic man, however, political discourse had to be accompanied by concrete action on the ground and the context lent itself to bold initiatives in this direction. The 1960s showed that the mystique of unity of which Kwamé N'krumah was the most prominent exponent, was for many African political leaders emerging from decolonization, the credible political and ideological project to best address the question of Africa's development. A global, post-colonial geopolitical context took shape during this favorable period, leading to the creation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963, which became the African Union (AU) on July 9, 2002 in Durban, South Africa. Other organizations, this time on a regional scale, also came into being. Such was the case of the Common African and Malagasy Organization (OCAM) which, at the time of its creation, brought together 14 French-speaking African countries. A summit conference was held in Tananarive, Madagascar, from June 25 to 27, 1966. On this occasion, Léopold Sédar Senghor, President of the Republic of Senegal, presented his project for a French-speaking community and suggested the creation of CAMES (N'dao, 2008).

The organization was to include representatives from all OCAM states, plus Burundi, France, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania and the Maghreb states. In 1966, the CAMES project gained in visibility through the Conference of French-speaking African and Malagasy Ministers of Education (CONFEMEN) held in Paris. This organization, created in 1960 and made up of 15 French-speaking member states at the time of its creation, gave a specific mandate to the consultative commission of experts:

> To undertake in-depth research into the structures and teaching of African and Malagasy universities, taking into account the French reform of higher education, in a broad spirit of inter-African cooperation and if possible unity[5].

A further step towards the creation of the CAMES was taken in early 1967, when the Conference of Ministers of Education of French-speaking countries met in

4 Established at the dawn of the 1960s, they were organized each year in Bouaké in central Côte d'Ivoire, bringing together European and African researchers to discuss a theme related to the social sciences in Africa

5 CAMES Archives. *CAMES, an institution at the service of African inter-university cooperation*, December 1981-February 1987, p. 2.

Abidjan (January 26-February 1). The conference opened with the address by President Félix Houphouët-Boigny who was somewhat critical of the outcome of the May 1961 Addis Ababa conference on the development of education in Africa. While he hailed "a conference inspired by a high ideal of progress and animated by an ardent faith in the future" (Boigny, 1967, p. 2), he however felt that:

> Five years (sic) of experience compel us to recognize that these programs, drawn up with enthusiasm, were often lacking in realism... The absence of doctrine or thinking about education diverted us from initially adopting principles, structures, methods and programs truly adapted to the realities of our African (Boigny, 1967, p. 6).

The Upper Volta historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo, a member of the Advisory Commission of Experts in Francophone Higher Education in Africa, tasked with proposing the necessary reforms in higher education in Africa and Madagascar, agreed with Félix Houphouët-Boigny on the need to adapt higher education to African realities. At the Abidjan conference, he presented a report entitled *Definition, role and function of higher education in Africa and Madagascar*, which foreshadowed the creation of CAMES:

> This is why the advisory commission of experts felt that it was urgent to set up a minimum of structures to coordinate the projects of States in this field of university cooperation, and to take a forward-looking view of the future. Couldn't we create an African and Malagasy office for university cooperation? This office could be headed by a steering committee made up of all the ministers of national education. It would also include an advisory board made up of rectors, professors and various personalities. Finally, a secretariat made up of members appointed by the Ministers "intuitu personae" would be responsible for preparing files and implementing decisions, as well as for all documentation, information, diploma accreditation and other work. Finally, relations with other African universities could be decided and organized within the framework of this office. This is a vital option for the future. To avoid it would be to evade a historical responsibility. (Boigny, 1967, p. 6).

This militancy finally led to the creation of the CAMES on January 23, 1968, at the end of the summit of heads of state (January 22-23) through Resolution 23 of the OCAM. Joseph Ki-Zerbo, the driving force behind this pan-African institution, was appointed Secretary General, and during his twelve years at the head of CAMES, he was responsible for programs on African pharmacopoeia and the exchange of professors between African universities. The creation of the Inter-African Consultative Committees (CCI) remains the true emblem of the Ki-Zerbo years. They made the procedures for awarding degrees in Africa more permanent, without resorting to French validation bodies. It was a successful relocation of higher education teacher qualifications from Europe to Africa.

To understand the importance of this issue, we need to appreciate the risks that what Assane Seck describes as "timid conservatism" could entail (Seck, 2006, p. 42). Indeed, the first modern university in the French-speaking countries of West Africa, that of Dakar, only got off the ground in the years 1949-1950, fed by a handful of baccalaureate holders trained in the two high schools of Dakar and Saint-Louis. But things changed abruptly with the 1956 loi-cadre instituting semi-autonomy, and secondary education quickly gained real momentum. In all the colonies, embryonic universities were created but their future was far from guaranteed. The problem of training teachers for these institutions soon arose. Would we continue to rely on teachers from a patchwork of international cooperation agencies? On

the French qualification system whose African problems were to be the focus of attention? The answer was a resounding "no" for Joseph Ki-Zerbo, who was fighting against all remnants of subordination. So, rather than leave each state to "fend for itself", risking a cacophony that would prevent any form of meaningful inter-African cooperation, he fought for a supranational academic coordination body, hence the CAMES, a real tool for creating an African epistemic community.

CAMES after Ki-Zerbo: a critical assessment

The founding fathers of CAMES had conceived it as the symbol of an Africa united by knowledge, the driving force behind the African renaissance. When in 1993, its heirs took stock of its quarter-century of existence, it was to note that "one of the elements of the institution's hidden face remains promotion by internal means as unfortunately advocated by some teachers in member countries[6]". In fact, the national versus supranational debate is a permanent feature in the history of the CAMES. Today, as in the past, it structures debates in certain academic circles on the legitimacy of CAMES to take the place of sovereign states in scientific peer review. As early as April 1980, at the ordinary session of the CAMES in Kigali, the adoption of the text on competitive examinations for the Aggregation in Legal and Economic Sciences was opposed by the representatives of Cameroon, Congo and Niger[7].

These countries, with their own assessment bodies, no doubt feared the competition that these inter-African aggregation juries could represent. The history of CAMES is marked by the desire of certain members to emancipate themselves from these procedures for political, ideological, academic and geographical reasons. Relations between Madagascar and CAMES, for example, reflect the problems associated with the construction of a transnational academic space in Africa. Madagascar has maintained an ambivalent relationship with CAMES, even though it is one of the founding members. The Malagasy side cited "the permanent decline in the number of teachers due to retirements, very low results in the (CAMES[8]) competitive examination, compromising the renewal of retiring staff, files rejected for reasons of age and non-conformity, the island position making links difficult (with the continent[9]) and overdue contributions as a member state[10]". The Niger case combines ideological, political and academic considerations. When the CCI agreement was first signed in 1976 in N'Djamena, Niger had already had its own national body for the promotion of teachers for a year, called the University Advisory Committee (CCU). Yet Niger was one of the first signatories to the CAMES agreement on CCIs, along with Upper Volta, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Chad and Togo. The country participated in CAMES programs until 1980 at which time, unfortunately, notes Bouli Ali Diallo, then Rector of the University of Niamey, a misinterpretation of the role of the CCI by the Niger authorities of the time led them to reject the CAMES CCI agreement. They had been led to believe that it was the CAMES that appointed teachers and researchers to the grades corresponding to their registration on the eligibility lists. Feeling that CAMES was exercising a power that fell within the realm of national sovereignty,

6 CAMES Archives. *Bilan du CAMES*, 1993. p.21.
7 CAMES Archives. *Rapport de la session ordinaire du CAMES*. Kigali, April 12-14 1980, p.19.
8 The author underlines this element.
9 The author underlines this element.
10 CAMES Archives. *Rapport d'activités. Exercice 2012*, p. 9.

the Niger authorities decided to withdraw Niger from the CAMES CCI program. To understand Niger's withdrawal in 1980, when it hosted the CCI session of the Cames, we need to look at the major ideological positioning of the universities of Niger during that period. The revolutionary left, embodied by, among others, the leading figure of the famous physicist Abdou Moumouni Dioffo, partly trained in the USSR, was dominant at the time. According to Nigerian academic Habibou Abarchi (2018), they saw the Cames as an instrument of French imperialism, tasked with maintaining control over the universities of its former colonies. Cameroon's bilingualism which obliged the country to take account of the heritage of the Anglo-Saxon university in its English-speaking universities whose rules did not always follow those of the CAMES, modeled on France, and Senegal's degree reform in 2016, despite the reservations of the CAMES, are to be taken seriously.

British anthropologist Mary Douglas insists that "the maintenance of the institution is threatened not so much by external dangers as by uncertainty about the involvement of its members" (Cordonnier, 2005). The various cases examined here are certainly less about chauvinism than a desire to deconstruct the hegemony of the CAMES in defining the criteria of scholarly legitimacy. In the absence of reforms in this area, the defense of the national path is seen as an alternative to promotion under the banner of that institution. On the other hand, recriminations against current evaluation bodies and the organization of titles must be carefully examined; otherwise the national principle will be reinforced. Another situation that somewhat undermines the legacy of the founding fathers is the over-representation of foreigners on aggregation juries: unlike the CCIs, the aggregation competitions in medicine, law and economics still call on the expertise of foreigners to sit on their juries. This over-representation of foreigners was undoubtedly intended to reassure skeptical opinions about Africa's ability to confer scientific validity on these competitive examinations. In a phase of transition and maturation, pragmatism dictated that this decision be retained. Fifty-five years after the creation of the CAMES, the question of foreign presence on aggregation juries can now be seen in a different light.

Conclusion

The creation of Cames is therefore the culmination of Joseph Ki-Zerbo's intrepid struggle to restore Africa's eminent historical dignity after the long colonial night. For this militant of the African renaissance, intelligent maieutics had to be based on the quest for thought that was suited to action. The creation of Cames is concrete proof of this requirement. Understood as an aesthetic of self-reinvention, this pan-African institution has come a long way, more than fifty years after its creation in Niamey, Niger. The successes achieved should not blind us to the divisive tendencies of certain states, under pressure from teachers' unions eager to break with the Cames evaluation system, deemed too obsolete and unnecessarily restrictive. The time has come for the Cames to undergo a transformation to bring it into line with the modern university. In any case, if Cames didn't exist, we'd have to invent it now[11], as its founder Joseph Ki-Zerbo once said. Reinvent it, I might add.

11 Nantes Diplomatic Archives Center. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Ouagadougou Post Office. CAMES activity report for 1970, presented in Bangui in 1971.

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