

Africanist

by Élara Bertho

In her memoir, the renowned French researcher Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch looks back on her Jewish childhood, her first experience of Africa in the 1960s, the neo-colonialist stance of some academics, and her intellectual and political career, in which anti-racism has played a pivotal role.

Reviewed: Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Choix de l'Afrique. Les combats d'une pionnière de l'histoire africaine*, Paris, La Découverte, 2021. 304 pp., €22.

Few researchers embody a historiographical moment as much as Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch. She has had a lasting impact on the history of African societies. She is known as "Mama Africa", which is also the title of the tribute volume dedicated to her by Odile Goerg and Chantal Chanson-Jabeur¹. She embodies an all-encompassing perspective on the African continent and is committed to disseminating knowledge to students and the general public alike.

Her memoir, *Le Choix de l'Afrique*, presents an ego-history of her intellectual journey, from her clandestine childhood under the Nazi occupation of France to her latest popular works on the history of slavery and the slave trade.

Coquery-Vidrovitch is a pioneer in many fields (the history of African women, the history of African urbanization, the intersecting history of slavery, connected

¹ Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, Chantal Chanson-Jabeur, Odile Goerg, «Mama Africa ». *Hommage à Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2005.

history), and has been instrumental in training students in France and Africa, as in the case of the Dakar School, for example. She is also a leading anti-racist activist and a founding member of the Representative Council of France's Black Associations (CRAN). This book centers her intellectual and personal career around the same struggle: anti-racism, in all its forms.

A clandestine childhood

This is without doubt the most touching part of the book, in which the historian gives a modest account of her years growing up as an undeclared Jewish girl during the Occupation. Born in 1935, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch was six years old when her father, Rémy Vidrovitch, died in 1942. She was raised by her mother, older sister, grandmother and their maid—a circle of women who, she says, protected her from a sense of fear. "I have no memories of fear or anxiety," she states (p. 42).

Mute until a fairly late age, the little girl absorbed events: the Exodus, the relocations, the conversion to Christianity, the family's clandestine life in Paris, the suicide of one of her grandfathers. The figure of her mother, in particular, is masterfully portrayed: It was she who took the decision not to declare the family as Jewish; it was she who threw herself "into the lion's den" in an effort to trace her deported father, going straight to the Commissariat-General for Jewish Affairs (in a very powerful scene described on p. 35); it was she who organized the relocations and name changes. Ultimately, she saved the family.

Because the State was treating its citizens so wrongly, personal morality became paramount. It was a relentless education in self-responsibility, with the added conviction that being Jewish was a status of which I should be proud, not because of its history, which I didn't know, but because it was for this reason that we were being unduly persecuted" (p. 16).

In her fight against anti-Semitism and all forms of racism, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch establishes a clear link between her clandestine childhood and her career as an anti-discrimination researcher in Africa. She attended the *École Normale Supérieure de Jeunes Filles* in Sèvres from 1956, but felt like a "black sheep", a "non-conformist" who was far too much of an outsider to fit into the boarding school mold.

In July 1960, she accompanied her husband, Michel Coquery, to Oran for military service in the cartography department. She gave birth to her first daughter there. She then chose to focus her work on Africa, a decision she attributes to her anti-conformism in the academic context of the time.

A small world

Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch joined the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in 1962 as a research assistant. Under the supervision of Henri Brunschwig, she studied the concessionary companies that exploited French Equatorial Africa, and Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza's third expedition to the Congo (1881-1883). She passionately followed the teachings of sociologist Georges Balandier, geographer Gilles Sautter, anthropologist Denise Paulme and linguist Pierre Alexandre.

"I was certainly not the first historian in France to study Africa, but I was the first who, without any emotional attachment to the continent, began to work *after* the independence movements" (pp. 78-79).

Thanks to her generational standpoint, she adopted a decolonial approach from the outset, free of the "scoriae of colonial ideas unconsciously conveyed" by her predecessors (p. 79). In those years, she identified as resolutely Marxist and anti-colonial.

Her ambition was to follow the same route as Savorgnan de Brazza, from Gabon to Congo, Oubangui-Chari (now Central Africa) and Chad. In 1965, she arrived in sub-Saharan Africa for the first time, in Gabon. This marks the start of a whole section of the book focused on denouncing the neo-colonialism of academia, technical cooperation and big business.

Development workers, academics and entrepreneurs are described in turn in a series of short, scathing portraits, revealing a neo-colonialism openly on display. French songwriter Herbert Pepper and his wife, for example, instruct their houseboy to act "dumb" to entertain the guests. The anthropologists Emmanuel Terray, Marc Augé and later Michel Izard are depicted conducting their fieldwork from the comfort of their villas, sipping aperitifs and ordering informers to report to their table.

This style of satirical portraiture immediately places Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch in the position of moralist, as she describes the downside of technical and academic cooperation. A few delightful scenes provide an illustration of the context in which the main theories promoting oral history were produced.

Documenting colonial scandals

Along the way, amid the varying degrees of neo-colonial attitudes among her colleagues, the historian assembled a wealth of documentation on the concessionary companies. Most notably, she uncovered the 1904 Mboko scandal (in present-day Central Africa), which was hushed up by the highest colonial authorities. More than 1,500 deaths were ignored, and the administrator at the time, Guibert, was forced into silence. Savorgnan de Brazza's report, written after he completed his inspection mission in 1905, came at the wrong time: "Two scandals of this magnitude at the same time were too much for the French authorities" (p. 112).

By patiently annotating and editing these sources, the historian helped bring these scandals to light, providing in-depth documentation of the mechanisms that underpinned colonial exploitation and the manufacturing of institutional silence².

The book also reveals the temporal and material nature of archives. In Aix-en-Provence, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch helped classify part of the *Archives Nationales d'Outre-mer*, which had been housed for several years at the Bordeaux docks and whose listings had been lost. Today, these collections are the main source for French imperial history, and it is difficult to imagine them left damp and unclassified. In Africa, too, she reveals the varying states of preservation of both national and private archives. While some holdings are particularly well cared for, such as those in Dakar, she also recounts astonishing scenes of piles of papers stored under a veranda in Ndjolé. "I found a huge old suitcase, which I crammed to the brim with papers in random order, as they were in total disarray [...], and sent the whole lot off to France" (p. 128).

² Camille Savorgnan de Brazza, Dominique Bellec, Catherine Coquery, *Mission Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, et al., Le rapport Brazza. Mission d'enquête du Congo : rapport et documents, 1905-1907*, Neuville-en-Champagne, Passager clandestin, 2014.

African history, women's history

Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch describes the excitement of the 1968 protests back in France and her brief involvement with the Communist Party. She also relates the countless institutional quarrels that led to the creation of the research laboratory on Africa (*Connaissance du Tiers-Monde*, now CESSMA, at Paris Diderot University). At the newly established Paris 7 University, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and his young team set up a research group focusing on women's history, African history and "long-term" history. A whole new academic field began to take shape.

During her career, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch has supervised numerous theses in France and Africa. The Dakar School was created following the Africanization of programs and staff, and she contributed to this transformation by supervising the theses of Senegalese teachers (Abdoulaye Bathily, Boubacar Barry, etc.). At the same time, she has edited general textbooks on African history, *Africa and Africans in the 19th century*³ and *A Brief History of Africa*⁴. The final chapters of her memoir focus on her public relations activities (such as the *L'Afrique des routes* exhibition at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris⁵) and her anti-racist activism.

This sweeping retrospective documents a particular era in French research, the work of a researcher who has four children, and the ups and downs of fieldwork. Adopting the oral style of interviews, even private confidences, the book is deliberately polemical. Although it contains a few redundancies and editorial flaws, it offers a powerful argument for anti-racism, while tracing an exceptional career that has left its mark across many disciplines.

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³ Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *L'Afrique et les Africains au XIXe siècle : mutations, révolutions, crises*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1999.

⁴ Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Petite histoire de l'Afrique : l'Afrique au sud du Sahara de la préhistoire à nos jours*, Paris, La Découverte, 2016.

⁵ Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *L'Afrique des routes : histoire de la circulation des hommes, des richesses et des idées à travers le continent africain : exposition*, Paris, Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, 2017.