

How Local Economic Intermediaries shaped Elite Conflict and the Turn to Anticolonialism in French Indochina and French West Africa

Abstract: By design, elites benefit from power arrangements, so how and why does the dominant political strategy among elites become reformist in some contexts and radical in others? This study uses a paired comparison to show why Vietnamese elite political strategy became increasingly radical after World War I to foreclose opportunities for collaboration with colonial authority, whereas Senegalese elite political strategy entailed cooperation with colonial commerce as more serious challenges to French authority were constrained. Analyzing materials from four colonial archives across Vietnam, Senegal, and France, I find that longstanding local economic intermediaries originating from a precolonial era held central positions in trade networks to influence intra-elite alliances and cleavages. These intermediaries emerged as powerful trans-local actors during capitalist expansion in the nineteenth century and retained autonomy from both indigenous and colonial states. Despite the similar structural positions these intermediaries held in relational networks, I find they shaped elite configurations divergently in each case. By focusing on local dynamics through a third “other” actor endogenous to colonial political processes and situated outside of the colonizer-colonized dyad, this study provides a model of local intra-elite triadic dynamics rooted in transformations of the global economy.

Theoretical Framework: A Triadic Model of Intra-Elite Conflict

This research reconsiders the political import of local merchant classes by situating indigenous structure and strategy as dynamic processes that enable and constrain forms of collaboration and revolution. The global political economy is characterized by “chains of command” that connect large commercial enterprises to on-the-ground resource extractors; these are laden with relations of power in which one group of actors “sends and binds” another group to act on its behalf (Adams 1996; Reed 2017; Wallerstein 1983). While these chains typically favor elites who are structurally aligned with the state, the opportunity for elites to break with the state is shaped by those external to the dyadic chains of power and extraction connecting imperial center to periphery and often endogenous to the system they are disrupting (Zhang 2021).

The central innovation of this study is the inclusion of “third” actors—tertiary economic actors such as merchants, traders, shippers, and shopkeepers—who are outside of direct state control yet central movers in commodity chains (Adams 2005). Conceptually, the inclusion of third actors builds on the argument that social structures are built on agglomerative processes from the bottom up through fundamental relationships of dyads and triads (Granovetter 1985; Martin 2009; Simmel 1955; Tilly 1998). The power relation between elites and their commercial and state patrons can thus be ruptured by an intermediary “other” actor to shape the unexpected radicalization of elites who are favored by, but can break from, their patrons. This analytical framework of triangulation between intermediaries, radicals, and reformists extends recent innovations that consider “third” actors in the re-constitution of cleavages.

Historical Context and Methodology

The colonial field was tied to the metropolitan field as colonial administrative systems grafted onto existing indigenous systems. Colonial rule needed to be cost-efficient, so authorities relied

on existing indigenous systems of exchange. This paper focuses on an important conjuncture of the 1920s, in which post-war recovery shifted the burden of empire onto the colonies (Cogneau 2023). During this period, colonial finance provided competing opportunity structures for colonized leaders to oppose not only colonial monopolies but also each other.

This study employs a paired comparison design built on comparative historical work in sociology and political science (Geertz 1968; Hammer and Itzigsohn 2025; Tarrow 2010). The comparison between Vietnam and Senegal seeks to refine theories of the relationship between radicals and moderates, addressing why radicals emerged and triumphed during Vietnam's revolution while reformists led Senegal towards political independence. The data collection involved two years of research in Vietnam and Senegal, utilizing archival materials from the National Archives of Vietnam, Centers I and IV, the National Archives of Senegal, the French National Archives (ANOM), and library resources from the Vietnamese Academy of Social Science, Institute of history, and the West African Research Center.

Vietnam: Chinese Merchants as Bottlenecks of Reform

In French Indochina, the central economic intermediaries were the *Minh Huong* (Chinese) merchants. Historically, merchant capital in the Sinosphere was never allowed to be independent of the mandarin state. This relative autonomy from the imperial court allowed these traders to become “merchants without empire” by the time of French arrival (Gungwu 1990).

The Chinese business class helps explain Vietnamese responses to colonialism for several reasons. First, they played a central role in rice cultivation, which made up 45% of Vietnam's commodity exports (Bittmann and Cornejo 2025). By the end of the 1920s, the Chinese owned 75 rice mills, while the Vietnamese owned five times fewer (Trần 2002). Chinese village shopkeepers were established in almost every village of southern Vietnam (Goscha 2016). The French depended on Chinese networks and knowledge of village practices. A 1923 colonial report noted that these intermediaries were “indispensable” (Nguyễn Phan 2002).

Through the lens of Chinese business, merchants served as bottlenecks in the chain linking French interests to indigenous elites, enabling radicalism through two mechanisms. First, Chinese merchants actively undermined an emerging Vietnamese reformist business class (the “Constitutionalists”). When Vietnamese “economic” nationalists like Bùi Quang Chiêu organized rice boycotts in 1919 to contest Chinese dominance, the failure of these reformist aspirations crucially enabled radical Vietnamese elites to emerge. Second, radical Vietnamese elites took advantage of the material networks of Chinese merchants that shuffled them across Asia for communist organizing. Radicalism in Vietnam thus had an indirect effect: the Chinese undermining of indigenous bourgeoisie economic aspirations for reform within the colonial system pushed the movement toward revolution.

Senegal: Mouride Marabouts and the Collaborative Anchor

In Senegal, the “third” actors were religious elites known as marabouts, particularly those of the Mouride brotherhood (Cruise O'Brien 1971; Sy 1969). The rising role of the marabout in commercial activity is linked to the mid-19th-century transition from the slave trade to “legitimate commerce” (Rodney 1967, 1970). The power of the Mourides was cemented through

their control of production. Groundnuts accounted for nearly 90% of all exports, making Senegal the second-largest exporter in the world (Diallo Côt-Trung 1998; Lewis 2022). Postwar economic decline resulted in a breeding ground for speculative finance through a 1919 agricultural campaign that benefited the trading houses in Senegal (Thiam 1993:118). As Boubacar Barry notes, the marabouts generally managed peasant production and exploited the agricultural surplus of the labor of their disciples. When information about their social background was collected on them, marabouts generally came from higher caste families, were wealthy, and educated in Arabic (Behrman [1970] 2013:190–91). They played “a collaborative role in the establishment of the trading economy for the benefit of commercial houses” (Barry 1992: 57), and “there is no doubt that these marabouts played a considerable political role that the colonial power could not bypass” (Harding 1997). Marabouts managed peasant production and exploited the agricultural surplus of the labor of their disciples (Barry 1998; Lewis 2022; Moitt 1997). In 1926, the founder of the Mourides, Cheikh Amadu Bamba, contributed 500,000 francs to stabilize the French gold franc, 25% of the total requested (Harrison 1988).

The logistical and financial support of the Mourides was a determining factor in shaping elite conflict. They favored the reformist agenda of Blaise Diagne, the first African Deputy in French Parliament. Mouride leaders provided Diagne with financial support and helped recruit 140,000 West Africans for the French Army during WWI. The consequential trifecta of symbiotic dependencies between French business, Diagniste African elites, and Mouride marabouts significantly constrained opportunities for radical dissent among Diagne’s opposition. Anti-Diagnost Galandou Diouf lost in the 1928 parliamentary by only a few hundred votes and claimed that public authorities, assisted by Bordeaux financial powers, swayed votes in favor of Diagne using suppression, bribes, and coercion. French police reports had “bolshhevik tendencies” written in red under Diouf’s file and followed by surveillance of his trips between Paris and Senegal alongside Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté, one of the founders of African communism who established the pan-Africanist League for the Defense of the Negro Race and its periodical *La Race Nègre* (ANS 21G38:35-42). Diouf “fiercely criticized” Diagne in a 1928 issue of *La Race Nègre* (ANS 21G44:35) and sought to invalidate Diagne’s election in by going to Paris (Thiam 1993:248) (Thiam 1993:248). While Diouf himself was not a communist, his affiliations with the French Socialist party and more radical networks exposed him to ideological contexts for the “new forms of struggle in France and West Africa” (Harris 2009:214).

While radical opponents like Galandou Diouf called for agrarian reform and had ties to communist organizers, they were consistently outmatched by the resources of the collaborationist block. Even when a potential radical ally appeared within the religious elite, Cheikh Anta, who supported Diouf, the French administration intervened to exile him and ensure a pro-Diagne successor was instituted. In Senegal, economic intermediaries allied with collaborationist elites in favor of colonial merchant capital while undermining radical agrarian change. ainst the establishment figure” of Diagne (Robinson 2000:225). Cheikh Anta had greater autonomy given his longstanding reputation as a financial businessman and supported Diouf financially. Chaikh Anta bought Diouf’s car (Harrison 1988:166) and property, helping the latter to avoid bankruptcy (Cruise O’Brien 1988:138). Suspicions of Cheikh Anta’s subversiveness is also evidenced in a surveillance report when his old home was visited by an Egyptian Muslim representative, who deposited 15,000 francs, had relations with “leading figures with subversive ideas” and was deemed “suspect, especially in this current hour when Soviet activity is becoming more active”

(ANS 21G38:133-134). Other marabouts were shown to support Diouf by hosting meeting space or contributing financially (ANS 21 G 122:87). These efforts, however, were ultimately unsuccessful in the period after WWI, as economic intermediaries allied with collaborationist elites in favor of colonial merchant capital while undermining radical agrarian change

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