



What Got Us Here, Won't Get Us There

15th International Conference of the European Academy of Design

ONLINE and in PERSON in Brazil, Finland, India, Spain and the UK.

16-20 October 2023

The challenges towards the emergence of an African higher design education: case study of a French design diploma relocated to Benin

Caroline Grellier

University of Nîmes

grellier.caroline.design@gmail.com

Abstract: In October 2019, Francophone Africa's first graduating design school opened its doors in Cotonou, Benin. A French private design school, chosen by a Beninese government agency, carried the project and recruited me to create and run the school. For nearly three years, as an observer-participant, I fulfilled the mission of delocalizing the French diploma to Benin, which acts as a normative instrument. Although the project responds to a market, this approach produces a double effect: the importation of a French pedagogical culture, but also of a French design culture in Benin. As design education in French-speaking Africa emerges, and as international design research simultaneously focuses on decolonising design and design education through a pluriversal lens, this case study aims to analyse the issues at stake in this model of design education in Benin, which is already paving the way for a multiplication in the coming years.

Keywords: Decolonising design, Design education, Design degree, Design culture, Benin

1. Introduction

For the past decade, design research has been exploring the place of design and design education in non-Western cultures. Like the pioneering Decolonizing Design group created in 2013 or the Special Interest Group of the Design Research Society dedicated to Pluriversal Design initiated in 2019, this international dynamic carries the project of deconstructing a dominant design culture, built from the sole Western perspective. The objective is to recognize the existence and validity of design knowledge that is expressed outside this hegemonic framework.

The communities of researchers based in the South are widely mobilised on this subject, including on the African continent, as evidenced by the Design Education Forum of South Africa entitled "Decolonize!" in 2017, or via the actions of the Panafrican Design Institute whose mission is to disseminate African design cultures. However, we observe that French-speaking African countries,

representing a third of the states on the African continent, remain on the sidelines of these reflections. And for good reason, since the construction of a higher education in design is just emerging: while design training is absent in universities, the very first school of design with a diploma in French-speaking Africa opened its doors in October 2019 in Cotonou, Benin. This project, the result of a partnership between a Beninese governmental innovation agency and a thirty-year-old French private design school, chosen by the agency, is based on a logic of complete transfer of its French model to Benin. In a context of extraversion of African francophone higher education, and in light of the research dynamics around decolonizing design, the question posed in this article is the following: what are the most striking facts of this experience and what lessons can be drawn from it?

For almost three years, I have been in the position of participant-observer at the heart of this project, first as Executive Director and Course Leader until June 2020 and as a teacher until June 2021. This paper proposes to bring together the most salient observations of the experience I took part in, to present an analysis of important issues of an emerging model of design education in Africa, which tends to multiply in the years to come.

This paper also has the particularity of sharing a territory still unexplored by design research and of opening up the field of reflection.

2. Context of the creation of the beninese design school

2.1 Training in design before 2019

What were the models of design education in Benin before the first school to offer degrees?

The first possibility was self-training. The democratisation of the Internet has facilitated access to training resources: tutorials available on Youtube to learn how to use graphic design software, blogs, forums, platforms dedicated to sharing and commenting on portfolios, online courses (free or paid) allowing one to obtain certifications from recognised design companies, definition content, design history, e-books, documentaries, conferences, etc. Thus, for the profile of those already working as freelance designers, the motivation to join the new and first design school was mainly based on the need for a degree to certify their knowledge and skills.

The second possibility was to join the only design training centre, dedicated to graphic design and audiovisual professions, created in 2017 in Cotonou. This establishment has seen a notable increase in its numbers, thanks to short courses (maximum 3 months), with adapted timetables (evening courses, weekend courses), low costs, and a programme dedicated to learning graphic design software in line with a growing interest among young people. There was no diploma, only certification delivered by the training centre at the end of the course. This private training centre model was inspired by those already established in Nigeria and Ghana.

The third and final possibility was to join a design agency directly and be trained "on the job". To go further and compensate for the lack of training that met their recruitment requirements, the Beninese studio Switch had even initiated its own training programme, announced on its Facebook page in 2020: "A few months ago, based on a need for qualified human resources, we thought of and launched "Le Dojo", an intensive training camp for design professions. It consists of recruiting design enthusiasts, training them for free and integrating the most deserving into our team as collaborators". The transformation of design agencies into design school agencies was already taking place in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire due to a lack of training at the level expected by the job market.

In its government action plan (PAG), Benin launched a project in 2017 to create a City of Innovation and Knowledge, including a campus defined by the desire to offer training that is new in the sub-region. In the wake of this, considering design as a profession of the future in Africa, and noting the lack of diplomas in the field, the government agency in charge of this City issued an international call for projects at the beginning of 2018: foreign design schools were invited to submit their technical and financial proposals in order to benefit from a subsidy allocated to the project to create this new school. One year later, the school opened its doors.

2.2 Origin and trajectory of higher education in Benin

To better understand the Beninese higher education landscape in which the Beninese design school was created, it is important to share an overview of its construction from a historical perspective.

The first texts organising public education in general in present-day Benin were adopted in 1903 (Djeguede, n.d.). Four years earlier, the Kingdom of Dahomey had been integrated into l'*Afrique Occidentale Française* (AOF) (Desplantes, 2013), under the name *Colonie du Dahomey*. In addition to religion and health, education represented for the French colonial power “the principal means of accomplishing its ‘civilising mission’” (Marchand, 1971, p. 349), which was justified by the massive propaganda of a self-proclaimed duty of assistance (Røge, 2012) to a people considered inferior¹ (Fanon, 1961). The colonial school aimed at alienation and cultural uprooting (Yameogo, 2021), through the imposition of the French educational model and its values².

In 1960, when Dahomey declared its independence, higher education was virtually non-existent in Africa (Pourtier, 2010). Indeed, the colonists had only created a few schools, centralised and regionalised, with the aim of training the administrative staff of French West Africa. The Nigerian professor Abdou Moumouni Dioffo explains in his book *L'éducation en Afrique*, published in 1963, the mechanism of scarcity and therefore of privilege that was put in place, dedicated to the sacredness of French education, when he quotes the words of Governor General Roume in an extract from the *Journal Officiel de l'A.O.F.*, number 1024, published in May 1924: "Let us consider education as a precious thing that should be distributed only with good reason, and let us limit its benefits to qualified beneficiaries."³ (Dioffo, 1963).

According to Dioffo, this same mechanism was repeated after 1960, with the arrival of the first African academics in France. According to him, there was initially a desire to conquer the diplomas that had previously been considered “inaccessible to Negroes” in the colonies. Thus, this “cult of the diploma” increased the perceived value of French higher education, which became a real doctrine (Dioffo, 1964).

At the same time, the movement to create national public universities began in the former colonies: the University of Dahomey was created in 1970 within the Benin Popular Republic. Here again, France supported these projects financially and technically by sending numerous development workers to teach and train teachers (Pourtier, 2010). However, during the 1980s and 1990s, with the end of the *Trente Glorieuses*, France disengaged and the crisis in public education worsened in French-speaking Africa, for two main reasons: on the one hand, African countries lacked the means

¹ In 1853, the writer Arthur de Gobineau published his *Essay on the Inequality of Races*, which aimed to establish the differences between the white, yellow and black human races. This work contributed greatly to the massive diffusion of this theory, on which the “civilising missions” are based.

² The Malian writer and ethnologist Amadou Hampâté Ba describes the daily life of colonised schoolchildren in his novel *Amkoullel, l'enfant peul*, published in 1991.

³ In the original “Considérons l’instruction comme une chose précieuse qu’on ne distribue qu’à bon escient et limitons-en les bienfaits à des bénéficiaires qualifiés.”, Dioffo, M. (2019). *L'éducation en Afrique*. Editions science et bien commun, Mémoire des Suds - we translate.

to restructure; and on the other, France and development aid agencies maintained a neo-colonial policy, which fostered an ideological domination and slowed down the profound reforms of African education systems (Pourtier, 2010; Dioffo, 1964). In this sense, Pourtier analyses the African university as being "an imitation of the French university, the question of the full validity or equivalence of diplomas having always been a sensitive point in Franco-African university relations"⁴ (Pourtier, 2010).

In addition to the deterioration of the public offer of higher education in Benin, there is a growing demand for access to higher education, due to a significant demographic factor. For example, the public University of Abomey-Calavi, the largest in the country, is close to 100,000 students, five times more than its actual capacity (Koko, 2020). Considering this need, but also the particular importance given to education by African families, as explained by Dioffo (1964), private schools are expanding significantly in sub-Saharan Africa (AFD, 2013). In Benin, the *Direction des Établissements Privés d'Enseignement Supérieur* (DEPES) recorded a 73% increase in new EPES between 2017 and 2019, i.e. eighty-three institutions (Houngbadji, 2020). This privatisation of supply thus brings African private higher education into a globalised education market, as evidenced by the report *The Business of education* in Africa, published by the American financial organisation Carreus Capital in 2017.

Seizing on the "cult of the diploma" (Dioffo, 1964), private higher education institutions are adopting a strategy of partnership with Western private higher education schools, with a view to attracting an affluent class that does not have the means, like the elites, to send their children to European or North American universities (Pourtier, 2010). These partnerships are based on double degree programmes, African and Western, or delocalised Western courses. In his speech on 20 March 2018, French President Emmanuel Macron announced that he wanted to see the number of African students benefiting from delocalised French training double, without having to leave their countries⁵ (Baumard, 2018).

In sum, this insight allows us to understand the historical cultural complexity at play between France and Benin, within which the French school, by delocalising its diploma to a Beninese institution, is responding to the demand of a local market. Furthermore, in contrast to the criticism levelled at African universities in general for offering courses of study that are inadequate for the job market (Pourtier, 2010), an enthusiastic and reassuring communication about the profession of designer is declaimed: as witnessed by a round table organised by the Beninese design school in September 2021 entitled "Design: the new must-have job"⁶, or the massive display of slogans in the streets of Cotonou, such as "Dare to take up a profession with a future", "If you are worried about your future, train for a profession of tomorrow", "Ensure your future with us in the design professions"⁷.

2.3 Role and positioning of the French design school

A few weeks before the opening of its "little Beninese sister"⁸ in 2019, the French school created a page on its website dedicated to the Beninese project, which reads: "This arrival on African soil reinforces our position as a forerunner in the field of design education in France and

⁴ In the original: "un décalque de l'université française, la question de la validité de plein droit ou de l'équivalence des diplômes ayant toujours été un point sensible dans les relations universitaires franco-africaines.", Pourtier, R. (2010). L'éducation, enjeu majeur de l'Afrique post-indépendances: Cinquante ans d'enseignement en Afrique: un bilan en demi-teinte. *Afrique contemporaine*, 235, 101-114. - we translate.

⁵ At the same time, the French government had announced that it wanted to increase tuition fees for foreigners and attract more students from non-African emerging countries.

⁶ In French: "Design : le nouveau métier incontournable" - we translate.

⁷ In French: "Osez un métier d'avenir", "Si votre avenir vous inquiète, formez-vous à un métier de demain", "Assurez votre avenir avec nous dans les métiers du design" - we translate.

⁸ In French: "petite soeur béninoise" - expression used by the French design school - we translate.

internationally⁹¹⁰. This attribute of “forerunner”, coupled with the colonial imagination of an “African soil”, reveals not only its political and commercial ambition on the market, but also its desire to claim an expertise reinforced by the primacy of its experience, justifying in its eyes its role as prescriber, which is also attributed to it by the Beninese agency. The Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire reminds us that prescription is a key element in the articulation of power, at the heart of the colonial act: “each prescription represents the imposition of the choice of one individual on another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed into that which conforms to the consciousness of the prescriber.” (Freire, 2020, p.46-47). Here, the prescription of the French design school is based on highlighting its expertise in the training of designers.

On the Beninese design school's website, the introduction reads: “We train the continent's best African designers to international standards, who will make their cultures shine in Africa and around the world”¹¹. The notion of international “standards” seems to imply that there are universal norms to which future African designers must conform and be trained, without these rules having to depend in any way on their own knowledge. Questioned during a live talk on the colonisation of design practices, the Indian designer Anushka Kandwala (2020), for example, exposes the problem of the decolonisation of taste: “In design schools, a minimalist aesthetic is favoured, which corresponds to a standard of Western modernity, but the question of the colonial influences in these standards and who decreed them as such is not asked”.

It is precisely on this question of the French training frame of reference, as a standard established within the Beninese school, that our reading in the following section focuses.

3. The experience of relocation a French design diploma to Benin

3.1 The importation of a French pedagogical cultural device

The reform of the *Diplôme National des Métiers d'Art et du Design* in France (DNMADE), adopted at the start of the 2019 academic year by the French design school, was seized upon as an opportunity to deliver in Cotonou no longer a school certificate¹², but a degree diploma, recognised by the French state, presented as an additional argument to convince African students, in the logic of the “cult of the diploma” (Dioffo, 1964).

As Cros and Raisky (2010) point out, apart from its normative act, the reference system also acts as a cultural benchmark, providing a common basis for organising the skills to be acquired towards the professional world in a given country (Kazi-Tani, Valentin, 2019). The DNMADE is the result of a historical trajectory of design education in France, its evolution and its questioning specific to its cultural and professional context (Kazi-Tani, Valentin, 2019). It is based on the experience of the *Brevet de Technicien Supérieur* (BTS) and *Diplôme des Métiers d'Art* (DMA) courses, a French particularity, and claims the objective of an “organic link between design and art professions”¹³ (DNMADE Training referential, 2020, p.21).

⁹ In reality, the training offered by the French school abroad consists of a whole class of French students doing their Masters abroad and not the training of foreign students at home.

¹⁰ In the original: “Cette arrivée sur le sol africain renforce notre positionnement de précurseur dans le domaine de l'éducation au design en France et à l'international.” - in French, we translate. www.lecoledesign.com

¹¹ In the original: “Nous formons aux standards internationaux les meilleurs designers africains du continent, qui feront rayonner leurs cultures en Afrique et dans le monde.” - in French, we translate. www.africadesign.school

¹² The Beninese school has completed its opening year in 2019-2020 with this certificate project from the French design school.

¹³ In the original: “un lien organique entre design et métiers d'art” - we translate.

Moreover, the DNMADE is structured in fourteen mentions, offering a multitude of career paths and outlets designed from France, the relevance of which can be questioned in African contexts. The Franco-Lebanese designer Marc Baroud (2019), who was in charge of the creation and design department of a school in Beirut, Lebanon, bears witness to this same problem when he writes: "I kept questioning the 'transposability' of teaching product design - where the logic of mass production is inescapable [...] - in a country where industry did not exist"¹⁴. Although the analysis of the design market in West Africa is beyond the scope of this article, this point of questioning cannot be ignored since all degree courses aim to qualify future professionals in line with the needs of companies and the economic activity of their territories. However, in a largely extroverted value system that persists in French-speaking Africa (Ki-Zerbo, 1992), a Beninese company will, in the vast majority of cases, give preference to hiring a candidate with a Western diploma, which will also justify a higher salary (Dioffo, 1964; Pourtier, 2010). Thus, the French diploma represents a grail for the Beninese student, even if it is disconnected from local realities.

The question of the diploma also arose within the Beninese design school itself, during the recruitment of the local teaching team. Two major difficulties emerged: firstly, the Ministry required the recruited professors to have a doctorate in their field of teaching in order to give them the administrative authorisation to teach, even though there were no design degrees in the sub-region and even fewer doctoral programmes in design. Secondly, it was an arduous challenge to find profiles corresponding to the specialities mentioned in the French referential.

The particularity of the team of teachers was therefore ultimately its novice character: of the nineteen teachers recruited, only three had previous teaching experience: drawing, art history, general culture. And among the nine design teachers, three were graduated from Ghanaian, American, French and Moroccan training centres or design schools; the others were self-taught and discovered the organisation and content of the courses through the French reference system. It was composed of three blocks of courses (generic, cross-disciplinary, practical and professional courses) and their associated hourly volumes, defined according to the prerequisites after a French Baccalauréat.

3.2 The importation of a French design culture

From the twelve teaching units of the digital design and graphic design curricula, we select three of the most striking examples to illustrate our analysis about the effects of importing a French, Western design culture into a design school in Benin. In the first block called "Humanities and Culture", the History of design course remained an unresolved issue for me in my role as pedagogical coordinator of the Beninese design school, since "the historiography that contextualises the study and socio-cultural perception of design in French schools is mainly based on the classical canons related to industrial design, i.e. Arts & Crafts, Bauhaus, Deutscher Werkbund, etc."¹⁵ (Kazi-Tani, Valentin, 2019). Thus, the transposition of a French History of design course to Benin raised the question of the design culture carried by the Beninese school. Although a literature on a World History of design exists, even in minority, it remains unknown in France and accessible only in English. The aim of this literature is to propose other accounts of the birth of design, far from a single history (Adichie, 2009) linked to the Western industrial and socio-economic trajectory. It is about recognising the validity of

¹⁴ In the original: "Je ne cessais de remettre en question la "transposabilité" de l'enseignement du design de produits - où la logique de production de masse est incontournable [...] - dans un pays où l'industrie n'existait pas.", Baroud, M. (2019). *Design en contexte*. in D.Bihanic. *Design en regards*. Les Presses du réel. - we translate.

¹⁵ In the original: "l'historiographie qui contextualise l'étude et la perception socioculturelle du design dans les écoles françaises repose principalement sur les canons classiques liés au design industriel, soit les Arts & Crafts, le Bauhaus, le Deutscher Werkbund, etc.", Kazi-Tani, T., Valentin, F. (2019). *Des discours sur les méthodes*. in D. Bihanic. *Design en regards*. Les Presses du Réel. - we translate.

the expression of other design cultures (Margolin, 2015). On the African continent, researchers are devoting recent work to demonstrating, for example, the existence of a "pre-colonial design" (Ambole, 2020), or questioning the possibility of a design History specific to South Africa (Pretorius, 2016). Ahmed Ansari, a Pakistani-born design researcher and co-founder of the Decolonising Design platform, rightly outlines the challenge and urgency of training design academics, historians and theorists, capable of translating and constructing non-Anglo-European canons (Ansari, 2018).

In the third block, composed essentially by the design studio, the Design Project Methodology course, which I was in charge of, is a second example, among many others, that raised key questions during this experience. The French design school presented a three-phase method in its curriculum: problem analysis - solution search - solution selection and development. In talking to a teacher of a project workshop, where the students had to apply this method, he admitted to me that he had discovered it and had never had the impression of working in this way, and therefore felt uncomfortable teaching it. This question of method is actually directly related to culture: "in the context of French design education, the description and claim of transmitting 'creative methods' understood as a specific competence of the profession, also acts as a cultural and symbolic device that constructs a discourse of reference on design"¹⁶ (Kazi-Tani, Valentin, 2019). In this regard, design studies researcher Mahmoud Keshavarz attributes a Western character to the unique definition of design as a "problem-solving task" and Amollo Ambole (2020) proposes to rethink design thinking from an African perspective. To this end, Keshavarz (2018) explains that "Western white knowledge of design is often posited as universal facts without corporeal localisations, while failing to account for the geographical, historical and corporeal aspects of its producers". The question of mobilising African endogenous knowledge (Hountondji, 1994) about design is beyond the scope of this paper but is a major question mark for the construction of an African higher design education, aligned with its cultural value system, and should be the subject of significant in-depth research to contribute to the decolonisation of design at stake.

Finally, a debate that occurred in the middle of my art class on 24 March 2021 is worth mentioning here as it engages the reflection on the importation of a French design culture into Benin from the perception of the Beninese school students. As he had just finished presenting his biomimetic design, inspired by Benin's natural heritage (this was the subject given following an educational outing to the protected forest of Niaouli), a student challenged me with these words: "Madam, do we have to be inspired by our African cultures because we are African and the school is called Africa Design School or can we do what we want in this school?¹⁷". The question then launched a powerful identity debate in the class, bringing to the forefront the question of the expectations of the French school, judge and decision-maker of their graduation, towards them, students of the Beninese school, in the face of the discourse of the two schools to "do African", as if to justify a local anchoring, which then resounded in their minds as an injunction.

This last part allows us to take into account the difficulties for the students, as well as for the teachers, to navigate in their socio-cultural environment, while evolving in a decontextualized normative framework.

¹⁶ In the original: "dans le cadre de l'enseignement français du design, la description et la revendication de transmission de 'méthodes créatives' comprises comme compétence spécifique à la profession, agit également comme un dispositif culturel et symbolique qui construit un discours de référence sur le design", Ibid. - we translate.

¹⁷ In French: "Madame, est-ce qu'on doit forcément s'inspirer de nos cultures africaines parce qu'on est africains et que l'école s'appelle Africa Design School ou bien on peut faire ce qu'on veut dans cette école ?" - we translate.

4. Conclusion

Beninese higher education, like those of other French-speaking African countries, still bears the scars of a French colonial heritage that has considerably weakened it. Faced with the deterioration of public university education, private higher education schools are multiplying and cultivating a “cult of the diploma” (Dioffo, 1964) towards the former colonial power, through delocalised training, thus maintaining the supremacy of French education in Africa (Pourteau, 2010). Resituating this context has made it possible to understand the favourable reception that the arrival of a French design degree in Benin has received in the emerging market of higher design education in Francophone Africa.

By transferring its pedagogical engineering to Benin, the French design school decontextualized its training reference framework, which it imposed as a cultural normative device on two levels: on the one hand, it was a question of importing a French pedagogical culture and, on the other, of importing a French and Western design culture.

The experience of applying this decontextualized reference system, which this article bears witness to, sheds light on the limits of this model and on the resulting paradox: while design research is moving towards the exploration of a pluriversal design, bringing together several voices, narratives, and practices around the field of design, this model of creating a Beninese, African design school, copied and pasted from French, Western template and curricula, seems to be a real hindrance to the programme underway towards the decolonisation of design and its teaching. Such a project could not succeed without committing the responsibility of Western schools, as well as future African schools, to enter into “a programme of complete disorder to change the order of the world”¹⁸ (Fanon, 1971). It is a question of interrogating histories and values from other angles in order to enter into a sincere process of observation and understanding of endogenous design cultures and knowledge on the one hand, and locally existing pedagogical cultures and transmission institutions on the other. This effort to deconstruct and renegotiate, while challenging, also embodies the opportunity for design to reinvent itself, as its reorientation and transition (Escobar, 2018) proves necessary in the face of a Westernised civilisation in crisis.

This article relates an experience, seen as a starting point for a series of questions with a political dimension that result from it: How can African countries reappropriate their (higher) education systems? How can we fight against the “cult of the diploma”? How can we rethink the relationship between the cult of the diploma and the training of doctors in design in the countries of the South, in the light of the decolonial research produced? How can we produce and disseminate design research produced from the African continent on itself, which re-interrogates the discipline on its very definition, its historiography and its practices? How can design education be democratised, outside the business of private schools? Why train designers in Africa, for which markets? How can we deconstruct, in the West as well as in Africa, the standards of designer training dictated from the sole Western perspective? What place is there for the valorisation of African cultural identities in a pluralistic reading of design? And last but not least, what does “design” mean in French-speaking Africa, from an African point of view through a French language that adopted this world in the 1960's?

There is an urgent need to produce a decolonial design research that addresses the whole of the African continent, in a university or other framework, that can weave united links within and beyond Africa, at the risk of perpetuating the dynamics of domination that prevent the continent from developing fully in accordance with its own value systems.

¹⁸ In the original: “un programme de désordre complet pour changer l’ordre du monde”, Fanon, F. (1961). *Les damnés de la terre*. Maspero. - we translate.

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About the Author:

Caroline Grellier is a French designer graduated from Ecole Boulle and University of Nîmes, based in West Africa since 2014. For the past five years, she has been involved in several design schools projects in Francophone Africa; as an independent researcher, she explores the question of pluriversal design from an African cultural perspective.

Acknowledgements: A special thanks to Riccardo Cappi, Professor in criminology and Brazilian by adoption, whom I welcomed into my home by happy chance while writing this article, and who provided invaluable assistance by proofreading it.