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RA Reviews' Editorial Voice:

“France Has Always Been a Problem for Africa”:

A Conversation Long Overdue in America

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Africa is the most improvised continent; nearly half of the African Union's 54 member states are former French colonies. Twenty countries south of the Sahara are still Francophone countries where the French language and France's economic interests dominate. An unsettling fact emerges when examining the economic landscape: none of the ten largest African economies are French-speaking. Yet, six of the poorest ten nations on the continent are predominantly Francophone. Eleven out of the 14 countries that use the currencies of the CFA franc, which France backs, are listed among the [least developed](#) by the United Nations. France is indeed a problem for Africa. This is not new; the “French concern” also preoccupied many 19th-century West African leaders.

France initially enriched itself through four centuries of involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. As this trade in African subjects waned in the early 19th century, the French empire builders embarked on a new era of colonial conquests in Africa. They assumed a prominent role in organizing the West Africa Conference, commonly called the Berlin Conference, which effectively led to the partitioning of African territories among various European powers.

West African leaders who confronted the might of France's colonial armies refused to give in, and many declared jihad against the French. This was a customary response, given that most region's inhabitants were Muslim, and traditional wars in Islam were practically justified through the idea of jihad. However, West African leaders demonstrated varying perspectives on the rationale of resisting French conquests. One prominent scholar, Mā al-‘Aynayn, the Mauritanian and Saharan leader, vehemently rejected any compromises with the invading French armies. His 1885 treatise, titled *Hidāyat man Ḥāra fī Amr al-Naṣārā* (A Guide to Those Who Have Been Concerned about the Christian/French Concern), ardently argues that in the face of the unjust French presence, resisting them has become a duty and responsibility for all.

Similarly, Samory Touré of Upper Guinea, the prominent anti-French leader of the region, and Al-Hājj Umar Fuuti Taal, another influential West African figure, chose to force their people to migrate from French occupied-territories rather than accepting the French colonial order.

Following numerous failed truces with the French colonial forces, Lat Dior Diop, the ruler of the last traditional kingdom in the Senegambian region, rejected French presence in his territory. He proclaimed that the French were only welcome as visiting strangers, not permanent residents. As the Wolof saying goes, “*gan du-tabakh*” (a visiting stranger does not build his own house). And, by constructing railways between Dakar and Saint-Louis, which would pass through his territory of Kajoor, the French had declared themselves

residents, not mere visitors. Lat Dior told his people that he would never live to see a railway as railways symbolized French control of colonial subjects and land. Lat Dior met his demise in his final stand against the French colonial army in 1886.

Another tenacious leader, Mamadou Lamine Dramé of Mali and Senegal, rejected French presence in the region; and fought back on various occasions, besieging the French colonial administration in fort Bakel. The fate of these West African figures who led a resistance against France's wars in Sudanic Africa was dramatic and often bloody: they all perished while fighting for the cause of dignity. The French army decapitated Mamadou Lamine and sent his severed head to France as a trophy; his skull is still housed in the [Musée de l'Homme](#) of Paris.

As France consolidated its control over the eight colonial territories in what would eventually form the French West Africa Federation, West African leaders scrambled for ways to salvage what remained of their communities. They transitioned from armed resistance to alternative forms of peaceful opposition. They adopted a cohabitation approach with the colonial forces while fundamentally rejecting submission to French hegemony. For instance, Shaykh Sa'dbu of Mauritania, in his pragmatic approach when dealing with the French, refrained from employing religious rhetoric such as *Naṣārā* (Christians) and instead began referring to them by their racial identity as "French people." He argues that the benefits of avoiding confrontation with the French outweighed the potential harm that could arise from such conflict. In his 1895 treatise, titled *Al-Naṣīḥah: al-‘āmmah Wa al-Khāṣṣah Fī al-Tahdhīr min Muḥārabat al-Faransah* (Public and Private Advice to Warn Against Fighting the French) advocates that the principles of Muslim Muṣlaḥah, or public interest, would discourage resorting to a destructive war when the prospect of achieving truce or peace was viable.

Another scholar, Musa Kamara, strongly advocated for the separation of politics and religion to remove the idea of jihad from the strategy of dealing with the French colonial occupation. He noted that politics is "a self-serving arena for those who desire power and fame." Therefore, it runs counter to the essence of jihad. His book, titled *Akthar Al-Rāghibīn Fī-l-Jihād* (The Majority of the Pseudo-Jihadists), was a powerful declaration of this cause.

On the other hand, Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba, the founder of the Murid community, advocated for a strategy of cautious engagement with the French colonial authorities, often calling for a withdrawal from the colonial state. He wrote in one of his poems that the French often accuse their opponents of being jihadists as a means of justifying their violence. He, therefore, called for a withdrawal from the colonial state, with the aim of safeguarding the interests of his Murid followers.

Like the resistance group's experience, the cohabitation strategy employed by these pacifist leaders proved ineffective in altering French hegemony or redirecting its aggressive actions in West Africa.

From 1895 to 1958, France continued to perpetuate the grim legacy inherited from its participation in the transatlantic slave trade. It compelled African farmers to cultivate resources to support French industries while simultaneously implementing taxation policies aimed at financing what it termed the "burdens of colonization." Furthermore, France conscripted hundreds of thousands of Africans, baptized into *The Senegalese Tirailleurs Corps*, to

participate in European tribal wars, deploying them to defend France against Germany during World [War I](#) and [II](#). Similar numbers were dispatched to colonial war zones such as Indochina and Algeria.

My first encounter with the stories of African veterans of the French wars occurred in the 1980s, during a summer stay in the village of Sam-Sam in the Diourbel region of Senegal. Abdou Ndiaye, also known as Baay Faal, was a limping veteran of France's colonial wars. He recounted a vivid memory: his French officers hastily retreated when German soldiers advanced upon their trench in the French city of Buzancais. They used tennis balls on their chests to disguise themselves as women to pass through the German lines. In this dire situation, only his fellow African recruits remained to fend off the invading Germans. As I moved on to college years later, I never had the chance to corroborate Baay Faal's sad story. However, I refrained from dismissing it because parallels to his tale are told in different contexts, and all available evidence in popular culture does not contradict it. For example, when the surviving veterans of these wars returned to West Africa seeking their rightful back pay, they were met with a horrifying fate in what is now remembered as [Massacre de Thiaroye](#). Their French comrades and supervising officers perpetrated the brutal massacre in December 1944.

Regrettably, the decades that followed the widely celebrated year of Africa's independence in 1960 did not witness any substantial change in France's repressive actions in Africa.

Except for Guinea Conakry, none of these former French colonized territories managed to attain a clear-cut independence from France. They were integrated into what is now known as Francophone Africa, cynically labeled in the last couple of decades, as *Francafrique*. Recognizing Africa's desire for true independence, Charles de Gaulle, the President of France 1959-1969, fostered the illusion of self-determination without granting these nations true economic or political sovereignty. Much like France's historical devastation in Africa, this new arrangement marked the beginning of the third phase of the 'French problem' in Africa following the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism. It consisted of a complex web of neocolonial arrangements that tacitly employed military and political measures to thwart any genuine attempt to break free from France's neocolonialism.

The persistence of this neocolonial arrangement can be attributed to two key factors: [France's Shadow Diplomacy](#) starkly contradicts Paris' public declarations of supporting democracy and self-determination in Africa. In practice, this covert diplomacy [involves unofficial](#) and covert bureaucrats of the French *Élysée*, who significantly shape policy outcomes in Francophone countries. Prominent African leaders and public intellectuals who opposed France's neocolonial structure have often met one of the three fates: removal from political power, dismissal from position of influence and imprisonment, or, tragically, assassination. It is worth noting that, since 1990, an estimated 78% of the 27 coups in countries south of the Saharan have occurred in these Francophone countries.

The second key factor is perpetuated through the use of CFA franc currency, employed by 14 Francophone countries within the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) and the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC). The CFA franc was initially established on December 26, 1945, through a colonial decree, and it was set to a fixed exchange rate with the French Franc, a relationship that continues to the present day with the euro. Recent public scholarly discourse has extensively highlighted the CFA franc's detrimental impact on these countries, spanning its pivotal role in surrendering Africa's monetary policy to France, obstructing much-needed economic diversification in the sub-region, and perpetuating trade imbalances and dependency. To underscore this problem, consider that member countries of this French economic arrangement must deposit 50% of their foreign exchange reserves in the French Treasury and 20% for financial liabilities, leaving only 30% of their accounts within their national borders. When the West African countries contemplated ending this currency colonialism in 2021, President Macron employed shadow diplomacy to quash the effort. He swiftly concurred with President Alassane Ouattara of Côte d'Ivoire, introducing superficial changes to the colonial arrangement while preserving its core structure.

The problem posed by France for Africa extends beyond economic spheres and encompasses cultural and educational dimensions. Liberal critics of French cultural dominance tend to patronize Africa: they often disparage France's influence but frequently fail to provide a clear roadmap to liberation. Many elites draw inspiration from Frantz Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth* but often refrain from advocating for concrete steps to dismantle French economic hegemony in the region.

France has often prided itself on championing Enlightenment values in Africa's literary discourse. However, it is worth noting that, despite its historical dominance in Francophone African literature, there has yet to be a Francophone African Nobel laureate in literature to date. The list of Nobel laureates in literature includes notable authors like Wole Soyinka of Nigeria (1986), Naguib Mahfouz of Egypt (1988), Nadine Gordimer of South Africa (1991), John Coetzee of South Africa (2003), Doris Lessing of Zimbabwe (2007), and more recently, Abdulrazak Gurnah of Tanzania (2021).

This observation underscores France's discouraging effects in shaping literary excellence and producing original ideas within its sphere of influence. It appears recently that there is no free and vibrant democratic life in the Francophone region that is comparable to what one witnesses, despite their shortcomings, in Kenya, Tanzania, Botswana, South Africa, or Ghana. Francophone countries that are spared from military rules are governed by long-standing rulers who reelect themselves for life or modify their constitutions to extend their terms in power. In the best cases, they control the public through eliminating any possible competitive, or free elections by arresting their serious political contenders.

The ongoing discourse surrounding the resurgence of military rule in the Sahel region— Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, overlooks the enduring French hegemony, repression

and exploitation. In reality, the only persistent challenge through African history over the past 500 years is that France is still a problem for Africa.

Nowadays, neo-liberal media pundits would bemoan the state of democracy in Niger while at the same time attempting to rationalize the pervasive poverty endured by its 27 million citizens. Nelson Mandela once astutely observed the banal nature of oppression is that: it normalizes African suffering and desensitizes us to the plights of Black people. While we read about the prevalence of decomposed bodies of African immigrants scattered across the Libyan desert, Tunisia, and across the Mediterranean Sea, decrying the plight of deposed President Mohamed Bazoum is but one aspect of more significant, overlooked tragedies in Africa. In many public appearances, this leader appears to belittle his national army, defend French neocolonial interests, and decline to negotiate a fair deal with French companies that exploit Niger's resources.

For those of us who have traveled through the Republic of Niger and witnessed the dire condition of the country's population, liberal democracy appears hollow and civilian rule remains a mirage unless it brings dignity to its people. Neocolonialism assumes many forms and unfolds through different stages, and I am afraid that liberal democracy is increasingly merging into one of these neocolonial forms.

In his 2005 documentary, [Arlit, deuxième Paris](#), Idrissou Mora-Kpai unveils the evil doings of French corporations operating within Niger's uranium mining fields. To put it succinctly, what brings profit to France all too often results in impoverishment and suffering for the local African communities. I firmly believe that the antidote to military rule lies in establishing a just civilian government, and certainly not in a normalized colonial arrangement disguised as democracy.

Alexis de Tocqueville was right: people would "want equality in freedom, and if they cannot have that, they still want equality in slavery." The pro-junta's appeal to Russia for help reflects their disappointment with the United States' tacit support for Francafrique, whether in its passive "observation" of the legacy of the colonial pact or its perceived complicity with what Charles W. Mills refers to as "[The Racial Contract](#)."

Amidst all these complexities, the only enduring consistent in the Sahel is the pervasive presence of France's hegemony, casting a long shadow over the lives of its people.

How should stakeholders in Africa approach this problem?

African Americans and scholars of African Studies should actively engage in addressing this problem. Their involvement should be driven not only by African solidarity but also by acknowledging that the Humanities have always championed just causes. The plight of former French colonies in Africa for economic development and dignity aligns with the principles of justice and, therefore, deserves their support.

Unfortunately, African solidarity has been somewhat sidelined in the African American civil rights movement since the passing of Malcolm X in 1965. The prevailing version of Dr. King's message that gained prominence in mainstream American politics

and academia was often seen through a nationalist lens. But it is time to bridge his message of justice and equality with a renewed focus on African solidarity. As Dr. King frequently emphasized, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." The US was an observer at the Berlin Conference of 1884, where France claimed the 'legitimacy' of its substantial share of African colonies. In the 21st century, Americans should not endorse that legacy or its unjust perpetuation under the guise of promoting democracy.

African studies professionals should be the agents of change rather than merely pursuing intellectual curiosity or endorsing the status quo. History provides substantial evidence to suggest that genuine change-makers in Africa have primarily arisen from different sectors including nationalists, labor unionists, the military establishment, and pragmatic leaders. While intellectual idealism of the educated elites has its place in Africa, it has primarily impeded the path to meaningful liberation and progress. Francophone Africans in the Sahel are turning to military rule due to their disillusionment with liberal democracy, which has increasingly become the favored channel for French neo-colonialism.

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