

# Africa and France – history, human rights, freedom

## *África e França – história, direitos humanos e liberdade*

Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe\*

### Abstract

For France, the so-called francophonie Africa or the total of 22 countries, mostly in west, northeast, central and southeast Africa (Indian Ocean) that France conquered and occupied in Africa during the course of the pan-European invasion of Africa during the 15th-19th centuries, belong to France in perpetuity. This is in spite of the presumed restoration of independence, since the 1960s, of each of the states concerned. French presidents and top officials of the French republic since the end of World War II, irrespective of ideological or political orientation, attest to this key position in French international politics. Quests for African freedom from this subjugation will be central in charting the salient defining transformative features of African-French relations of this new millennium.

**Keywords:** French colonialism, human rights in Africa, genocide in Africa, African-French relations, French military interventionism.

### Resumo

*Para a França, o chamado Francofonia África ou o total de 22 países, a maioria na zona oeste, nordeste, central e sudeste da África (Oceano Índico) que a França conquistou e ocupou na África durante o curso da invasão pan-europeu de África durante a 15 a 19 séculos, pertencem à França em perpetuidade. Isto é, apesar da restauração da independência presumido, desde 1960, de cada um dos Estados em questão. Presidentes franceses e altos funcionários da República Francesa desde o fim da II Guerra Mundial, independentemente*

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\* PhD pela University of Lancaster, Inglaterra. Especialista em direitos humanos e guerras na África. Professor vinculado à Lancaster University. Lancaster - Reino Unido. E-mail: hekweekwe@hotmail.com

*da orientação ideológica ou política, atestam esta posição-chave na política internacional francesa. Missões para a liberdade Africana será fundamental para mapear as características definidoras transformadoras mais importantes das relações afro-francesa deste novo milênio.*

**Palavras-chave:** O colonialismo francês, direitos humanos em África, o genocídio na África, as relações afro-francês, o intervencionismo militar francês.

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## Introduction

Since the 1960s, there has been a persistent populist myth in North World-South World international politics and relations that the country that retains the “accolade” as the North World’s most military-interventionist power in the South is the United States. Interestingly, this remains the case as a myth! In reality, though, this unenviable “accolade” in global politics is in fact not held by the United States but France. And the South’s geographical focus where France appears not to have anything else but invasion as its own definitive credo in foreign policy is Africa (EKWE-EKWE, 2011, p. 28-34).

In March 2014, *The Washington Post* ran an editorial on the events in the Crimea entitled “President Obama’s foreign policy is based on fantasy” (WASHINGTON POST, 2014). Here, the paper likens Russia’s policy on this peninsular to that of a 19th century conqueror-state. Surprisingly, the editorial does not mention the contemporary world’s *lead* “19th century-style” invader: France. In the past five years, France has invaded Côte d’Ivoire, Mali and the Central African Republic and co-led the invasion of Libya. In December 2013, France invaded Central African Republic (CAR). It is its second invasion of the CAR in 12 years. More importantly, this is the 52nd French invasion of the so-called *francophonie* Africa countries since 1960. In early 2013, it invaded Mali (invasion no. 51); in 2011, it spearheaded the invasion of Libya (no. 50) which also involved Britain and the United States; in 2010, it invaded Côte d’Ivoire, its no. 49 since 1960.

Back in 2003, it was extraordinary to fathom how very hypocritically encased French foreign policy considerations could be especially when it focused on Africa. Or so it seemed. For a country that had displayed unrelenting opposition to the then US and British military intervention in Iraq, France appeared to be basking in the global populist imagination as, perhaps, the country that not only had invented the concept of “non-intervention” in other countries’ internal affairs, but was guided, *unambiguously*, by this principle in its own policy in practice. The robust performance of foreign minister Dominique de Villepin during those dramatic January-March 2003 UN security council debates on Iraq would have added vivid credibility to this assumption (DE VILLEPIN, 2003). In one memorable session in those debates, de Villepin’s opposition to the impending US-British-led invasion of Iraq drew unprecedented applause from even usually reticent diplomats. Such were the liberatory contents in de Villepin’s address that one would not have been too mistaken if they thought that these had been derived, unedited, from the seminal papers of Amilcar Cabral (CABRAL, 1973; CABRAL, 1974), one of the world’s leading restoration-of-independence theorists and philosophers. De Villepin had in fact stated the following in his 14 February 2003 speech to the security council: “[T]he use of force is not justified at this time. There is an alternative to war ... Such intervention could have incalculable consequences for the stability of this scarred and fragile region. It would compound the sense of injustice, increase tensions and risk paving the way to other conflicts ... This message comes to you today from an old country, France, from a continent like mine, Europe, that has known wars, occupation and barbarity ... Faithful to her values, she believes in our ability to build together a better world” (added emphasis). Yet a few weeks after these eloquent declarations and coupled with the preoccupation of an international media audience intensely focused on the unfolding Iraqi crisis, France invaded Central African Republic (CAR). In the wake of a coup d’état that had toppled the pliant, pro-Paris Angé-Felix Patassé regime in Bangui (CAR capital), France sent its troops into the country, with that invasion being no. 48 in Africa since 1960.

## 1 Quintessential target

“Francophonie” Africa constitutes a total of 22 countries, mostly in west, northeast, central and southeast Africa (Indian Ocean) that France conquered and occupied in Africa during the course of the pan-European invasion of Africa during the 15th-19th centuries. Despite the presumed restoration of independence, since the 1960s, France, right from the post-World War II leadership of Charles de Gaulle to the current François Hollande’s, has such glaring contempt for the notion of “sovereignty” in these “francophonie” Africa. Indeed, in practice, the “Brezhnev Doctrine” of the Cold War-era Soviet Union (STAVRINOS, 1971, P. 465-466; OUI MET, 2003) that had constricted the sovereignty of the contiguous east European alliance-states, within the strict ambience of the Warsaw Treaty universe, is a far more progressive relationship than the typologisation and operationalisation of “francophonie Africa”.

For France, the 22 countries of Africa that are classified as “francophonie Africa” are France’s *personal property* in perpetuity. As a result, Africa has been the quintessential target of French military interventionism for 55 years because immanent in the worldview of the French political establishment, irrespective of ideological/political colouration, none of the former French-conquered and occupied African states is really seen as *independent* or *sovereign* by any breadth or shade of either of these definitions. Instead, according to this conception, these are “francophone” backwoods, which, at best, have some measure of local administrative autonomy (hence, “francophone Africa”!), with ultimate sovereign power lodged back in Europe – in Paris, as it has been since the 1885 Berlin conference in which the pan-European World formalised its conquest of Africa (EKWE-EKWE, 2014a).

If evidence from the highest level of political authority of the French state is required to buttress this line of thought, we should recall that very introspectively frank declaration made on the subject in 1998 by François Mitterrand, a former socialist president of France: “Without Africa, France will have no history in the 21st century” (MASLAND, 1998, p. 19). This sentiment is underscored by Jacques Godfrain, former

head, French foreign ministry, who frames his own response in vivid geostrategic terms: “A little country, with a small amount of strength, we can move a planet because [of our] ... relations with 15 or 20 African countries” (MASLAND, 1998, p. 19). Ten years later, in 2008, another French president, Jacques Chirac, still indulges in this French obsession to control Africa in perpetuity when he himself intones: “[W]ithout Africa, France will slide down into the rank of a third (world) power” (BAUER, 2014). It was however France’s post-World War II leader, Charles de Gaulle, who, in 1944, had inaugurated this now well-known French obsession to control Africa *ad infinitum*. The irony of the circumstances was indeed not lost on anyone. Despite France’s early capitulation to Germany in 1940 in the latter’s war of aggression against its neighbours, de Gaulle, then exiled leader of the anti-German “French free forces” struggling desperately to effect French liberation, was himself vociferously opposed to the liberation of Africa. Africa, we mustn’t forget, was then under the jackboot of French occupation as well as those of its British and Belgian wartime allies. During the 1944 Brazzaville conference of French overseas-conquest governors which de Gaulle chaired, he was adamant in what he saw as his vision of the future of French-occupied Africa: “Self-government must be rejected – even in the more distant future” (DESCHAMBS, 1970, p. 249).

## 2 Supercilious antagonism

De Gaulle’s supercilious antagonism to African liberation was of course not unique at the time. Similar sentiments were evident in the position of Winston Churchill, the British prime minister, who insisted in 1942 that he had not attained his position as head of government to “preside over the liquidation of the British empire” (THE GUARDIAN, 2009). The Belgian king and government, who barely resisted Germany’s attack and overrun of their country beyond three weeks in May 1940, were themselves equally unwilling to discontinue their occupation of the Congo (Democratic Republic of the Congo) after Germany’s eventual defeat in 1945. This was in spite of the central role that the Congo played

in the financing of the Belgian war effort (including the entire expenses of the country's exiled royal family and government in London) which totalled the grand sum of £40 million. "In fact, thanks to the resources of the Congo, the Belgian government [in exile] in London had not to borrow a shilling or a dollar, and the Belgian gold reserve could be left intact", recalls Robert Godding, the then Belgian government-in-exile secretary with direct responsibility for the occupation of the Congo (RODNEY, 1972, p. 188). Besides, Belgium had, earlier on in Africa, carried out a catastrophic 30-year trail (1878-1908) of genocide against Africans in the Congo basin in which it annihilated 13 million constituent peoples (ISIDORE NDAYWEL É NZIEM, 1998, p. 344). Leopold II, the génocidaire king who supervised this carnage was equally obsessed with Belgian's *own share* of the conquest and occupation of Africa: "I do not want to risk ... losing a fine chance to secure for ourselves a slice of this magnificent African cake" (HOCHSCHILD, 1999, p. 58).

But unlike British and Belgian leaders (the latter were ultimately welded into the encompassing French-led *francophoniedom*), de Gaulle pursued France's long time ambitions in Africa with almost megalomaniac intensity in the years after 1945 – opposing African liberation projects in the west and central regions of the continent, under French occupation, as well as on the islands off the east coast in the Indian Ocean especially Madagascar. However in 1958, de Gaulle changed track, somewhat, in his anti-African independence drive. Stung and disillusioned by the 1954 spectacular and humiliating defeat of French forces in Vietnam and the looming disaster in its ongoing war in Algeria, de Gaulle produced a document for a purported future of African freedom. In the main, this document envisioned a *circumscribed* African independence outcome that would ensure continuing French political and economic hegemony in Africa (ALLMAN, 2013). Apart from Guinea, which opposed it when it was put to a referendum, France succeeded in imposing the document on the rest of its occupied states, with evident compliance with some segments of the African leaderships of the restoration-of-independence movement and the all too familiar tragic consequences since.

### 3 Operationalisation...

The stage was now set for France to invoke the licence, at its own choosing, to intervene in the political process of any of its prized African lands of “francophonie”: invade, intimidate, manipulate, install, antagonise, ingratiate, indemnify, expropriate, invade, intimidate... Hardly any of the 22 African countries in “francophonie” escaped this epoch of witnessing the invasion of their territory by some contingent of the French military from one of its numerous bases in the region or from those further away back home in Corsica. Each of these African “francophonie” states “hosts” a French military base of varying capabilities and configuration as part of this overarching network in which Dakar, Sénégal, is at its epicentre, in turn linked to requisite interventionist brigades positioned in Corsica. Thanks to this network, the French military has invaded this African “francophonie” enclave 52 times, *since 1960*, as we have stated – from Chad to the Congo (Congo Democratic Republic), Côte d’Ivoire to the Comoros. Such invasions provide the French the opportunity to directly manipulate local political trends in line with their strategic objectives, install new client regimes, if need be, and expand the parameters of expropriation of critical resources even further as unabashedly vocalised by many a president.

On this score, the Congo Democratic Republic (or Zaïre or Congo-Kinshasa as it has been variously called), the *jewel in the crown* of “francophonie”, is aptly illustrative. Between 1961 and 1996, France intervened militarily in the country 17 times to prop up the notorious dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko which ravaged one of Africa’s richest economies. Countries such as Central African Republic (or Central African Empire as it was known when it was ruled, literally, by the very francophile acolyte and dictator, Jean-Bédél Bokassa), Rwanda (French military intervention was ongoing in the country as the forces of the pro-French central government perpetrated its dreadful genocide against the Tutsi in 1994), Burundi, Djibouti and Chad bore the brunt of the invasions as France sought to enforce or safeguard the fortunes of one client regime or the other.

Furthermore, in flagrant disregard for the lives of African peoples and their environment, and those of future generations, France carried out three atomic bomb “tests” over the Sahara Desert, in west Algeria, in February, April and December 1960. The latter (27 December) bomb exploded had plutonium with yield of 10,000-14,000 TNT, equivalent to one-half power of atomic bomb the United States air force dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, 6 August 1945 (BBC, 1960). Pointedly, France never considered carrying out any of these “tests” in one of its numerous provinces in *homeland*(European)France.

For France, therefore, its hegemonic control of “francophone Africa” in the past 55 years has been a lucrative and “prestigious” rearguard quest to maintain a stranglehold of influence in the Southern World, despite the obvious militarily weakened position of its overall international status after the end of the Second World War – or as from indeed 27 years earlier, following the end of the First World War (EKWE-EKWE, 2011, p. 57-58). Former head of French foreign ministry Jacques Godfrain’s geostrategic observation, quoted earlier, couldn’t have been more correctly stated: “A little country, with a small amount of strength, we can move a planet because [of our] ... relations ... with 15 or 20 African countries”.

So, keeping a stranglehold on “francophonie Africa” enables France, with an astonishingly fragile, struggling economy, to scoop gargantuan levels of capital, mineralogical and agricultural resources that it couldn’t ever generate in its own homeland, year in, year out. Furthermore, so brutally a double-jeopardy, Africans, *themselves*, pay for France’s military invasions of “francophonie Africa” as Gary Busch, a political economist, shows in his 2011 excellent research on the subject with the stunning title, “Africans pay for the bullets the French use to kill them”. Busch draws the world’s attention to the key “settlement documents” mapped out by France, back in 1960, that marks its envisaged future relations with “francophonie Africa” (BUSCH, 2011):

France is holding billions of dollars owned by African  
[“francophonie”] states in its own accounts and invested in



the French bourse ... ["Francophonie"] African states deposit the equivalent of 85% of their annual reserves in [dedicated Paris] accounts as a matter of post-[conquest] agreements and have never been given an accounting on how much the French are holding on their behalf, in what these funds been invested, and what profit or loss there have been.

It is precisely because of this French blanket control of the critical finances of "francophonie Africa" that no French president, during this epoch of consideration (from de Gaulle to Hollande), has found it necessary to go to the national assembly and seek authorisation for any of the 52 invasions of Africa in 55 years not to mention seek a franc or euro from the legislature to fund the escapade! In effect, France appropriates crucial African financial resources *generated* in Africa but *transferred* to and reserved and controlled in Paris to invade Africa and secure even more African resources... Consequently, France's agelong noisy motto, "Liberté, égalité, fraternité", surely has no pretentious universal appeal but instead is "Liberté, égalité, fraternité Français!" For Africa, specifically, France's flagged up national motto is much graver: "S'emparer d'Afrique! Occuper Afrique! Dérober Afrique!"

As a result of this continuing inordinate leverage exercised by France in Africa, in addition to that of Britain's, these two foremost pan-European World conqueror-states of Africa currently have a greater *secured* access to Africa's critical resources than at any time during decades of their formal occupation of the continent (EKWE-EKWE, 2014b).

## 4 Origins

But why these 22 countries in Africa – at least 3000 miles away from France? Why Africa? Why not Asia, perhaps, or the Arab World, a people closer home to France? But aren't these 22 African countries *sovereign* or rather "francophonie", as France insists? Are these categorisations, "sovereign" and "francophonie" synonymous? If so, how? If not, why not? Yet the crucial question remains: Why Africa?

France has long been wracked by chronic anxieties about its “status” and “prestige” in the world since its military was dealt a humiliating defeat during the 12-year old uprising (1792-1804) by enslaved African military forces led by Toussaint L’Ouverture in French-occupied San Domingo (Haiti) in the Caribbean – the “greatest individual market” of the 18th century European enslavement of the African humanity, which accounted for two-thirds of French foreign trade at the time (JAMES, 2001, p. xviii). The Africans of San Domingo, “The Black Jacobins”, as CLR James, the illustrious African Caribbean scholar would describe them in such searing irony if not sardonicism in his 1938-published classic of the same title on the subject, “defeated in turn the local whites and the soldiers of the French monarchy, a Spanish invasion, a British expedition of some 60,000 men, and a French expedition of similar size under [Napoleon] Bonaparte’s brother-in-law” (JAMES, p. xviii). Following the latter’s victory in 1803, the Africans proclaimed and established their republic of Haiti on 1 January 1804.

France has yet to recover from the catastrophic damage to its psyche, elicited by its losses in San Domingo, effectuated by the *transformation* of enslaved Africans, as James notes perceptively in his study, “trembling in hundreds before a single white man ... into a people able to organise themselves and defeat the most powerful European nations of their day ... [This] is one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement” (JAMES, p. xviii). Consequently, in its relationship with Africans, wherever this occurs on earth, France feels that it is still fighting Toussaint L’Ouverture and his formidable forces all over again and again... Furthermore, San Domingo is gravely etched indelibly in French consciousness as the precursor to the catalogue of crushing French military defeats in the subsequent 150 years of its history, aptly illustrated by the following: the 1871 Franco-Prussian War, the 1914-1918 World War I, the 1939-1945 World War II and the 1954 Battle of Dien Bien Phu resulting in the débâcle of its elite French Far East Expeditionary Corps’s occupation garrison in Vietnam, inflicted by the resolute Viet Minh commanded by General Giáp (MACDONALD, 1993).

It would require another site of examination to discuss, more fully, how this indelible French angst over San Domingo must have worked through the mindset of Nicholas Sarkozy, a latter day occupant of the Élysée palace, whose regime thrived in its serial fantasy as the neo-Napoleonic imperium of these early decades of the 21st century. Evidently convulsed by the legacy of San Domingo, Sarkozy, in July 2007, engaged in a thuggish foul-mouthed theatrics of a so-called address “on Africa” to an African audience in Dakar, Sénégal, that should have sought auditioning elsewhere rather than the stage of the hallowed auditorium of the Cheikh Anta Diop University, named after the great African polymath (AFRICA RESOURCE, 2007). Undoubtedly, Sarkozy knew, fully well, that his audience was made up of none other than the proud heirs and heiresses of those *actualisers* of history on the estates of San Domingo just 210 years earlier.

## 5 Handwriting on the wall

In essence, the audience in that July 2007 Dakar auditorium detected that Sarkozy, head of the French state of the day, was already reading the unmistakable handwriting on the wall about the prospects of “francophonie” in Africa. Despite its near-monolithic activity in the lives of generations and the resultant semblance of durability, the importance and influence of “francophonie” in Africa is beginning to wane. Events in Africa in the past 21 years have seriously weakened and undermined its efficacy. The Tutsi genocide in Rwanda, organised premeditatedly by France’s ruthless local clients in power in Kigali whilst a French expeditionary force was operating in the country, was a monumental indictment of the entire “francophonie” project in Africa, reinforcing the gory legacy of the earlier, Belgian-francophonie genocide in the Congo basin which destroyed the lives of 13 million Africans. France could not escape complicity in the murder of 800,000 Africans in Rwanda in 1994. Pointedly, there has been a partial eclipse of French influence in this central/southern Africa region since the latter genocide. The popular overthrow and subsequent death in exile of Congolese

dictator Mobutu, during the same period, was a further blow to the fortunes of “francophonie” in the region. Elsewhere in the empire, the tentacles of “francophonie” were also beginning to unravel. The situation in the Côte d’Ivoire economic powerhouse was of particular relevance. The sudden death in 1993 of Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the Ivorian political colossus who had been state president since 1960, created a serious crisis of succession in the country that still remains unresolved. In 2002, it became the background of a tragic war between the state and insurgents in its north region and the precipitate collapse of Africa’s most successful economy that followed a decade later by the French invasion of the country and its installation of a client regime in Abidjan. But in Sénégal, France’s attempt to continue to dictate its choice of leaders in this northwest stretch of “francophonie” was rejected massively in the 2000 presidential elections when Abdoulaye Wade, the veteran opposition politician, defeated Abdou Diouf, the incumbent president and Paris’s much preferred candidate, and in the choice of president, 12 years later, in the post-Wade era. In a desperate effort to stem the steady decline of “francophonie”, France embarked on its biennial so-called African-French summit that extends invitation to leaders of non-league states. It was in this context of “francophonie”-extension in the 1990s that France intensely courted the friendship of Sani Abacha, the Nigerian dictator and génocidaire military commander who participated in the 1966-1970 Igbo genocide, who was at the time internationally quarantined as a result of his regime’s continuing deteriorating human rights records. Abacha’s predictable appreciation at this gesture of breaking out of painful political and economic isolation was followed by a deft regime decision that keyed into the inner workings of the infrastructure of “francophonie”: Nigeria would hence embark on an intensive educational/allied cultural programme to “adopt” French as an “additional” lingua franca to English! Paris was of course delighted! But it was very short-lived indeed. The lingua franca opportunism died with the génocidaire and dictator in 1998!

## Conclusion

It is now clear that the tenuousness of “francophonie Africa” lies right in its foundational premise of operationalisation: the incorporation of a league of countries that exists *solely* to serve French interests whilst critically dependent on its day to day overseeing on usually ruthless *anti-African* local regimes. This ruthlessness is a feature of its overarching moral and intellectual bankruptcy which ensures that it does the bidding of such projects as “francophonie” or “francophonie-extension” because of the firm grip that it exercises within a designated “home turf”. This is why the head of this “home turf” is bereft of any disposition of responsibility to “home”, howsoever this is defined, but is existentially sutured to the palace of Élysée’s priorities and diktat.

Paradoxically, though, this French grip on these regions of Africa is all too brittle as can be seen in the immediate consequences on “francophonie” in the event of the overthrow or death of the dictator. The leaderships of the French state find it extremely difficult to contemplate that, with the steadily growing and expansive African grassroots’ pressure on their inept African-led regimes which can only intensify, “francophonie” has no long-term prospects in Africa. While the overall socio-economic situation across the continent is currently in a state of flux, Africa is unlikely to return to that spurious stability epoch of the Houphouët-Boignys and Senghors or the murderous repression of the Mobutus and Bokassas which enhanced the development of “francophonie”.

Inevitably, if “francophonie Africa” is France’s *comprehensive subjugation* of the African humanity, as French leaderships since the 1960s, from de Gaulle to Hollande, have hardly had any cause to disguise, the dual prime questions of the age must be: When will the Africans involved in this staggering 21st century outrageous subjugation bring it to an end? Isn’t it now obvious that “francophonie Africa” – CAR, Mali, Niger, Congo Democratic Republic, Congo Republic, Burundi, Mali, Côte d’Ivoire, whatever, wherever, cannot hold?

France will realise much sooner than later that it cannot continue to enrich itself from Africa and consequently construct some phantom prestige in international relations based on its control of the destiny of Africa and Africans.

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