

# Francophobia as an expression of Pan-Africanism in Francophone Africa: An exploration of the Cameroonian political and media discourse

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## Abstract

*There has over the decades been a recrudescence of francophobia in many francophone African countries. This has attracted the attention of scholars across the world and has fuelled a discourse which has myopically constructed francophone Africans' francophobic sentiments either as a purely xenophobic movement or a nationalist feeling. Meanwhile, for many members of the African diasporas and intelligentsia, francophobia is essentially an expression of their pan-African convictions. In effect, for many francophone pan-African political activists, the act of fighting and mitigating neocolonialism in their countries is inextricably tantamount to exhibiting francophobic sentiments. Such an act is also tantamount to deploying various forms of animosity against France. This is so perhaps because France is arguably perceived as the most dominant neocolonial force in their countries. In this paper, this popular trend is illustrated with close respect to the Cameroonian experience. Using secondary sources and critical observations, the paper specifically looks at how various manifestations of French neocolonialism have given birth to waves of anti-French sentiments among the intelligentsia and in the media; and how this anti-French feeling is mostly expressed in the name of Pan-Africanism. The paper thus examines how Pan-Africanism has, to both the Cameroonian intelligentsia and the media, meant adopting a virulent anti-French discourse or rhetoric. In line with this central objective, the paper answers three principal research questions: what body of evidence proves that there is French neocolonialism in Cameroon? How has French neocolonialism engendered a virulent pan-African discourse that is basically anti-French? And how has this pan-African francophobic discourse been observed or manifested among the Cameroonian intelligentsia and in the country's private media?*

**Keywords:** Anti-French sentiment, neocolonialism, Pan-Africanism, nationalist media, domination, Françafrique. Cameroon

## Introduction: Pan-Africanism and the imperative of being anti-French

Be it subtle or evident, foreign dominance has hardly, if not never, been welcome in countries across the world. Nations have always developed the "instinct" and reflex of denouncing and resisting any form of external dominance, especially when such dominance becomes politically, economically and/or culturally asphyxiating. In tandem with this, most Third world and non-Anglophone nations have tended to interpret the phenomenal globalization of "very powerful"

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Anglo-Saxon cultures (notably Americanism) as a threat to their own cultures and ideologies. In France, for instance, the government has in both gentle and aggressive ways resisted the American cultural and ideological domination. France has done this by sometimes resorting even to what many scholars have called anti-Americanism. Meunier (2009) notes for instance that, by leading the anti-globalisation movement in the 1990s and by championing the movement against the war in Iraq in 2003, France has over the years confirmed its status of “old enemy among America’s friends”. Meunier further observes that “even before the days of Chirac and De Gaulle, France had always seemed to be at the forefront of animosity toward the United States – from eighteenth-century theories about the degeneration of species in the New World to twentieth-century denunciations of the Coca-Colonization of the Old World” (Meunier 2009:129). In the same line of argument, Herrmann and Kertzer (2015) have argued that although not that pronounced, anti-Americanism has always been part of the French popular cultures and lore. In their words, “the more attached the French are to their country, the more of a break they give the United States compared to other great powers who behave similarly” (Herrmann & Kertzer 2015:1).

In the same way, France has perceived American cultural and ideological “dominance” as a threat to its own culture and as an “ill” to energetically combat (sometimes with strong anti-Americanism), so too have many of its former colonies viewed its domination of various sectors of their economies as an equation to solve with anti-French sentiments. Thus, growing and perceptible waves of francophobic sentiments have since the decolonisation period prevailed in many, if not all francophone African countries, begging for scholarly and political attention (Soumare & Konan 2019; Roger 2019; Survie 2019).

This growing wave of anti-French sentiments observed in Francophone African countries has variously been reviewed and interpreted by politicians, researchers, sociologists, philosophers and anthropologists, among other observers. At least two schools of thought have attempted to theorise the phenomenon (francophobia), mostly taking into consideration its local or national colorations, its roots and French/Western institutions’ attitudes towards it. The first school of thought – which I technically call the “skeptical school” – has interpreted the phenomenon either as a mere myth, a political rumor not backed by substantial empirical evidence or a minor dilemma not deserving elaborate attention. An egregious adept of this school of thought is General Secretary of the Franco-African Summit, Mme Stephanie Rivoal (cited in Myer 2019) who views the myth of the recrudescence of the francophobia movement in francophone Africa more as a hastened generalisation and simplification of French political and military presence in the continent as a whole and in francophone African countries in particular. In an interview granted to the tabloid *Point Afrique*, she claims that it is surely faulty to present anti-French sentiments in Africa as a strictly generalised phenomenon. The French diplomat anchors her position in her personal observation and her personal experience with African businessmen, politicians and technocrats. She claims that her numerous visits on African soil have informed her that many Africans rather greet French presence in their territories with much hope and euphoria. In her language, the allegations of a growing anti-French sentiment in Africa should very much be taken with a pinch of salt:

Let us face concrete facts. Anti-French sentiments are not a generalized phenomenon in Africa. In all African countries that I have once visited, people have repeated told me “you Frenchmen need to come again and invest in our countries” [My translation]<sup>1</sup> (cited in Mayer 2019: para 2)

In the same line of argument, a French diplomat cited in Roger (2019:49) claims that the myth of a recrudescence anti-French sentiment in francophone countries is just a negligible phenomenon

1. Parlons de faits concrets. Le sentiment anti-français est loin d'être généralisé à l'ensemble de l'Afrique. Partout où je vais, on me dit : *venez investir davantage dans nos pays*.

that should not, for now, be seen as a call for alarm. In his language, the phenomenon “is like the cries of mosquitoes. You hear them around you in the advent of the night. You also feel their presence around you; but you need not be worried for now” [my translation]<sup>1</sup>.

If Rivoal on one hand and her French counterpart cited in Roger (2019) on the other hand do not totally negate the existence of francophobic feelings in Africa, many of their African peers and contemporaries categorically relegate the thesis of such francophobic feeling to a lie, a post-truth or a mirage mostly evoked to discredit France or create a fictive lack of entente between France and its former colonies. One easily finds this category of observers among African leaders, particularly those that have – or pretend to have – some strong affinities with French multinationals or political institutions. In line with this, Roger (2019) quotes Boubacar Keita as suggesting that far from being driven by anti-French sentiments, citizens of francophone countries in the Sahel region view French military presence in their respective countries as a demonstration of French solidarity that can only be welcome and be popularly considered as a strategic action in the ongoing fight against radical Islamism and terrorism in the region. After a French helicopter crashed and caused the death of 13 French soldiers in the Sahel region, president Keita wrote his French counterpart saying:

I can assure you that in spite of the impatience and frustrations sincerely or maliciously expressed here and there, the peoples in the Sahel region remember and continue to exclusively underscore the solidarity which they enjoy from French troops”. [My translation]<sup>2</sup> (cited in Roger 2019:26).

Contrary to the “skeptical school”, the second current (the “non-skeptical” school) confirms the existence of an ever growing wave of anti-French sentiments in francophone Africa. This non-skeptical school attributes the anti-French sentiment to a multitude of factors, principal among which are the sequels of French colonialism and neocolonialism clearly manifested by the continuous existence of a colonial currency in Francophone African countries (the CFA Francs), the prevalence of colonial patterns of trade between France and its former colonies, and France’s military presence and constant political interference in the internal affairs of African French-speaking countries (Pigeaud & Sylla 2018; Mbog 2020; Crux 2020; Chimtom, 2020). Adepts of the “non-skeptical” school argue that France’s continuous socio-cultural and political domination in French-speaking countries in particular and in Africa in general has made it the major problem of the “Dark Continent”, as well as the greatest threat to the continent’s socio-economic development. Cameroon’s separatist movement, the Ambazonia Prisoners of Conscience Support Council (2019:9), states this theory plainly, when it declares in its report titled *History and Context* that:

Kenneth Kaunda [once said]: “There is a devil in Africa! That devil is called France.” For Africans in former British colonies, as well as for most activists and allies in non-French speaking countries across the globe, Kaunda’s statement does not compute. We are too used to focusing on the “big bad guy” and France doesn’t seem like him. But for Africans who have experienced life within the skeleton of France’s colonial legacy, these words ring true without explanation.

In effect, French continuous – but un-avowed – political, economic and military domination in its former African colonies has triggered the emergence of all manner of both underground and overt nationalist movements which have rooted their mantras in French-bashing and anti-French agitations. Thus, in many francophone African countries, the perceived evidence of French neocolonialism – manifested by French military presence, pro-French economic policies, the domination of French multinationals, the prevalence of colonial currencies (the CFA Francs or

1. C’est comme les moustiques à la nuit tombée: il y a un bruit de fond gênant, mais rien de bien méchant pour l’instant

2. Je puis vous assurer qu’en dépit des impatiences observées, des frustrations exprimées çà et là, qu’elles soient sincères ou feintes, les peuples du Sahel ne retiendront et ne magnifieront que la solidarité dont elles bénéficient aujourd’hui de la part des forces françaises

Françafrique) and France's purported pernicious alliance with unpopular ruling elites among others – have turned out to fuel massive anti-French sentiments in various Francophone African countries. In his paper titled "The anti-French sentiment in Africa", Roger (2019) particularly stresses that this francophobia stems from popular beliefs and various forms of conspiracy theories that associate French military presence in the Sahel with neocolonial ploys aimed first and foremost at protecting French interests against local peoples' own interests in the sub-region. By such conspiracy theories France is less enthusiastic in wiping out the jihadist menace in the Sahel because the cultivation of a chaotic atmosphere in the Sahel can only justify France's military and political presence in the region and thus work in the favour of Emmanuel Macron's France.

A striking issue in the manifestations of francophobia in francophone Africa is that the anti-French sentiments most often take a concrete shape under so-called pan-Africanist or Afro-optimist political movements. In other words, many of the pressure groups and political entities that formally express anti-French feelings tend to anchor their sentiments in pan-Africanist or Afro-optimist ideals or in some form of unstructured movement or rhetoric that resemble these ideals. A case in point is French-Beninese activist Kemi Seba who, in guise of defending pan-African ideals, initiated a digitally driven campaign that has remained bent on caricaturing the CFA Franc as an instrument of French neocolonialism in francophone Africa as well as a channel through which France perpetually and insidiously keeps its former colonies in 'economic slavery' (Bax & Monnier 2017; Chutel 2017). Another case in point is the Suisso-Cameroonian activist Nathalie Yamb who, under the impulse of an aggressive anti-French pan-Africanism, has on multiple occasions multiplied animosities against the French government and the French nationality. During the 2019 Russo-African Summit held in Sochi, she censured France, noting that:

France continues to view the African continent as its propriety. We want to dump the CFA Franc which Paris, with the complicity of its Africans stooges, insists on maintaining under the name "Eco" [...] We demand the dismantling of French military bases which exclusively enable the pillage of our resources [...] and supports the continuous stay of dictators at the head of our States [my translation]<sup>1</sup> (cited in Soumaré & Konan 2019:62)

Thus, to many francophone pan-African political activists, the act of denouncing, fighting or checking neocolonialism in their countries or continent is inextricably tantamount to exhibiting francophobic sentiments and deploying forms of animosity against France. This has been so, perhaps because France is arguably the most dominant neocolonial force in their countries as well as in the entire African continent (Ambazonia Prisoners of Conscience Support Council 2019; Pigeaud & Sylla 2018). The fact that many francophone Africans use francophobia as a tool to express their pan-African or Afro-optimist convictions has not really attracted the attention of scholars. Most of the research works that have devoted their attention to francophobia in francophone African countries have tended to present this francophobic sentiment either as an essentially xenophobic or nationalist tendency. There is therefore a great need to illustrate how African francophobia is not essentially xenophobic or just nationalist, but an expression of a bigger philosophic-political movement (Pan-Africanism).

In this paper, the above is done in the light of the Cameroonian experience. Using secondary sources and critical observations, the paper specifically looks at how various manifestations of French neocolonialism have given birth to waves of anti-French sentiment among the Cameroonian intelligentsia and in the media. The paper also looks at how the above-mentioned anti-French sentiments are mostly expressed in the name of Pan-Africanism. The

1. La France considère toujours le continent africain comme sa propriété. Nous voulons sortir du franc CFA, que Paris, avec la complicité de ses laquais africains, veut pérenniser sous l'appellation éco », [...] Nous voulons le démantèlement des bases militaires françaises qui ne servent qu'à permettre le pillage de nos ressources (...) et le maintien de dictateurs à la tête de nos États.

paper thus examines how Pan-Africanism has, to many members of the Cameroonian intelligentsia and media, meant adopting a virulent anti-French discourse or rhetoric. In line with this central objective, the paper answers three principal research questions: how true is the belief that there is French neocolonialism in Cameroon? How has French neocolonialism engendered a virulent pan-African discourse that is basically anti-French? And how has this pan-African francophobic discourse been observed or manifest both among the country's intelligentsia and media?

## French neocolonialism in Cameroon: reality or myth?

By definition, neocolonialism is a paradoxical situation where a country is *de jure* independent but continues in various insidious ways to be under the political, economic and cultural control of its former colonial master, a foreign power, a powerful international body or specific foreign multinationals. It is also a system that emanates from a vicious alliance between the former colonial power and the ruling class of the ex-colony. Such an alliance has as main target to predominantly defend or protect the economic and cultural interests of the former colony or its multinationals, to the detriment of the local/African population (Martins, 1995). Many sources have sought to illustrate neocolonialism in Cameroon. A review of these sources reveals that at least three Western and Asian powers have over the years exerted neocolonial control over the Cameroonian government or the country as a whole. These powers include the United States of America, China and most especially France (Mayers, Nguiffo & Assembe-Mvondo 2019; Jansson 2009). According to Survie (2009; 2019), Haag (2011), Pigeau and Sylla (2018) and Mbog (2020), France is pre-eminent among neocolonisers in Cameroon.

The myth of French neocolonialism in Cameroon is rooted in a plurality of factors, one of which is the fact that, since independence, Cameroon has continued to maintain colonial patterns of trade with France. Although Cameroon has generally been open to international trade, it has in most years made France its main, or one of its principal trading partners. In 2009, France was Cameroon's first trading partner with a commercial exchange of about 860 Million Euros which included 597 Millions of import from France and 263 Million of export to France (a negative trading balance) (Haag 2011). In 2018, France was second to China in the list of the five main trading partners of Cameroon (Societe Generale 2018). A number of trade agreements signed between France and Cameroon have been to the advantage of France and other members of European Union, and to the detriment of local industries in Cameroon. For instance, in 2016, Cameroon signed a free trade agreement with the European Union (of which France is a member). This agreement has been viewed as a system which removes the little protection local industries could have in Cameroon to the advantage of French and European Union domination of the Cameroonian market.

Beside the colonial pattern of trade, Cameroon has – like other French speaking Africa countries – continued to use a colonial currency (the CFA Franc) introduced in its territory by France in the pre-independent period. Through this currency, France has exerted financial control over Cameroon. Not only is this currency guaranteed by France, Cameroon is obliged to deposit over 50% of its foreign earnings into an operational account in the French treasury. This requirement enables a huge outflow of capital which could have been used for Cameroon's socio-economic development. Beside this, the currency is minted in Europe and managed by a central bank (Central African States Bank [BEAC]) which is also subtly controlled by France. In effect, decision on monetary policies in the Central African Monetary Community (of which Cameroon is member) can be taken only with the consent of France. France's representation in the central bank of the CFA zone is not massive, but given the fact that decisions taken in the bank must be unanimous or enjoy a large majority, France has a *de facto* veto power in the decision-making machinery and the operations of the bank.

More palpable evidence of French neocolonial influence in Cameroon is the favourable treatment accorded to French multinationals in Cameroon, a treatment which in many cases has enabled them (the multinationals) to exhibit illegal and imperialistic tendencies in the country. Indeed, a number of French companies have capitalised on widespread corruption in Cameroon as well as on their alliance with some very influential figures in the Cameroonian government to abusively exploit Cameroonian resources, evade taxes or violate the human rights of their local employees. A case in point is French multinational Sondiaa, which has constantly deployed illegal take-overs of local people's landed properties for the creation or extension of its sugar cane plantations (Haag 2011; Survie 2019). Other egregious cases include Rougier, Coron and Bolloré which in all impunity have often employed mercenaries from the security engineering company Africa Security SARL to ruthlessly address incidents of protest mounted by their employees. Thus, many French multinationals operating in Cameroon have, with great impunity, or with the complicity of some influential officials of the Government, perpetrated human rights violations in Cameroon (Transparency International Cameroon 2018).

Sharing corollaries, Pigeaud (2009) cites several reports generated by Oxfam and The Catholic Committee for the Fight Against Hunger which reveal that the French corporation called 'Plantations of Upper Penja (PHP)' has negatively distinguished itself by its constant violation of its workers' human rights, the abusive treatment of its employees and the very low wages it pays its workers (about 60000 heads). In effect, its workers sometimes labour for more than 15 hours daily. Peageaud (2009) also notes PHP's non-respect of environmental protocols, its involvement in fiscal evasion and unscrupulous entrepreneurial attitudes. PHP has for years embraced these questionable cultures without being reprimanded or sanctioned by the Cameroonian authorities, thanks to subtle bribery, corruption and in officious support of the government. As Pigeaud pointedly (2009:27) puts it,

PHP has the support of the region's political, administrative and judicial authorities. "As a traditional leader, I receive a monthly salary from PHP, reveals a local authority. The Senior and Junior Divisional Officers similarly receive a pay from the company". [...] PHP "does anything it wants to whosoever it chooses to deal with. Its administration is capable of the worst, surmises a businessman who hails from Njombe and who proffers anonymity. [My translation]<sup>1</sup>

Pigeau further explores some of the reasons why PHP and similar French corporations operating in Cameroon will perpetrate the most reprehensible fiscal, social and entrepreneurial cultures [?], yet will remain untouchable and rather 'venerated' giants in the Cameroonian polity. She observes that many members of PHP's administration are top figures of the party in power in Cameroon. The company is member of the Cameroonian banana companies of Cameroon, a lobby headed by another important figure of the party in government and brother-in-law of the Minister of Commerce, Luc Magloire Mbarga Atangana. The latter doubles as the Chairman of PHP's board of directors. Moreover, the company gives out its lands for rent to top Cameroonian army officers. The company enjoys a good relationship with the nation's president as its employers are regularly sent to work on president Biya's pineapple plantations. In view of all these factors, Pigeau (2009) associates the neocolonial policies of the company partly with the connections it has with the powers in Cameroon.

While a number of French multinationals enjoy the status of "untouchable" or neocolonisers thanks to their affinities with influential members of the party in government, others have such privileged status thanks to the support they provide to specific key government agencies or government projects. The French oil company Total for instance has for years sponsored the

1. PHP a les responsables politiques, administratifs ou judiciaires de la région dans sa poche. «En tant que chef traditionnel, je suis payé chaque mois par la PHP, confie une «élite» locale. Le sous-préfet, le préfet aussi. [...] PHP «fait ce quelle veut à qui elle veut», ses dirigeants «sont capables de tout», résume un homme d'affaires originaire de Njombe qui ne veut pas être identifiable.

training and activities of the Cameroonian Navy in exchange for the protection of their petroleum platforms in the country (Haag 2011; Tache 2019).

France's neocolonial control over Cameroon has also been greatly felt in the political realm. This has been seen both in instances where Cameroonian presidents openly declared their loyalty or allegiance to France, and incidents where a French president, an influential politician or multinational from France sought to pressurise the Cameroonian president or government towards executing a pro-French design. In one of his speeches to the public, Cameroon's very first president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, manifested his loyalty to France saying: 'How can we conceive having other partners than this country [France]? How can we forget its accomplishment all these years that we have learned to understand and appreciate [it]' (cited in Takoungang and Krieger 1998:88). With the same measure of enthusiasm, Ahidjo's successor President Biya told the French press in an interview in *La Baule* (France) that he (Paul Biya) 'cannot disagree with the opinion of President Francois Mitterrand', and that he is 'the best student of France' (cited in Centre d'Etudes d'Afrique Noire 1999:234). Cameroon's presidents have not only been 'good students or stooges of France' but its protégés, according to popular perceptions. Many myths prevailing in Cameroon claim that most Cameroonian presidents have been France's choice in presidential elections. It is for instance rumoured that France manipulated the 1992 presidential elections to ensure the victory of Paul Biya and hinder the election of an Anglophone at the head of the Cameroonian government. Archbishop Christian Tumi (one of Cameroon government's staunchest critics) remarks for instance that: 'every body knows that Fru Ndi<sup>1</sup> won the election in 1992. Who organized the coup? It was Mitterrand and I am citing something [French President François] Mitterrand said to Biya: "jamais un anglophone à Etoudi [meaning never should an Anglophone be allowed in Etoudi<sup>2</sup>]"' (cited in Chimtom 2018:17). Rumours like the one voiced above point to the fact that a number of Cameroonian people view France with a lot of suspicion.

## Anti-French sentiments as Pan-African manifestations against French neocolonialism in Cameroon

The persistent prevalence of French neocolonialism has engendered sporadic waves of anti-French sentiment in Cameroon. This anti-French sentiment has from time to time fueled Cameroon's popular culture (urban music, literary productions, popular cinema, political discourse and media contents). However, rarely have Cameroonian authorities or French diplomats and French multinationals publicly recognised the existence of francophobia in the country. Even on occasions where the French government has unambiguously bashed its Cameroonian counterpart, there have hardly been official expressions of anti-French sentiments from the Cameroonian government. Recently for instance, President Emmanuel Macron claimed in a video that went viral on social media that he has successfully pressured President Paul Biya into liberating some opposition leaders and political opponents. Macron's act quickly attracted the indignation of critics across Africa (Mbog 2020; Crux 2020). Nevertheless the Cameroonian government tended to overlook or downplay the issue, using the period to rather cowardly declare its loyalty to the French government. In a February 2020 press release issued in reaction to Macron's pronouncement, Cameroon's Minister of Communication Rene Emmanuel Sadi rather claimed that France is: 'A country with whom Cameroon shares strong historical ties and

1. John Fru Ndi has for over two decades been the leader of the opposition in Cameroon. As leader of the Social Democratic Front (SDF), he lost the 1992 presidential elections in Cameroon; in favour of Paul Biya, the current Cameroonian Head of State who has been in power since 1982. Fru Ndi has witnessed his decline from this position of leader of the main opposition party in recent presidential elections, with Maurice Kamto's Cameroon Renaissance Movement's rise to prominence in the Cameroonian political landscape. Fru Ndi is from the Anglophone region of Cameroon, precisely from the North West Region of the country, an area believed to host ethnic nationalities (the Bamendas) that are in their majority hostile to President Paul Biya's and Francophone rule in Cameroon.
2. Etoudi is the neighbourhood where the Cameroonian presidential palace is located. It is a synecdoche commonly used in Cameroon to mean the country's presidential palace

relations of friendship and cooperation. These relations are mutually beneficial and have always been founded on the sacred principles of State sovereignty and mutual respect' [My translation]<sup>1</sup> (Cited in Mbog, 2020:4)

The silence of the Cameroonian government and French politicians and diplomats on the issue of growing francophobia in Cameroon is both complemented and justified by the fact that rarely – if not never – has any case of physical/mortal aggression against French nationals or French interest been reported in the country. Apart from a small number of 1990s movements initiated by pressure groups to boycott French products, one has hardly witnessed popular manifestations against French economic interests in the country. Also, France and French tertiary institutions have since the beginning of the post-independence period (since 1960) continued to be an attractive destination for many Cameroonians seeking to further their university education abroad. As noted by the French ambassador to Cameroon Christophe Guilhou, (cited in Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Etrangères 2020), the number of Cameroonian nationals who seek admission to French universities grows yearly.

In spite of these positive developments, many sporadic manifestations of anti-French sentiment have surfaced in the country's socio-political space, particularly following incidents of neocolonial attitudes of France towards Cameroon or rumours of France's involvement in destabilising activities against Cameroon. On February 22, 2020 for instance, French President Emmanuel Macron made a suggestive remark on a video that went viral on social media. In the video Macron claimed that he had mounted sustained pressure on the Cameroonian president Paul Biya and compelled the latter to liberate a political opponent (Maurice Kamto) who was jailed in connection with post-election protests. In the same video, President Macron highlighted various political maneuvers he had deployed and was planning to leverage in order to further direct President Biya towards a peaceful handling of some security issues in Cameroon and a forceful liberation of other political prisoners. Word verbatim, he said:

I pressured Paul Biya and asked him to address the Anglophone crisis and issues pertaining to his political opponents. I told Biya we must not meet in Lyon if Kamto is not released. He (Kamto) was freed because we put pressure. And now, the situation is deteriorating again. I will call president Biya next week. We shall mount maximum pressure on him for him to put an end to this situation. I am fully aware and concerned about incidents of violence in Cameroon. These incidents of violence are unacceptable. I am doing my best. [My translation]<sup>2</sup> (cited in Mbog 2020).

This muscled and relatively macho act by Macron sparked virulent criticism from the Cameroonian public, as well as waves of anti-French manifestations in the country. While a certain number of observers promptly read Macron's statement as the act of a supremacist or an 'inexperienced neocolonialist', the majority of Cameroonian critics (according to literature available) viewed the pronouncement along with covert ploys by France, aimed at maintaining the *Françafrique* (France's sphere of influence). In reaction to Macron's declaration, various pressure groups organised anti-French protests targeting the Yaoundé-based premises of the French embassy to Cameroon as well as the Douala-based<sup>3</sup> French consulate.

1. La France est « un pays avec lequel le Cameroun entretient des relations d'amitié et de coopération anciennes, étroites et mutuellement bénéfiques, et qui ont toujours été fondées sur les principes sacrés de la souveraineté des Etats et du respect mutuel

2. J'ai mis la pression sur Paul Biya pour qu'il traite le sujet de la zone anglophone et ses opposants. Je lui avais dit que je ne voulais pas le recevoir à Lyon tant que Maurice Kamto n'était pas libéré. Et il a été libéré parce qu'on a mis la pression. Et là, la situation est en train de se redégrader. Je vais appeler la semaine prochaine le Président Biya, on mettra le maximum de pression pour que cette situation cesse. Je suis totalement au courant et totalement impliqué sur les violences faites au Cameroun et qui sont totalement intolérables. Je fais le maximum

3. Yaoundé and Douala are two major Cameroonian cities. The former is the political capital of Cameroun while the latter is the economic capital of the country.

Macron's viral declaration also fuelled an anti-French political discourse in the Cameroonian media and among the country's intelligentsia. While most media houses that raised the issue multiplied various forms of aggressive rhetoric to describe Macron's neocolonial attitude, a number of Cameroonian political ideologues and academics proffered analyses that associated Macron's perceived 'blunder' not only with some jaw-dropping conspiracy theories but also with some of the most childish – but problematic – expressions of French imperial control of Cameroon. A university lecturer and political analysis (Mathias Eric Oyona Nguini) interpreted Macron's act as evidence that:

There exists a pseudo-Cameroonian activism working in collaboration with some special forces towards imposing a new political clientele to Cameroon. This is done within the framework of a colonial democracy [...] This activism aims to destabilize and overthrow the Cameroonian government. It is one of the instruments leveraged by intrusive neo-imperial powers to create hybrid wars aimed at consolidating the neocolonial *satellisation* [My translation]<sup>1</sup> (cited in Mbog 2020).

In the same line of thought, Catholic clergyman Roman Kisi described Macron's remarks as a sign of the recrudescence of French leaders' colonial attitudes towards the Cameroonian government. In an interview he granted the online tabloid *Crux Magazine*, the man of God conceded that Macron's claims clearly show that he is not only 'responsible for all the chaos in Cameroon' but is also part of an insidious imperialistic system mounted by France and programmed to perpetually undermine Cameroonian leadership. This is suggested by the simple understanding that 'if he [Macron] has ordered Kamto's release and is now pressuring President Biya to release other political prisoners, it means that African leaders like Paul Biya are stooges' (cited in Crux 2020). It may not be totally out of place to suspect or argue that Cameroonian presidents have been stooges of their French counterparts. This is so as President Biya – just like his predecessor Ahmadou Ahidjo – have since the early parts of his rule declared his loyalty and even subservience to French presidents and France. In 1990, Biya declared to the press in *La Baule* (France) that 'I cannot disagree with the opinion of President Mitterand that I am the best student of France' (cited in *Centre d'Etudes d'Afrique Noire*, 1999:234).

Incidents like Macron's remark somewhat serve as both a reminder and a spotlight. This is so as they easily draw the attention of the Cameroonian public to other socio-political problems popularly perceived to be the consequence of French neocolonial control over Cameroon. The incidents also fired members of the Cameroonian populace to variously exhibit pan-African sentiments, anchoring such sentiments in a plurality of social materials. In fact, most reactions to French neocolonial attitudes towards Cameroon have most often been coated with specific components of the pan-African ideology. Some of these components of the pan-African ideology include the African self-determination concept, the back-to-African-value movement, the African unity idiom and the worldwide Black Nationalism and socialism concepts. This is seen in most Cameroon separatist movements' attitude towards French domination in Cameroon. The Ambazonian Prisoners of Conscience Support Network (2019) – one of the separatist groups currently campaigning for the creation of a break-away country called Ambazonia – for instance, has on various platforms anchored its activism in an anti-French type of Pan-Africanism. In its report/manifesto titled *History and Context*, the group has described its secessionist movement as a pan-African initiative aimed at challenging the ills of a political regime which is nothing other than 'the French neocolonial regime in Cameroon'.

Like the Abamazonian Prisoners of Conscience Defence Council, the Archbishop of Douala, His lordship Christian Tumi (a staunch critic of President Paul Biya) holds French neocolonialism

1. Un activiste pseudo-camerounais, agent de services spéciaux travaillant pour imposer une nouvelle clientèle gouvernementale au Cameroun, dans le cadre factice d'une démocratie coloniale (...), agit contre le Cameroun pour le déstabiliser et renverser son gouvernement. Il est un de ces agents typiques que les puissances intrusives néo-impériales utilisent pour créer des guerres hybrides destinées à raffermir la satellisation néocoloniale.

responsible for many of Cameroon's socio-political and economic malaises. In an interview granted the local Cameroonian newspaper *The Rambler* for instance, the clergyman lists France's interference in the political affairs of Cameroon among the major remote causes of the current Anglophone crisis. The man of God also holds French neocolonialism responsible for the pitiable economic state of Cameroon. He declares that: 'what is creating the whole problem is the presence of France in Cameroon. Whereas the English people left, whereas they packed their boxes and everything and went away, Cameroon is controlled by France. That's the problem' (Cited in Chimtom 2018:16).

Like Archbishop Tumi too, a good number of Cameroonian politicians and political analysts have by their observations, fuelled the myth that France is the principal 'enemy' of Cameroon and that putting an end to its meddling in the affairs of Cameroon is the only way Cameroon may achieve political and economic success. As noted by Atemengue in his book title *Sortir le Cameroun de l'impasse* [Saving Cameroon from impasse], many Cameroonian politicians have developed anti-French sentiments as a tactical political tool as well as for nationalist reasons. In an article titled "Cameroun: francophonie et populisme à la carte", Dougueli George (2019) similarly numbers the *Mouvement Africain pour l'indépendance et la Nouvelle Démocratie* (MANIDEM) – currently integrated into Cameroon's opposition party called the Union of Cameroonian People (UPC) – as one of the opposition political forces which have used francophobia and constant French-bashing as a pan-African strategic tool to win the hearts of the Cameroonian electorate. The French critic further observes that Francophobia has thus progressively become a form of populism used by a number of Cameroonian politicians and pressure groups for political point-scoring. Dougueli writes that in populo-nationalist quarters as well as in secessionist movements in Cameroon, francophobia is a kind of fashionable culture. It is viewed as being open to the world; as well as a channel for censuring France's African policy, the ills of the *Françafrique* and the troubling Cameroonian Diaspora living in France.

## Anti-French sentiments in Pan-African media initiatives: the Cameroonian experience

It is an accepted premise that the media of mass communication do not only have a symbiotic relationship with the society in which they subsist, but they also reflect their society of origin in many respects. Following this theory, it is not surprising that anti-French sentiments have progressively permeated the popular culture and the media discourse in Cameroon right from the time of French colonial rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is on record that the nationalist press spearheaded by newspapers such as *l'Effort Camerounais* made anti-French reporting a key strategy in its advocacy for the independence of Cameroon. Decades after Cameroon's independence, the anti-French rhetoric has remained perceptible in the Cameroonian media for reasons which range from the urge to denounce the ills and mistakes of French colonialism (that France has never recognised) to the imperative of expressing pan-African ideals. In line with the first motive mentioned above (the urge to denounce France's unavowed colonial mistakes), journalist Hamna Mana of the Cameroonian tabloid *Le Jour* remarks that:

Anti-French sentiments in Cameroon are anchored in one important factor: France has never acknowledged the fact that she has waged a war in 1950 against nationalist groups struggling for Cameroon's independence. This failure on the part of France is fuelling Cameroonians' rancour against the French government. The latter has not memorably appeased its former colony, hence the mix-ups. [My translation]<sup>1</sup> (cited in Mbog 2015:7)

1. Le sentiment anti-français s'appuie sur un élément important : la France n'a jamais reconnu qu'elle avait mené une guerre au Cameroun dans les années 1950 contre ceux qui se battaient pour l'indépendance. Ce déni entretient de la rancœur, il n'y a pas eu d'apaisement mémoriel, d'où tous ces amalgames

Mana's reading of the situation is plausible if one considers anti-French cinematic productions such as Jean Marie Teno's 1992 documentary film titled *Afrique je te plumerai* (translatable as 'Africa, I will Pluck you'). In this film Teno censures French colonialism in an acerbic way, holding it responsible for a French-instigated 'cultural genocide' in Cameroon. This genocide, according to Teno, is the product of France's introduction of Euro-centric socio-cultural and political paradigms (pro-French education, Euro-centric economic policies and anti-traditionalist and anti-African worldview, etc.) which undermined and ultimately asphyxiated traditional Cameroonian societies and killed the African soul of the Cameroonian nation. According to Teno, France deployed the Euro-centric paradigms mentioned above to technically inhibit an African-driven form of socio-cultural and economic development in the country. Going by this understanding, Teno ends up advocating a developmental model which on the one hand takes into account the failures of the past (France's colonial mistakes) and on the other hand exorcises French socio-political influence from the soul of Cameroon. He declares that: 'I wanted to trace [the] cause and effect between the intolerable present and the colonial violence of yesterday to understand how a country could fail to succeed as a state which was once composed of well-structured, traditional societies' (a segment of the voiceover of Teno's *Afrique je te plumerai*).

As earlier mentioned, a number of Cameroonian media houses or media practitioners justify their anti-French sentiments or rhetoric with their strong desire to defend pan-African ideals. Leading this category of media voices is the privately owned broadcaster *Afrique Media*, a TV station which has taken pride in labeling itself a pan-African broadcaster. In effect, of all Cameroonian media houses which fuel francophobia in Cameroon, *Afrique Media* is arguably the most vocal, vibrant and dynamic. This broadcaster has firmly rooted its editorial philosophy in denouncing neocolonialism in Africa (particularly in Cameroon and other Francophone countries), an endeavour which can only lead them to propound an anti-French rhetoric.

As a francophobic media house, *Afrique Media* has non-hesitantly resorted to yellow journalism and various gutter reportorial practices to bash France. Most of its interactive programmes – notably "*le debat Africain*" (the African Debate), "*le Merit Panafricain*" (The Pan-African Merit), "*Bouquet Special*" (Special Bouquet) and "*Edition Speciale*" (Special Edition) are forums where panelists and presenters create or use any opportunity to rain insults on France and her policies in Francophone Africa. The station's director of programmes Patrick Eya confesses the station's fervour to bash France at all costs when he says '*nous avons choisi de dénoncer les injustices que la France fait subir au continent africain*' [we have chosen to denounce the injustices that France inflicts on the African continent] (cited in Mbog 2015). By this statement, and many similar ones, the station's staff has on various platforms or media not denied their anti-French mantra.

Also acknowledging the Anti-French penchant of the station, another senior journalist working with *Afrique Media*, François Bikoro, confided that:

*Afrique Media* does not deny the fact that it is bias in its treatment of issues bordering on pan-Africanism. It doesn't also deny the fact that, its voice represents a counter-force to the mainstream media which are bent on propagating the Western ideology [...] *Afrique Media's* way of operating has nothing to do with journalism but opinion broadcast shaped according to the "African palaver model" [My translation]<sup>1</sup> (Cited in Boungou 2014).

In 2015, the station fuelled anti-French sentiments in Cameroon by naturalising a myth and by helping to propagate a conspiracy theory that presented France as the invisible hand that presently arms and tele-guides terrorist groups in Northern Cameroon. Actually, in a succession

1. Afrique média ne cache pas son parti pris pour les questions panafricaines et se veut une réponse aux médias mainstream qui se font le devoir de véhiculer idéologie occidentale [] Afrique média ne fait pas du journalisme, mais la communication dopinion sur le modèle de la palabre africaine

of media reportages, the station argued that, given the fact that most of the weapons seized from the Boko Haram terrorist group are French-made, France should be the invisible hand arming the Boko Haram group and fueling terrorism in northern Cameroon (Pommerolle 2015). This anti-French line of argument and aggressive rhetoric has landed *Afrique Media* in trouble with both the Cameroonian government and some French political institutions. In June 2015, for instance, the Cameroonian media regulatory organ the National Communication Council (NCC) suspended the media house and closed its Yaoundé and Douala offices over issues of hate speech against France and some other Western countries (Moki 2015). This suspension did not deter the station from pursuing an anti-French editorial policy and an adversarial posture vis-à-vis France's political allies or multinationals in Cameroon. In effect, in several situations where it was suspended in Cameroon, the station swiftly delocalised its pole of transmission to Malabo (Equatorial Guinea) and continued with more virulent French bashing. Thus, the station has continued to give the impression that pan-Africanism in media broadcasting is tantamount to francophobia. Thus, it has also perpetrated the now popular – but problematic – belief that anti-French sentiments could be an efficacious weapon to combat French neocolonialism and support pan-Africanism in Cameroon.

## Conclusion

Many years after independence, France's presence has remained dominant – if not preeminent – in Africa in general and Francophone Africa in particular. Sources have demonstrated French involvement or interference in the affairs of both Anglophone and Francophone African countries, at different points in time, in the contemporary history of the continent. The *Françafrique* for instance has from its inception in the 1940s to date remained a seminal example of French economic control over Francophone African countries; while her continuous military presence in numerous Francophone countries (through the creation of military bases in Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Chad and Djibouti just to name a few) has given many observers the impression that it (France) has in no way envisaged the wisdom of leaving its colonies. This persistent French policy has also suggested that much of Francophone Africa has remained France's sphere of influence or neocolonial territories. This objectionable state of affairs has not gone down well with many political activists and observers in Francophone Africa.

These last years have thus witnessed renewed waves of anti-French sentiments and agitations in several French-speaking African countries from Mali to Cameroon. The anti-French sentiments have literally permeated the entire social discourse in these countries, most often taking the form of a pan-African rhetoric against Western neocolonialism. In this paper the author has argued that, to many Francophone African political activists, combating neocolonialism and exhibiting pan-Africanist tendency have come to mean nursing anti-French sentiments, perhaps because France is increasingly perceived as the pre-eminent neocoloniser in Francophone Africa. In Cameroon more specifically, the popular perception or representation of France as the most dominant neocoloniser is given credence. Several incidents of France's interference in the political and economic life of the country have been established. Such incidents have triggered or resurrected anti-French campaigns rooted in Pan-African ideals. In the domain of media reporting, broadcasters like *Afrique Media* have, in view of the continued dominance of France in the country, tailored their mantras and editorial philosophies to dominantly sound anti-French. French bashing has thus become a pertinent way of exhibiting Pan-African feelings in the Cameroonian media and in the socio-political landscapes of the country.

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