

## Leveraging Pan-Africanism to Fight French Neocolonialism in Francophone Africa: A Study of the Cameroonian Audiovisual Media and Intelligentsia

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**Abstract.** The persistence of French neocolonialism has motivated the emergence of new and very aggressive forms of pan-Africanism in most – nay all – Francophone African countries. Indeed, many Francophobic pressure groups operating in Francophone African countries have sought to resist French neocolonialism in their countries by mobilizing forms of pan-Africanism, which to a great extent, are xenophobic and disruptive to France’s diplomacy in specific Francophone African countries. In Cameroon, for instance, several so-called pan-African media initiatives, such as *Afrique Media*, have resorted to a very combative – but professionally problematic – form of journalism called ‘journalism of opinion’ to denounce Western political imperialism and contribute in no small measure, to the fight against Western (and particularly French) neocolonialism in Cameroon. This paper seeks to illustrate the above phenomenon hinging on secondary sources and critical observations. Specifically, the paper explores indexes of French neocolonialism in Cameroon and examines how the Cameroonian intelligentsia in general and specific pan-African media houses in the countries in particular, have sought to combat this French neocolonialism.

**Keywords:** Pan-Africanism, neocolonialism, Afrique media, Françafrique, journalism of opinions, the Palaver Tree.

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## Introduction

More than fifty years after their independence, many African countries continue to unduly chafe under the yoke of Western political, socio-cultural, and economic domination. This situation is best captured with the harsh term of neocolonialism. By definition, neocolonialism is a paradox where a postcolonial state is maintained under the political, economic, military, and cultural dominance of its former colonial master(s), years after its independence (see Nkrumah 1965). In other words, it is a situation where a postcolonial state is *de jure* independent but, in reality, has most, if not all, its policies dictated or controlled by the former colonial master or by any external very influential power. In line with this, the All-Africa People Conference of 1961 defined neocolonialism as “the survival of the colonial system in spite of formal recognition of political independence in emerging countries, which become victims of an indirect and subtle form of domination by political, economic, social, military, or technical means” (Martin 1984: 191).

The continuous and multifaceted domination of Western powers in key sectors of African economies has been indexical to the fact that old-fashioned colonialism is not entirely abolished in sub-Saharan Africa. The phenomenon has, indeed, instead morphed into a more complex and subtle ill. Thus, what most African states have been able to achieve so far is merely nominal independence, which has simply been tantamount to being neo-colonies or new forms of colonies. Kwame Nkrumah (1965: ix) describes how this new and insidious form of colonialism functions, “The essence of neocolonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality, its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside.”

The persistence of French neocolonialism has motivated the emergence of new and very aggressive forms of pan-Africanism in most – nay all – Francophone African countries. Indeed, many Francophobic political initiatives operating in Francophone African countries have sought to resist French neocolonialism in their countries by mobilising forms of pan-Africanism which, to a great extent, are xenophobic and disruptive to France’ diplomacy in specific Francophone African countries.

In Cameroon, for instance, a number of so-called pan-African media initiatives, such as *Afrique Media*, have resorted to a very combative – but professionally problematic – form of journalism called ‘journalism of opinion’ to denounce Western political imperialism and contribute to the fight against Western (and mainly French) neocolonialism in Cameroon. These aggressive and nearly xenophobic forms of pan-Africanism applied in Cameroon politics and media reporting have remained understudied, especially by Cameroonian scholars. The few scholars who have devoted their attention to pan-Africanism in Cameroon

have mostly looked at the government's application of this ideology in its public diplomacy or relation with other African countries. Therefore, there is a need to study how pan-Africanism fuels aggressive and nearly xenophobic political actions and media reportage against France in Cameroon.

This paper seeks to fill the gap mentioned above in knowledge by illustrating how a Francophobic form of pan-Africanism drives Cameroonian intelligentsia and media's fight against neocolonialism, particularly French socio-political and economic dominance in Cameroon and other parts of Francophone Africa. Specifically, the paper hinges on secondary sources and critical observations to examine two issues. In the first place, it explores indexes of French neocolonialism in Africa in general and Cameroon especially. In the second place, it examines how the Cameroonian intelligentsia in general and specific pan-African media houses in the countries have sought to combat this French neocolonialism.

### **Neocolonialism in Africa: Military, Economy, and Culture**

In his classic book on neocolonialism, Kwame Nkrumah (1965: 31) explained some essential routes of such new colonialism:

The methods and form of this direction can take various shapes. For example, in an extreme case the troops of the imperial power may garrison the territory of the neo-colonial State and control the government of it. More often, however, neo-colonialist control is exercised through economic or monetary means. The neo-colonial State may be obliged to take the manufactured products of the imperialist power to the exclusion of competing products from elsewhere. Control over government policy in the neo-colonial State may be secured by payments towards the cost of running the State, by the provision of civil servants in positions where they can dictate policy, and by monetary control over foreign exchange through the imposition of a banking system controlled by the imperial power.

Kwame Nkrumah's lamentations date back to the spring of independence in Africa, and one would have expected the situation to be significantly improved today. Unfortunately, critics such as Haag (2011) and Al Mariam (2017) suggest that the problem has become rigidly worse, if not derisory, over the years.

This sceptical thesis is generally advanced in light of the prevalence of Western powers' military presence in most parts of Africa. Good cases are the American and French military presence/bases in strategic parts of the continent, which have not been without serious geopolitical and social consequences. France has, over the years, established military bases in four African countries, namely Djibouti (1450 men-strong), Ivory Coast (900 men-strong), Senegal (350 men-strong), and Gabon (350 men-strong). It has also regularly

deployed its army on the continent – through expeditions such as ‘serval’ and ‘Barkhane’ – to combat terrorism and maritime piracy and to repress destabilizing movements in specific countries within the continent. Thus, active military presence – which dates back to the 1960s – has earned France the status of ‘the Gendarme of Africa’ (Tirthankar 2019) and has attracted criticism from observers, particularly from pressure groups within the countries that harbour France’s military bases. This criticism has partly been fuelled by the myth that such military presence is aimed partly at protecting France’s economic, political and cultural interests in Africa, sometimes to the detriment of African countries’ socio-economic development. By the way, the French Ministry of Defence (Tirthankar 2019) claims on a site devoted to providing information about French military intervention in Sub-Saharan Africa that France’s military involvement in the ‘black continent’ aims at protecting Franco-African interest.

Another strong index of neocolonialism in Africa is the fact that patterns of trade adopted during colonial periods have remained virtually unchanged many years after independence (Hagg 2011; Oseni 2017). In effect, most African states previously colonized by France continue to have the latter as their leading trading partner (Taylor 2019; Economic Question 2018). Similarly, many former British colonies continue to have Britain as their chief trading partner. Poverty remains severe in African countries because the continent’s resources do not support its people. Meanwhile, Black African countries continue to produce dominantly for their former colonial masters. Africa continues to depend dominantly on the revenues generated from their exports to former colonial masters (Price 1984; Athow and Blanton 2002; Haag 2011; Oseni 2017).

In her 2011 study devoted to the mechanisms of neocolonialism in Africa, Haag (2011) demonstrates how France preserves a neo-colonial relationship with Cameroon in terms of economic, financial, political, and military influence and how Britain maintains such neo-colonial relation with Ghana in terms of economic and financial control. Similarly, Taylor (2019) has criticized the colonial currency of the CFA Franc in Francophone Africa. In this assessment, Taylor (2019) particularly notes that the French-backed currency (CFA Franc) is “the most blatant example of functioning neocolonialism in Africa today and a critical device that promotes dependency in large parts of the continent” as well as economic underdevelopment (Taylor 2019: 1066). According to him, “the real importance of the CFA franc should not be seen as purely economic, but also political” (Taylor 2019: 1064). In other words, the CFA franc is an instrument France uses to politically control its former colonies (Signé 2017). The former Deputy Prime Minister of Italy, Luigi Di Maio (Signé 2019), offered a similar reading of the *Françafrique* (the CFA currency in particular) when he extrapolated and contended that, by controlling the CFA currency, France does not only exploit

Francophone African countries, but contributes immensely to the underdevelopment of these countries, causing the latter's nationals to view and resort to illegal emigration into Europe as the best option to escape poverty and achieve upward financial mobility in life. Pointedly, Di Maio argued that "France is one of those countries that by printing money for 14 African states prevents their economic development and contributes to the fact that the refugees leave and then die in the sea or arrive on our coasts" (Signé 2019: 4).

The indexes mentioned above of Western neocolonialism have not only been confined to the political and economic sectors. Aspects of the cultural sphere, such as the media and communications, have also been touched by Western neo-colonialist influences. This is true to the fact that various forms of Europe-Africa media partnership/cooperation and foreign media initiatives on the African continent have directly or indirectly been instruments or enablers of neocolonialism (Asseraf 2022; Camara 2018; Krupova and Cech 2020). French global and transnational media houses, such as *Radio France Internationale* (RFI), *Television France Internationale* (TFI), and *France 24*, have been not only France's voice, but also insidious enablers/supporters of France's neocolonialism on the continents. Through many of their reportage and programs, these media initiatives have fuelled the myth of France's cultural and political superiority over French-speaking nations in Africa and overlooked newsworthy events that are susceptible to reinforcing France's image as a neo-colonial force in Africa. These French media initiatives have always endeavoured to present France's military presence in Africa in a positive light. Ndong (2020) remarks that the French and international media had long taken the existence of the *FrancAfrique* as "something of a dirty secret, even though it is used by some 187 million people." Thus, French media houses have been complicit to the French neo-colonial governments. They have often closed their eyes on French governments and multinationals pursuing neo-colonial policies in Francophone African countries.

### **Exploring French Neocolonialism in Cameroon**

It will be herculean to exhaustively explore the imperialist or neocolonialist powers that have subtly controlled or sought to control the Cameroonian government these last years. However, in this section, the particular focus will be on France, whose influence seems to be the greatest and most palpable in the country (Kohnert 2022; Haag 2011; Survie 2009; Jing 2019). It will be helpful from the outset to highlight that, without wanting to discard all the multiple – but non-universal – definitions given the term neocolonialism, this section hinges on the conceptualization of French neo-colonial control as a system that emanates from a pernicious alliance between France or French multinationals and the Cameroonian ruling class. This alliance aims to protect France's or French multinationals' economic

interests to the Cameroonian people's detriment. This alliance is often fuelled through military, cultural, and financial means which preserve, reinstall and control favourable Cameroonian leaders.

French neocolonialism as a phenomenon in Cameroon has attracted the attention of many scholars, political critics, and informed observers. Hagg (2011) has sought to establish this French neocolonialism through a review of evidence pointing to Cameroon's economic dependence on France, France's political interference in the affairs of Cameroon, and French military presence in Cameroon. She notes that French neo-colonial control in the economic realm is seen in the fact that France and the Cameroonian government have, since the independence period, perpetrated colonial trade patterns. Through such trade practices, France has, over the years, remained Cameroon's first economic partner, and the trade exchange between the two countries has always been in favour of France. In 2009, for instance, this trade exchange was estimated at 860 million Euros, with the trading balance being negative for Cameroon. That year, Cameroon registered 597 million Euro imports from France against only 263 million Euros in exports to France. The colonial pattern of trade between France and Cameroon is also facilitated by several monopolistic and mercantilist trade agreements that have insidiously enabled some French companies or multinationals to monopolize certain sectors of the Cameroonian economy. For instance, through such monopolistic agreements, the French group Bolloré has monopolized the Cameroonian transport system, including the Cameroonian railway (Camrail), the majority of the Douala Seaport, the shipping to Europe, and the transport per truck.

In addition to the colonial pattern of trade mentioned above, the Cameroonian government has, in many cases, questionably preferential treatment to some French companies and multinationals, overlooking some of the non-civic activities of the latter. French players, such as Bolloré, Coron Thanry, and Rougier, have, for instance, deployed illegal procedures in their exploitation of the Cameroonian wood. The Cameroonian government has hardly denounced and repressed these procedures, thereby encouraging a pathetic status quo for years. Although various reports written or sponsored by the World Bank and Global Forest Watch have decried such abusive exploitation of Cameroonian forest products by these French companies, the Cameroonian government has mostly remained mute and blind to these illegal practices. The Cameroonian government has also been indifferent to observers' and whistle-blowers' reports; this is the reason many critics have associated with French neocolonialism (Ndongo 2020; Survie 2019).

Furthermore, many French companies have, over the years, been involved in issues of violation of human rights. Yet, the Cameroonian government has hardly taken legal actions to call these companies to order, to redress the situation, or to protect its citizens. This



inaction by the Cameroonian government has been attributed to corruption. The French companies are generally powerful groups backed by influential but corrupt top government officials (Transparency International Cameroon 2018). The French multinational Soudiaa has, for instance, in many situations, illegally taken over local people's land to create sugar cane plantations. Such human rights violations have often gone uncensored by the government (Survie 2019). Similarly, there have been countless reports of Bolloré's use of expropriation and human rights violations against its Cameroonian employees. These cases have hardly attracted serious actions from the Cameroonian government. Hagg (2011) notes that companies such as Elf, Bolloré, and Rougier have, on several occasions, resorted to mercenaries and extreme violence to neutralize their Cameroonian employees' protests. The Cameroonian government has, in most cases, kept a blind eye to such use of extreme violence.

In addition to the troubling impunity mentioned above, French multinationals are purported to financially support the political campaigns of influential politicians in the country. Such magnanimity from the companies enables them to directly or indirectly influence the country's political life. A former general manager of the French oil company, Elf Aquitaine, by the name Alfred Sirven, explains how his oil company was once cornered by the Biya government for financial support ahead of his political campaign. The French manager confides that (Survie 2009: 104):

I was once received at the Cameroonian presidency by His Excellency Paul Biya. He needed me to provide him with 54 million for his campaign. It was a private meeting. Those guys, trust nobody, you know. They need the money and will not want their minister of finance to know anything about the monetary transaction. This is how Elf is able to have offshore accounts which nobody, including local Cameroonian authorities can trace [My translation].

French companies have sometimes only needed to provide financial support to relevant Cameroonian governing elites to control the latter or enjoy multifaceted favours from the latter. They have also used such donations to enjoy privileges and impunity anytime they perpetrate illegal activities on Cameroonian soil. Such financial support to Cameroonian politicians has, for instance, enabled several French companies to evade taxes, violate the human rights of their workers, and even use the very judicial apparatus in Cameroon to deal with entities who dare resist their neo-colonial policies.

A case in point is the former mayor of the municipal community of Njombe-Penja (in the littoral region of Cameroon) who 'daringly' sought to correct the neo-colonial policies and tax evasion strategies of three powerful French agro-industrial companies, namely Société des Plantations Nouvelles de Penja (SPNP), Société des Bananeraies de la M'Bome (SBM), and Société des Plantations du Haut Penja (PHP). The former mayor's daring action

only attracted the combined fury of the French multinationals and top figures of the Cameroonian government (Transparency International 2018). In effect, on ascending to the head of the municipal council of Penja, Mayor Paul Eric Kingue attempted to resist and redress the three French companies' neo-colonial policies and practices using his office as mayor. This seemingly over-ambitious initiative earned him troubles brewed for him by the French companies in collaboration with some corrupt Cameroonian government officials, one of which was the country's former Minister of territorial administration and decentralization Marapha Ahmidou Yaya (Transparency International Cameroon 2018). Kingue's attempts to make the French companies comply with the regular payment of their taxes earned him the raft of the latter. The directors of the three companies started by placing aggressive phone calls to the mayor, vowing to crush him politically. With the aid of some top government officials, they later instigated politically intimidating actions and two court cases against Kingue. One of the cases was rooted in false accusations of embezzlement of public funds, precisely the sum of 1,400,000 CFA Francs. The other revolved around Mr. Kingue's presumed support of riots in the locality of Penja. Mayor Kingue went through a hellish politico-judicial torment which saw him deposed from his post of mayor and jailed at the New Bell maximum prison from 2008 to 2015. The former mayor gained his freedom in 2015 grace to the support of the Cameroonian civil society. In its review of the case described above, Transparency International Cameroon (2018: 42) writes that:

The Paul Eric Kingue case has demonstrated how an administrator elected by the people has attempted to address the illegal policies of big banana corporations operating in his municipality only for him to suffer the fury of those agro-industrial companies which have since become big systems of influence and occult power machines whose influence are felt not only in the Mongo Division but also in the entire Cameroonian territory. [...] Thus, the Paul Eric Kingue case has permitted the public to see how obscure and opaque interests related to systems of corruption, collusion and coercion could be mobilized in complimentary modes by powerful banana exploitation companies which have transformed their areas of exploitation into quasi-colonial spheres where local populations are exploited, bullied, humiliated, marginalized and maltreated [My translation].

French multinationals finance not only the campaigns of Cameroonian politicians but also fund the activities of some key organs of the Cameroonian State, such as the armed forces. Through such a system, they often assume significant influence in the Cameroonian territory. The French oil corporation, Total, has for years financed six of the ten divisions of the Cameroonian navy, in return for protecting its oil platforms by this arm of the Cameroonian army (Hagg 2011).



Another greatest instrument of French neocolonialism in Cameroon is the CFA Franc. Since the pre-independence period, the CFA currency, in particular, permitted France to control the economy of Cameroon, together with those of other former French African colonies. The currency is an instrument of French monetary imperialism in Cameroon. This description is on the ground that it hampers Cameroon's economic sovereignty and creates a situation where the European Central Bank dictates Cameroon's monetary and exchange rate policies. Additionally, the Franco-African agreements that led to its introduction oblige Cameroon, like other former French colonies in West and Central Africa, to deposit up to 65% of its monetary reserves in the French treasury. This injunction contributes to massive capital outflow and deprives the Cameroonian economy of thousands of billions that could be used for the country's development. In tandem with this evidence, it could be argued that the CFA Franc is practically detrimental to Cameroon's economic development, despite a few of its strong points.

Another piece of evidence pointing to the neo-colonial nature of the currency is that it is printed in France, not Cameroon. In other words, Cameroon still depends entirely on France for the availability of its currency in its economy. Given all the troubling factors mentioned above, many Cameroonian and foreign observers have expressed hostility toward the CFA Franc currency, most often describing it as an instrument leveraged by France to control Cameroon economically and politically. Many critics suggest that the currency militates and accounts for the country's underdevelopment. The colonial currency maintains Cameroon in a rank subordinate to that of France. Ndongo (2017) caricatures the currency as a 'colonial relic'. He adds that *for Cameroonians who hope to "export competitive products, obtain affordable credit, work for the integration of continental trade, or fight for an Africa free from imperialist control, the CFA franc is an anachronism demanding orderly and methodical elimination"* (Ndongo 2017).

The last instrument of French neocolonialism in Cameroon is French military cooperation and presence in Cameroon. Although the presence of military soldiers on Cameroonian soil is not as considerable as in countries such as Djibouti or Cote d'Ivoire, the fact remains that French troops have, from time to time, transited through Cameroon for missions in neighbouring countries. The French army has never directly intervened in the country; however, France has maintained its military cooperation with Cameroon. This cooperation has made French companies one of Cameroon's leading suppliers of weaponry (Ambasonian Prisoner of Conscience Support Network 2018).

French neocolonialism in Cameroon dates back to the 1960s and has evolved into a complex dilemma. One remembers that from the dawn of Cameroon's independence, France sought to define Cameroon's governing elites and administrative apparatus, ensuring that

pro-French leadership prevails in the country. The French government surrendered the administration of Cameroon to local people in 1960, ensuring that a pro-French president, in the person of his Excellency Ahamadou Ahidjo, ruled the country. In many instances, Ahidjo declared his allegiance to France. In one of his speeches to the Cameroonian nation, Ahidjo described his loyalty to France thus: “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]” (Takougang and Krieger 1998: 88). In addition to such public pro-French declarations, Ahidjo relied heavily on French military and mercenaries as well as French intelligence to crush the UPC movement which had since the colonial period exhibited a strong anti-French and anti-colonial sentiment, often resorting to terrorism to attack French interests in the country.

Ahidjo’s successor Paul Biya came to power in 1982 and has benefitted from the support of France to remain in power for over 35 years (Takougang and Krieger 1998; Tache 2019; Survie 2019). It is, for instance, rumoured that Biya won the 1992 elections with the fraudulent support of the French and that his prolonged stay in power is the consequence of his constant loyalty to France (Takougang and Krieger 1998; Tache 2019). Whether this rumour is true or false is a matter for another debate. What remains observable is that this rumour has structured the popular imaginary in Cameroon the same as the myth stipulating that France still controls the entire governing machinery in the country.

### **1. Cameroonian Intelligentsia’s Attitude towards French or Western Neocolonialism in Cameroon**

The persistence of French neocolonialism in Cameroon has become the concern of media and the Cameroonian intelligentsia, including Cameroonian politicians, pressure groups, civil society organisations, opinion leaders, members of the Cameroonian Diaspora, and religious organisations. It has engendered a perceptible growth of anti-French sentiments in the country, particularly in intellectual circles. Cameroonian political activists, opinion leaders, politicians, and media have created a variety of intellectual and political fora to denounce this French neocolonialism in the country.

One of these multiple fora is the popular music in which politically committed artistes, such as Lapiro de Mbanga, Junior Singa, Tchana Pierre, and Longue Longue, have released well-received pan-Africanist songs, in which the West in general and France and its multinationals, in particular, are strongly criticized for their neo-colonial influence on the continent in general and in Cameroon in particular. A good example is Longue Longue’s *Ayo Africa*, in which the artiste reviews some of the evidence of French and Western domination and control of the Cameroonian economy.

Like musicians, famous filmmakers have also deployed cinema to denounce Western imperialism, particularly French neocolonialism in Cameroon. An egregious example is Jean Marie Teno's 1992 documentary film in French titled *Afrique je te plumerai* (Africa, I will pluck you) (Teno 1992). In this film, Teno decries French neocolonialism in Cameroon, holding it responsible, not only for underdevelopment in the country, but also for cultural genocide in the country. According to Teno, continuous French influence in Cameroon has made conditions favourable for alien and neo-colonial cultures, such as Euro-centric education, pro-French administration, and pro-French world views, to damage traditional Cameroonian societies and inhibit effective socio-economic development in the country. Teno unveils the vision of his cinematic initiative situating it in the fight against neocolonialism in his country. He also describes his cinematic initiative as a postmodern advocacy for social development that takes into account the failures of the past.

Another significant portion of Cameroonian criticism of French neocolonialism in Cameroon appears in the form of literary media or mediatized reports generated by popular writers, political activists, researchers, and politicians. An egregious example is the series of open letters the former mayor of the Njombe-Penja municipality wrote during his days in prison after a politico-judicial machination involving French companies and some top brass of the Cameroonian government was conceived against him. In two of the letters addressed respectively to the Cameroonian president (titled "*Lettre ouverte à Son Excellence Monsieur le président*") (Kingue 2011) and to the free world (titled "*Lettre ouverte de Paul Eric Kingue au monde libre*") (Kingue 2010), he exposes the neo-colonialist policies of some powerful French agro-industrial companies, such the Société des Plantations Nouvelles de Penja (SPNP), Société des Bananeraies de la M'Bome (SBM), and Société des Plantations du Haut-Penja (PHP).

In these open letters, Kingue precisely censures the constant involvement of the companies mentioned above in fiscal evasion, abuse of power, and terrible violations of their employees' human rights. He highlights the derisory wages (less than 37 Euros) the companies pay their workers against very long daily work periods (7-15 hours) and under unsafe conditions, thereby perpetrating poverty in the region. He also reveals the insidious ways the companies evade taxes with the support of corrupt heavyweights of the party in government (the Cameroon People Democratic Movement), thereby depriving local political constituencies of the much-needed fund for their economic development. In his understanding, French agro-industrial companies are agents of neocolonialism and underdevelopment in Njombe-Penja. By derisory wages and gross violations of their workers' human rights, they increase the poverty of the local population. In his words, the French companies are 'heartless and mindless slavers' that capitalize on the widespread

corruption prevailing in the Cameroonian government to perpetrate modern-day slavery in the country. As he vividly puts it, conditions of work in most French banana companies in Njombe-Penja are disastrously inhuman and reminiscent of the enslavement of Black people in American plantations:

Most often, laborers work without adequate tools, boots, helmets, and other useful instruments. The companies' workers spray toxic and dangerous chemical products on plantations without protecting themselves. They toil barefooted and bare hands in inundated gutters, sometimes under the threats of 'team leaders' that are compelled to exhibit loyalty to their 'White administrators'. What is even curious here is that after tiring days of backbreaking labour, these workers do not enjoy any water point in town where they can decently take their bath. [...] In view of such a disaster that baffles even the organizations that financially support these French companies, I, the mayor-elect, could not, in spite of my being a member of the party in government, remain indifferent. Who could, better than a mayor operating in his sphere of influence, measure the level of suffering of a population? What manner of human being will remain indifferent to the meager salaries paid by these French companies of a strange morality to their workers. [My translation]

Mayor Kingue is far from being the only Cameroonian politician who has had a very bitter experience with French neocolonialism in his country. In many of their recent communications, many pressure groups and secessionist movements, particularly those operating in the English-speaking part of the country, blamed Cameroon's perceived economic stagnation and underdevelopment partly on French neocolonialism. A case in point is the secessionist movement Ambazonia Defence Council which has since 2017 joined the movement to create a break-away country called 'Ambazonia'. In several online communications, the group has identified the government's tolerance of and/or complicity in French neo-colonial control of the Cameroonian State as one of the principal sources of the Anglophone Cameroonian minority's relegation to second-class status in their own country. To this secessionist group, France's eminent position in Cameroon has facilitated Francophone Cameroonians' undue domination of all Cameroonian polity and economic sectors. Such French domination has, for instance, favoured the survival of various mercantile military cooperation and trade agreements which have continually kept the Cameroonian nation under France, besides giving France the green light to exploit and under-develop the country heartlessly. The group particularly demonizes the CFA Francs describing it as a serious vestige of French colonialism in Cameroon and a pernicious system that maintains Cameroon and Anglophone Cameroonians in monetary slavery.

The group further claims that French socio-political and economic imperialism has insidiously instigated a French-dominated political system in Cameroon, which is just too corrupt and ineffective, as well as the enforcement of an educational policy and a judiciary system that mainly and subtly promote the French language and Francophone cultures.

These policies and systems have progressively ‘Francophonised’ the English system of education and the standard law system supposed to be practiced in the English-speaking zones of the country. Through France and francophone culture’s dominance in Cameroon, successive French governments have, according to this group, condoned Francophone Cameroonians’ colonization of the Anglophone minority and the simplification of the latter’s cultural heritage. The result of all these scenarios is that a terrible socio-political and economic situation prevails in the country and forces Anglophone Cameroonians to suffer perpetual psycho-social misery. Thus, France’s behaviour in Cameroon has made the indigenous populations of the Cameroonian territories become “completely helpless subjects, robbed of all forms of power and human dignity”. In a report titled *History and Context*, the group declares that:

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. (Ambazonian Prisoners of Conscience Support Network 2017: 9)

The Ambazonian Prisoners of Conscience Support Network goes on to specifically expose what it perceives as evidence of France’s ‘devilishness’ and hostility to Anglophone Cameroon’s socio-cultural development. It states that France’s continuous hold on Cameroon is partly responsible for Anglophone Cameroonians’ disenchantment with the Cameroonian government. Such a hold is also responsible for growing secessionist feelings in Anglophone regions of Cameroon.

The Cameroonian government has on several occasions debunked claims that France or any Western country is infringing on Cameroon’s sovereignty. However, the impunity with which French companies and French institutions violate their Cameroonian workers’ human rights, the recrudescence of these companies’ involvement in corrupt and unscrupulous schemes aimed at manipulating the Cameroonian governing elites, and the prevalence of a colonial currency in the country among a myriad of other factors, only vindicate those tempted to give Anglophone secessionist groups some credits. It is hard to dismiss claims of French domination and neo-colonial attachment to Cameroon.

Thus, anti-neocolonialism has been manifested at various levels of the Cameroonian socio-political system and through various channels. Yet, many scholars still doubt the existence of a growing anti-French movement in the country similar to one observed in Ivory Coast in 2003. The General Secretary of the 2020 Franco-African Summit, Stephanie Rivoal, argues that contrary to popular belief, Franco-phobia is not widespread in Francophone Africa including Cameroon (Meyer 2019). In her words (Meyer 2019: 66), “concrete facts

reveal that anti-French sentiments are far from being generalized in Africa. Everywhere I go to in the continent, people tell me: you guys should come with more investments to our country” [My translation].

Rivoal’s observation may not be very far from the truth if one considers that French interests in Cameroon are hardly the target of violent protests or aggressive government policies. Apart from the 1990s, when the opposition coalition constantly called for a boycott of French products (Dougueli 2019), the business environment in Cameroon has hardly been too Francophobic. Furthermore, according to French Embassy in Cameroon, cases of physical aggression against French citizens or Whites in the country are quasi-inexistent, and there are increasing inter-race marriages between Cameroonian and French citizens. Furthermore, the number of Cameroonians who yearly seek admission into French universities or other institutes of higher learning is growing. More and more Cameroonian nationals want to go to France for academic pursuits, business tourism, or asylum. All these make spurious claims of growing anti-French sentiments in the country more of a myth than a reality. Therefore, anti-French sentiments are at best described by few Cameroonian authors as an incidental phenomenon and a trend confined to some political and intellectual quarters, notably circles ostentatiously or snobbishly branded ‘pan-Africanist’ (Boungou 2014; Mbog 2015; Atemengue 2003).

In his book, *Sortir le Cameroun de l’impasse* (Saving Cameroon from the Impass), Martin Amvouna Atemengue (2003), remarks that there are two categories of anti-French entities in Cameroon: those who are anti-French for philosophical reasons and those who entertain such a sentiment for tactical political reasons. Members of the first category claim they are bent on continuing anti-colonial struggles. It is common for members of this category to anchor their anti-French feelings in France’s colonial mistakes. The second category sees anti-French feelings as a way of life and a tactical political tool. For instance, it has become common among a significant segment of the country’s intellectuals and anti-government critics to blame Cameroon’s problems directly on the French or Cameroon government’s perceived allegiance to France. The Ambazonian Defence Council mentioned earlier, as well as a great majority of the Anglophone Cameroonian political class, are one such Francophobic critics. By such tactical political posturing, many members of the Cameroonian intelligentsia tend to scapegoat France for any political malfunctioning in Cameroon. By the same logic, many government officials and even opposition politicians have, in their quest for working solutions to the country’s development problems, tended to scapegoat France, accusing the latter of being responsible for all the country’s underdevelopment (Mbog 2015; Pommerolle 2015).



## **2. Cameroon Pan-African Media's Attitude towards French/Western Neocolonialism: The Case of *Afrique Media***

Similar to activists, writers, musicians, and politicians, many Cameroonian journalists have sought to demonize or decry French neocolonialism in Cameroon. In an article titled "Cameroon: A Breeding Ground for Rising Anti-French Sentiments" [my translation], Mbog (2015) reviews cases of Cameroonian journalists who either expressed anti-French sentiments or strong aversion to France's neo-colonial control of Cameroon. One such Cameroon media which have made anti-French and anti-neocolonialism a key aspect of their mantra is *Afrique Media*, a non-government pan-African television station created in 2000 with the vision of promoting African values and serving as the torchbearer of an emerging Africa.

### **a. *Afrique Media: Its Tagline and Criticism***

Fondly called 'the pan-African television station', *Afrique Media* was founded in 2000 by a media group bearing the same name (the Afrique Media Group) and having Justin Tagouh at its head. According to the television's website (<http://www.afriquemediatv.com/la-chaine/presentation>), it has a continental and global footprint, though its principal production centers are based in Cameroon. Suspensions and bans from the Cameroonian media regulatory organ (the *Conseil National de la Communication*) have pushed the station to seasonally delocalize its production centres from Cameroon to neighbouring countries such as Chad and Equatorial (Panafricom 2015). Broadcasting via terrestrial transmitters, cable, and satellite, the station has secured its presence in over 192 countries, principally in Africa. According to the station's website, over 220 million families are fans of *Afrique Media*. In spite of this apparent popularity, the station has virtually not attracted the attention of scholars. The bulk of the available literature that evokes the station's operations are constituted of online commentary and gossip papers (Makang 2017; Panafricom 2015; Boungou 2014).

*Afrique Media* could be considered an advocacy and politically-committed initiative, hinging on informative, motivational, and interactive media programs that, on the one hand, celebrate the African identity/specificity, and on the other hand, denounce Western neocolonialism in Africa. Indeed, the majority of the programs aired over the station are debates, talk shows, news bulletins, and documentaries, directly or indirectly aimed at exposing the ills of neocolonialism in Africa and foregrounding the efforts of pan-African movements or leaders on African soil. As stated on its website, the television station is "The torchbearer of an emerging Africa

as well as a site par excellence of the expression and promotion of African values” [*Le porte flambeau de l'Afrique qui monte et l'espace d'expression et de promotion des valeurs africaines par excellence* - my translation] (Afrique Media 2015).

The station's successful partnership with similar pan-African movements and media initiatives in many West and Central African countries as well as overseas has made its political influence be felt in many parts of the African continent and African diasporas in the West. In some of its programs, the station has given the impression that it closely supports and fuels neo-colonial and democratization movements in various African nations that still chafe under dictatorship and Western domination. Based on the contents of such programs, the station is often regarded as a democratization force in receiving African countries. However, its constant downplaying of African dictatorships, apparently innocuous to its programs, has made many critics sceptical of its mantra. In an online paper, Smith (2016) manifests such scepticism, associating *Afrique Media's* operation with various pro-African dictatorial governments and conspiracy theories. He confides that (Smith 2016):

Henry Diabate-Manden, a journalist and former star presenter with *Afrique Media* told me that the objective of the sponsors of *Afrique Media* was to manipulate the population to support Paul Biya and to turn against France. The populist manipulations of *Afrique Media* have also succeeded in overturning the popular support that the United States had in Cameroon after sending troops into the region to help fight Boko Haram. Thus, *Afrique Media* has succeeded not only in fanning hatred against Westerners, but in painting individuals or political parties seeking change as Western puppets.

Other sceptical views of the station have revolved around *Afrique Media's* porosity to suspected French spies and neo-colonial agents (Makang 2017). As earlier said, much of the literature on *Afrique Media* is published as online or journalistic writings. Empirical research is still needed to profoundly understand this television station's policies and functioning.

### ***b. Afrique Media as a Francophobic Pan-Africanist Movement***

From its inception, the television station has not denied its Francophobic inclination as well as its adhesion to a rather aggressive form of pan-Africanism. In an interview (Boungou 2014), one of the station's senior journalists, Francois Bikoro, declares 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 it represents a counter-force to the mainstream media which are bent on propagating the Western ideology”. In the same line of thought, the station's program director Albert Patrick

Eya claims that “We are regarded in many quarters as a source of nuisance, because we have decided to denounce the injustices France is inflicting the African continent” [My translation] (Mbog 2015).

In effect, if it is irrefutable that *Afrique Media* shows admeasured fervour and dexterity in attacking the neo-colonial penchant of Western countries irrespective of nationality, the media house has its attention more focused on anti-French reporting. This is probably because French neocolonialism seems to be the most dominant in French-speaking African countries. In line with this, French bashing is far too recurrent in the media house’s programming and its online communications. For instance, in an article posted on one of its websites, the media house prides itself on being the African media house “which, more than any other outlet, exposes the indecent efforts of the French government in Africa [my translation]”. In the same article, the media house confesses its primal assignment and pan-African commitment to watchdog after what it perceives as France’s shameful policies in Africa. It concedes that:

We are wrestling to death against a dreaded adversary [France] whose allies comprise the ensemble of Western countries and which enjoys an experience of one hundred years of conquest and enslaving of our peoples. This adversary – who is blessed with no natural resources and whose advancement depends upon the pillage of African resources – will fight using cruelty and malice to the fullest. It will do this in order to maintain the status quo. In no way will this enemy hesitate to do the worst [My translation] (Makang 2017).

*Afrique Media*’s apparent fervour to expose the ills of French neocolonialism in Francophone Africa in particular has led its journalists, panellists, resource persons, and broadcasters to sometimes adopt non-conformist and relatively yellow approaches to journalism. One such approach has been the use of what could be called an ‘accusatory’, rather than ‘investigative’ form of journalism, as well as the mobilization of unsubstantiated counter-truths. By such ‘accusatory journalism’ the media house usually proffers speculations and the reliance on anonymous whistle-blowers to the detriment of full and well-structured investigative journalism. As the station’s programs director Albert Patrick Eya puts it, “Our method consists in preaching falsehood with the hope that truth will emerge (*Notre méthode, c’est de precher le faux pour avoir le vrai* - my translation)” (Mbog 2015).

Another questionable journalistic paradigm constantly adopted by the pan-Africanist broadcasting house is what it calls ‘*journalisme d’opinions*’ (opinion journalism) rooted in the African concept of the ‘palaver tree’. One of the media house’s senior journalists, Francois Bikoro, refers to this ‘relatively strange’

reportorial policy when he contends that: “*Afrique Media’s* way of operating has nothing to do with journalism but opinion broadcast shaped according to the “African palaver model” [My translation] (Boungou 2014).

The African palaver tree or model refers to a space where African patriarchs and family heads converge for dialogue or debate around critical issues affecting the life of their communities of origin. Some of these issues include marriage, conflict resolution, and communal development. In such a context, debaters must often freely express their opinions, guided by several democratic rules and values, three of which are the openness of communication, truth-telling, and respect for or tolerance of oppositional views (Scheid 2011; Vanderpool 2019). On paper, *Afrique Media* claims to have rooted its model of reporting and discussing newsworthy events in the strong Pan-African symbol of the Palaver Tree. In reality, many democratic aspects of the palaver three concepts are absent in its mantra and editorial policies, particularly regarding French/Western neocolonialism news. For instance, the Palaver Tree concept allows for oppositional views in theory. But in most anti-French issues reported or debated on the station, pro-French panellists or neutral positions are most often carefully and subtly excluded. Such pro-French sides are not tolerated at all.

By basing their *modus operandis* and mantra on ‘the journalism of opinions’, and a skewed version of the ‘palaver model’, *Afrique Media* has, in many instances, mismanaged its discussion programs, creating rooms for situations where some of its panellists talk with some misguided libertinism and proffer insults or impolite remarks either against the Cameroonian government or Western powers. The station’s news and political analysis programs such as “*le debat Africain*” (the African Debate), “*le Merit Panafricain*” (The Pan-African Merit), “*Bouquet Special*” (Special Bouquet), and “*Edition Speciale*” (Special Edition) most often easily morph into loose forums where panellists and presenters rain insults or all manner of incivility on entities perceived to be neo-colonial or pro-French.

Such excesses and journalistic rascality were observed on the 7<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, and 30<sup>th</sup> of August 2015 editions of its programs mentioned above, “*Bouquet Special*” (Special Bouquet) and “*Edition Speciale*” (Special Edition). These incidents attracted public criticism and a regime of severe sanctions from Cameroon’s media regulatory organ, the National Communications Council (NCC). In effect, the NCC promptly shut down the stations’ Yaounde and Douala offices and suspended two of its journalists in June 2015 over issues of hate speech against some Western countries. The sanctions were also rationalized by the station’s defiance of an initial one-month suspension on its

broadcasting. According to NCC's Director Peter Esoka, *Afrique Media* had used several editions of its programs mentioned above to insult the policies of various Western countries (including France) sharing good diplomatic relations with Cameroon.

The station has, in effect, adopted a visibly combative spirit which has led it to constantly bash the West in general and France in particular at the least given opportunity. This combative spirit has made it to severally associate France and other Western countries' policies with various conspiracy theories and to openly insult these countries' nationals, foreign policies, and interests. For instance, the station has, in many of its reports on the Boko Haram terrorist group, riskily defended the theory that, since the majority of weaponry seized from the terrorists is manufactured in France, Paris may be the hidden hand that arms and tele-guides the terrorists and orchestrates unrest in Northern Cameroon with the complicity of the local elites (Pommerolle 2015; Moki 2015). In brief, *Afrique Media* has made anti-French reporting a dominant aspect of its mantra. One has the impression that the station interprets pan-Africanism as being resolutely anti-French or anti-Western. One also has the impression that the station is pushing a version of Pan-Africanist journalism which is more rooted in yellow journalistic practices.

## Conclusion

The persistence of French neocolonialism has motivated the emergence of new and very aggressive forms of pan-Africanism in most Francophone African countries. Indeed, many Francophobic political initiatives operating in Francophone African countries have sought to resist French neocolonialism in their countries by mobilising forms of pan-Africanism which, to a great extent, are xenophobic and disruptive to France' diplomacy in specific Francophone African countries. This pan-Africanism has some outlets, including media channels. In Cameroon, *Afrique Media* had resorted to a very combative, but professionally problematic, form of journalism called 'journalism of opinion' to denounce Western political imperialism and contribute to the fight against Western (and particularly French) neocolonialism in Cameroon. This media has many political movements sought to combat French neocolonialism through a xenophobic type of pan-Africanism.

This paper argues that there is palpable evidence of French neocolonialism in Cameroon. This neo-colonial situation is vehemently and sometimes subtly denounced by the Cameroonian intelligentsia and media, including *Afrique Media*. The only problem is that some media outlets, notably *Afrique Media*, tend to use un-journalistic ways to push for a pan-African cause which, by many indications, is just problematic. Thus, the paper clearly

states that combating French colonialism through pan-African rhetoric is genuine and laudable; but using un-journalistic approaches to do that is what is questionable.

### Notes on contributor

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