



France in Africa: Never Can Say Adieu

By Kalundi Serumaga



Despite apparently going as quickly as it came up, the recent disagreement between the African Union (AU) and one of its employees created a few interesting insights into the current state of Official Pan-Africanism, and also allowed an opportunity for reflection.

In summary, one Dr. Aneka Chihombori-Quao took to the fringes of radical African American media to begin denouncing the state of economic relations between France and the various West African countries descended from France's colonial empire. Her point was that an essentially colonial (by which she meant paternalistic and exploitative) relationship between France and Africa continues to exist. This, she contends, is a matter that the African Union, Africans and Africa's well-wishers should all be concerned about, and be fighting against.

The medical doctor-turned-diplomat, and long-term resident of the United States previously, was to make a series of strongly-worded attacks on France. All this coincided with the announcement that the AU was to terminate her services as ambassador.

"Fourteen African countries are obliged by France through a colonial pact", said Dr. Chihombori, "to put 85 per cent of their foreign reserve into France's central bank under the French minister of finance's control." She continued:

"..... if you look deeper, of the roughly 68 coups that have happened in Africa, 61 per cent have taken place in so-called Francophone countries. In other words, any African leader wanting to

take his country out from under the economic control of France was subject to be overthrown by a French-engineered coup...A case in point: Togo's first democratic leader was assassinated by Etienne Gnassingbe, an ex-French Foreign Legionnaire army sergeant who allegedly received a bounty of \$612 million. Similar things can be said of coups or political instability in Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin and the Central African Republic."

(Some of her statements have tested the bounds of credibility, especially in the financial figures she gave.)

These attacks then formed the basis of her criticism of the AU as an institution for failing, in her view, to end this robbery. Her insinuation was that the real reason for her sacking was because of criticising a powerful European country to which the AU was somehow beholden.

On its part, the AU defended itself not by answering the charges, but rather by challenging the credibility of the one making the accusation.

Describing Dr. Chihombori as running a "misleading campaign" in an October 15th statement, Ebba Kalondo, the AU Commission chair's spokesperson, explained that Dr. Chihombori's tour of duty had simply ended, and that a string of irregularities were uncovered in the normal review undertaken at the end of such a cycle. She stated that the ambassador had initiated a whole series of projects and activities without the knowledge or authority of her employer.

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In so doing, the accusation goes, Dr. Chihombori utilised the African Union logo and official address so as to present these activities as official ones, and went on to appoint people to these tasks, as well as to solicit for funds from the private sector to support them. Fraud, basically. The implication, it appears, is that these broadsides against France served as a diversion.

But this is not really the problem: everything that the AU has said about their former employee can be true, without everything that the employee said about France-Africa relations being untrue.

It is indeed a fact that the French government maintains an undue beneficial influence on fiscal matters among its former West African colonies. This is an arrangement that began in all cases well before independence, and has continued long after it.

It is also a fact that Official Africa, including the collectivity of the African Union, benefits from European Union and French aid largesse.

Furthermore, there is ample historical evidence of France's penchant for ripping off whole nations of black people.

From slavery to colonialism to post-colonialism

After the enslaved Africans in the French Caribbean island colony of Haiti rebelled in 1791 by killing most of the slave plantation managers and defeating the resident French forces, the revolutionary government of France sent reinforcements at the request of the absentee slave plantation owners. These forces - Napoleonic, no less - were also defeated, and the formerly enslaved of Haiti declared

themselves an independent republic in 1804.

In 1825, a decade after the end of Napoleon, twelve French warships armed, it is said, with 528 cannons, sailed to Haiti and delivered a demand: France was willing to finally recognise the new independent republic on condition that Haiti committed to paying France 150 million French francs *in gold* for the “loss of property” incurred during the rebellion. What’s more, this was to be borrowed from French banks. Haiti, faced with the prospect of a naval blockade, accepted.

This “debt” was kept in force until the final payment was made in 1947. That is a period of 122 years. To complete it, Haiti had to take an additional loan from the United States. As a result, Haiti remains one of the poorest countries in the world.

France continues to offer what I shall term “intervention services” aimed at resolving security problems in the various countries with which it has historical linkages to the tune of \$665 million a year.

However, the line between friendly assistance, and imperial overlordship is quite blurred.

Following a helicopter collision that caused the death of thirteen French soldiers in a November 26 combat operation against jihadis in northern Mali, France’s President Emmanuel Macron announced that he was summoning the heads of Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad to a December 16 Paris meeting to explain themselves. (France has a heavy military presence in the Sahel, ostensibly to combat terrorism.)

“I can’t, nor do I want French soldiers on the ground while there is anti-French sentiment that is sometimes held by the leaders of some of the African countries,” declared Macron at a press conference during a NATO summit in London early this month.

“The leaders of five West African nations...should come to France on December 16 to provide clarifications,” he added, more than a little imperiously.

Normally, revelations, such as the ones made by Dr. Chihombori, could promote a wider discussion of what effect a wholesale African rejection of Franco-African economic arrangements would have on the domestic French economy, and the wider European Union economy in which it is embedded. France is, after all, the EU’s third, and the world’s seventh largest economy.

With the revolts taking place against power globally, it is worth reflecting on how France, already dealing with twelve months of Yellow Vest rioters protesting the general fall in the standard of living, would then cope if it were dropped any lower.

Indeed, there are already rumblings afoot regarding what should be the future of that financial relationship.

The challenge of the imperfect messenger

But the problem may be the challenge of the “imperfect messenger”. The challenge, rooted perhaps in the Christian foundations of Western-built discourse, is the expectation that those who offer us redemption must first be above all blemish themselves.

The *New African* magazine and has been beating the drum on French trickery in Africa for at least two decades.

One hears a lot of things. For example, that Francophone countries are only allowed to access 10 to

15 percent of their own money held in the France Reserve Bank at any given time, and that any requests for more are charged at punitive rates, with the Bank having the discretion to deny the request.

Furthermore, that this power extends to French government officials sitting on the boards of more than a few West African central banks as representatives of France, and having veto powers.

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What Dr. Chihombori has done is perhaps what the writer Parselelo Kantai has described to me as the “privatisation of Pan-Africanism”. She would not be the first African person we have seen in our long history to take it upon herself to appear to speak for the whole race, and to establish organisations supposedly to advance this project.

The historical record of this is murky and riven with division and polarising interpretations. The principal and most famous of these, of course, is the story of the grandfather of Pan-Africanism himself, Mzee Marcus Garvey.

Looking at the bare facts, there is much to cast doubt on Garvey’s credentials as a leader. He had already been labelled as a charlatan by some other black activists in the period before he rode to global prominence between the two great European wars.

By the time his political career was over, he had been successfully sued for criminal libel by a fellow activist, and had been sued by numerous journalists for non-payment for their contributions to his newspaper. He had been married twice, after what can only be described as a chaotic short-lived first marriage, and somewhat messy divorce. He had overseen the failure of a number of business ventures seeded by money from his followers, and served a prison term for financial fraud before being immediately deported from the United States after the sentence was commuted.

The key point is this: If Official Africa will not step into the breach and actually do something effective about these long-running problems, then nobody should be surprised to see the rise of self-appointed lions. And therefore, nobody should be surprised that among those lions there may well be a good portion of chancers who have sensed an opportunity. Neither Dr. Chihombori nor Marcus Garvey are necessarily either.

What we need to note is the fact that that most well-known Africanist movements aimed at liberating black people, and whose legacy lives on today in a variety of ways, were not founded by a native African institution, nor an Africa-based political party, nor an African country; they were started by a person of African descent who did not speak a word of any African language, and who would reach the end of his life having never set foot on African soil.

This is in no way an attempted defence of Dr Chihombori and her actions. Nor is it an attempt to understand her initiatives. I am certainly not attempting to place her alongside Marcus Garvey. I am, however, making the point that when it comes to the politics of other wider Pan-African struggles, all will be condemned, be they prophets or phonies.

As things stand, the AU approach could be accused of being an attempt to reduce the whole incident to a matter of mere human resources management.

And even within that context, no explanation was offered as to why any such irregularities were not picked up earlier by Dr. Chihombori's superiors, nor how a person of such alleged dubious character came to be in the AU's employ at such an important deployment in the first place.

Instead the statement ended on an ominous note: "The African Union Commission reserves the right to take any legal action, if necessary, against any use and/or misuse of its name, logo and resources by any unauthorised individuals or entities."

Whether that is a cover-up or a blind spot is a matter that only further discussions can bring out.

The fact remains that not just Africa as a continent but the people of African descent everywhere remain the most precarious on the planet in terms of the conditions faced by the continent's people wherever they are interfacing with the modern world. Unlike Asia, where amidst the poverty, there are large economic classes of more or less indigenous wealthy people, and unlike South America, where, despite the weight of exploitative American capital and a large domestic class often descended from long-term European settlers, the ordinary people have sustained generations of resistance and are even now are in the midst of several uprisings. In contrast, Africans on the continent remain dispossessed, and even the rich are not rich. As for the diaspora, they remain the targets of an institutionalised racism, whose underlying workings are only being fully exposed by a new generation of activists and researchers.

Other questions arise.

The AU does have policies committed to a vision for relationships with and between the various African communities long domiciled in countries outside Africa, and, in particular, relationships with the First Diaspora comprising the descendants of those Africans taken from this continent during the various stages of Western and Eastern enslavements.

Had there ever been any discussion on the implementation of those policies between Dr. Chihombori and the AU before she subsequently allegedly embarked upon her unauthorised initiatives? Does the AU see any merit in and of itself in initiatives of the type begun by Dr. Chihombori Quao in the USA? Does the AU have its own plans, or even existing practical programmes, for such initiatives? If not, why not?

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Does the AU have a view on the justness, or otherwise, of the existing financial relations between France and some of her former colonies?

Perhaps these are not matters discussed in the course of a sacking. However, they should be of interest with us. I did put these questions, and more to the AU communications office, using the provided official address. I had not received a response by the time of submitting this article.

Even before Macron's Napoleonic reaction to the French soldiers' deaths (one the worst losses of life in France's military in decades) Bloomberg news agency had reported an announcement of intent by the West African Monetary Union, which is the mechanism created to maintain the currency unit binding former French colonies to France (while France, ironically, has no independent currency of her own anymore), to make a significant adjustment to the arrangement.

Benin's President Patrice Talon announced that the Africans had "unanimously" agreed to repatriate some their cash reserves from the French treasury.

This is no longer a private matter between them.

In January this year, one Luigi Di Maio, a member of Italy's populist Five Star movement, had already dragged the issue into an internal European Union quarrel over EU fiscal policy that he was having with Emmanuel Macron's France. "First [he] lectures us, then continues to finance public debt with the money which he exploits [from] Africa," said the Italian.

Macron was furious. And it seems he has remained so ever since.

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