

THE BLACK'S RACE REVOLUTION:
THE JOURNAL "LA RACE NÈGRE" AND THE
CIRCULATION OF RADICAL IDEAS IN FRENCH
WEST AFRICA IN 1927 – 1930*
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This paper discusses the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917 on the circulation of anti-French and anti-colonial ideas between France and French West Africa. Its aim is to revisit communism in the African context as one of the significant ideologies of the modern world that challenged colonial empires long before the era of decolonisation. Based on the articles in the journal *La Race Nègre*, published by African intellectuals in Paris between 1927 and 1932 and distributed in French West Africa, this article seeks to demonstrate the variety of radical and revolutionary ideas influenced by communism and Pan-Africanism that circulated between France and French West Africa and how these ideas were articulated by African intellectuals. Supported by the French Communist Party, *La Race Nègre* offered a radically different picture of colonial reality than the official discourse of France's "civilising mission" and was among the first press organs of African francophone intellectuals to demand the right to self-determination and independence for French colonial territories in sub-Saharan Africa. What is more, studying this dynamic may deepen our understanding of the roots of the anti-French sentiments and attitudes which are on the rise across present-day West African countries that once formed the colonies of French West Africa.

Keywords: Anti-colonialism, self-determination, communism, revolution, black race, French West Africa

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Introduction

In 1930, Assan Diack, a teacher in the Senegalese village of Sakal in the Louga region, was being secretly monitored by the colonial authorities of French West Africa for his anti-French attitudes and activities. He was known to be a fervent partisan of the *Ligue de défense de la Race Nègre*, League for the Defence of the Negro Race, an anti-colonial organisation of young Black African and Caribbean intellectuals living in Paris with the close ties to the French Communist Party. Diack acted as its agent in the colony of Senegal. He gathered together a small group of followers and in his home in Sakal he organised regular meetings where he instructed his fellows in spreading the ideas of the League in surrounding villages. His brother, Massouba Diack, had been for long suspected by the colonial authorities for very similar reasons. As an employee in the port of Dakar, he maintained contacts with Pan-Africanists and communist circles in metropolitan France that provided him with anti-French papers categorised as “Bolshevik propaganda”. In August 1927, for instance, he was arrested in the street in Dakar by the security services while holding a package of the radical anti-colonial journal *La Race Nègre*, which was supposed to be distributed across French West Africa.¹

This case of the Diack brothers demonstrates that among the different ideologies that circulated between Europe and Africa in the first half of the 20th century, communism held a particular position. Perhaps no other historical event in Eastern Europe had such an impact on modern African history than the Bolshevik Revolution and the establishment of a communist state in Russia in 1917. It is an historical fact that international communism would become the real engine of change in the African continent predominantly after 1945, when European colonial empires declined while the Soviet Union became the new superpower with global influence.

However, this paper aims to address communism as a significant issue for imperial Africa long before the era of decolonisation and the Cold War.² The overthrow of the Romanov dynasty, the disintegration of the Tsar’s Empire and the establishment of a communist government were events with a strong echo in the colonial capitals of Western Europe, in their colonial empires in Africa but also in regions with a significant African diaspora – the Caribbean and the United

¹ ANS 1G 21, Circonscription de Dakar et dépendances, Commissariat de Dakar, 26 mars 1930, Copie d’un rapport établi par l’Inspecteur Principal Lenaers fait à Louga 8 avril 1930.

² One of the first books to deal with this topic was WILSON, T., E. *Russia & Black Africa Before World War II*.

States. In the 1920s and 1930s, probably no other ideology became more radical in terms of anti-colonialism and anti-racism than communism.

There is no doubt that Marxism had significantly influenced the political thinking on colonialism from as early as the late 19th century. The socialist parties in colonial capitals such as Paris or London had been more or less critical of the colonial projects of their governments. However, after the First World War they took up a different position. In France, for example, many prominent socialists became convinced that the human and material resources of the colonial empire were indispensable for the existence of the French Republic as a world power. They even adopted a racial discourse of civilising mission, according to which France should bring civilisation to completely uncivilised or less civilised people in Africa.³

After 1918, communism, in the French colonial reports referred to as "bolshivism", put forward a powerful new discourse of anti-imperialism, racial emancipation and self-determination. James Genova has argued that for Lenin the colonised populations were not backward and in need of tutelage by Europeans. They were actually more advanced as they were exploited twice, as workers and as colonial subjects.⁴ The Bolshevik leader regarded colonial populations as the "weak links" of the imperial powers and the Third International, or the Comintern, established in 1919, made the "colonial question" one of its most essential elements.⁵ What is more, the Comintern was probably the only international organisation of the era that was openly anti-racist.⁶ It provided a strong and unprecedented platform for international cooperation between anti-colonial circles regardless of race and origin. One of the 21 conditions indispensable for foreign socialist parties to become members of the Comintern was to "support not by words but by acts" the emancipation movement in the colonies and demand the expulsion of the imperialists from the colonies.⁷

³ GENOVA, J. *Colonial Ambivalence, Cultural Authenticity, and the Limitations of Mimicry in French-Ruled West Africa, 1914 – 1956*, p. 65.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ MARANGÉ, C. Le Komintern, le Parti communiste français et la cause de l'indépendance algérienne (1926 – 1930). In *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 2016, No. 131, p. 53; see also DREW, A. Soviet and African Marxist Perspectives on the Colonial Question. In BLUM F., MAGGIO, D. M., SIRACUSANO, G., WOLIKOW, S. (eds.). *Les partis communistes occidentaux et l'Afrique : une histoire mineure ?*, p.109.

⁶ ADI, H. *Pan-Africanism: A History*, p. 65.

⁷ On the example of Algeria, Céline Marangé provides a good discussion of the involvement of the French Communist Party in the "colonial question", see MARANGÉ, C. Le Komintern, le Parti communiste français et la cause de l'indépendance algérienne (1926 – 1930). In *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 2016, No. 131, pp. 53–70.

Entering this network enabled African intellectuals to become a significant part of the growing global anti-colonial movement. Here, the works of Hakim Adi are of particular importance. He demonstrated how the rise of “black communism” in the 1920s was closely linked to the Pan-Africanist movement, and many of its important figures in Africa and the African diaspora created a common network with communist organisations.⁸

This article aims to revisit this issue in the context of France and French West Africa in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Taking the example of the journal *La Race Nègre*, published in Paris between 1927 and 1932 and distributed illegally in West Africa and the Caribbean, my aim is to demonstrate the radical anti-colonial ideas that circulated between France and French West Africa and how these ideas were articulated by African intellectuals.⁹ By the word “radical” I do not mean the voices that called for the reform of empire or for further emancipation of Africans within the empire. I understand the discourse and narrative that called for the end of colonialism, for self-determination and independence and that were openly anti-French or even anti-white.

The story of the Diack brothers in colonial Senegal, mentioned in the introduction, demonstrates that the rise of international communism not only attracted African intellectuals living in Paris but also stimulated the creation of new networks in French West Africa that enabled the circulation of the new radical anti-colonial ideas. This naturally resulted in the rise of new repressive policies on the part of the colonial state. I argue that this new dynamic was nothing other than the direct impact of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia on colonial West Africa. By 1920 communism had replaced radical Islam as the prime threat to the colonial order in French West Africa. In her detailed study, Kathleen Keller has brilliantly demonstrated how in the interwar era the colonial authorities in French West Africa became literally obsessed by tracking down and identifying the potential propagators of “bolshevik propaganda”. She has analysed the ambivalence of the French colonial state in terms of its notion of political freedom, underlining the fact that what was permitted in France was not automatically permitted in the different parts of the French colonial empire.¹⁰ While the French Communist Party could freely compete for political power in France, the activities of communists in French West Africa were subject to

⁸ ADI, H. *Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa and the Diaspora, 1919 – 1939*, pp. 61–79.

⁹ For the purposes of this paper I have used the issues of the journal *La Race Nègre* which are stored in the National Archives in Paris, site Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, under the shelfmark 20010216/43, dossier 1137–1155.

¹⁰ KELLER, K. *Colonial Suspects. Suspicion, Imperial Rule, and Colonial Society in Interwar French West Africa*, pp. 13–14.

repression. What is more, in 1928, the law on the press in French West Africa restricted the distribution of all "anti-French" materials.¹¹ This in reality meant that communist journals were allowed in metropolitan France while their distribution in French West Africa was forbidden and could take place only illegally. The same policy was applied to trade unions and syndicalism that were thriving in metropolitan France in that era but, until the government of the Popular Front in 1936, were not allowed in French West Africa for those who did not possess French citizenship.¹²

La Race Nègre was the press organ of the *Ligue de défense de la race nègre*, the organisation of black Africans linked to and supported by the French Communist Party. It is therefore a perfect illustration of how in 1920s Paris communism became to a large extent a part of Pan-Africanism and vice versa. However, the relations between Pan-Africanists and communists were never easy. The African intellectuals attempted to introduce Pan-Africanist trends into the communist organizations, which often led to many disputes as they often cared more about the "Black question" than the class struggle.¹³

In this paper, I will focus on the set of articles that expressed this ambiguity. They were published in 1929 and 1930, when the most important figure of the League was Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté, a former teacher from French Sudan living in Paris, who was considered to be one of the most radical communist figures within the African diaspora in Paris.¹⁴ I focus on the articles that primarily demonstrate the "radical anti-imperialism" of Africans belonging to the League but also on the writings that dealt with French West Africa in particular. I will show how they depicted "the truth" about colonial reality, which was in stark contrast to the official line of the "civilising mission".

"Revolutions" and Colonial Rule in French West Africa

The first West African experience of modern European political revolution dates back to the late 18th century. In the summer of 1789, when the people of Paris attacked the prison of the Bastille and overthrew the absolute monarchy of Louis XVI, the French possessed on the West African coast the small colonial territory of Senegal. Formed by two settlements in Saint-Louis and Gorée, by the end of the

¹¹ KELLER, K. *Colonial Suspects. Suspicion, Imperial Rule, and Colonial Society in Interwar French West Africa*, p. 14.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ ADI, H. *Pan-Africanism: A History*, p. 95.

¹⁴ For a good overview of Kouyaté's life see <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article173285> [cit. 8 September 2022].

18th century this trading colony was entirely linked to the flourishing Atlantic slave trade. As part of the French empire, the colony was significantly affected by the revolutionary events in France. In 1794 the Committee of Public Safety passed a law that abolished slavery not only in France but also in its overseas territories. Their inhabitants, mostly of African origin, became free citizens of an undivided republic with the right to be represented in the National Assembly in Paris.¹⁵

This unprecedented policy of equality in a colonial context was only short-lived. Napoleon I restored slavery in the colonial territories and banned the right to be represented in Paris. It was the revolution of 1848 in France and the return of a republican government in Paris that led finally to the official abolition of slavery in all French overseas territories. In the context of these events, the inhabitants of Saint-Louis and Gorée in Senegal – known as *originaires* – were granted some of the rights of French citizens. Most of them were Muslims of African and slave origin. The republican revolution in France in 1848 extended their emancipation in Senegal by giving men the right to vote for a representative in town communes and for a deputy for Senegal in the National Assembly in Paris. On the other hand, they could keep the arrangement of their familial or personal matters under the jurisdiction of Islamic courts.¹⁶

Such practice of political assimilation in this part of coastal Senegal continued to evolve in following decades, when this coastal region became known as the Four Communes of Senegal, formed by the municipalities of Saint-Louis, Gorée, Dakar and Rufisque. Although the *originaires* had never been fully equal to French citizen in metropolitan France, by the beginning of the 20th century the Four Communes were the only colonial territory in French West Africa where the ideas of the revolution of 1789 were put into political practice. This process of political emancipation reached its highest point in 1914, when Blaise Diagne was elected as the first black deputy from Senegal in the National Assembly in Paris, advocating that one could be French and a Muslim at the same time.¹⁷

However, the rest of French West Africa was a different story. Officially established between 1896 and 1902 with Dakar as its administrative capital, this

¹⁵ GENOVA, J. *Colonial Ambivalence, Cultural Authenticity, and the Limitations of Mimicry in French-Ruled West Africa, 1914 – 1956*, p. 18.

¹⁶ On this topic see DIOUF, M. Assimilation coloniale et identités religieuses de la civilisation des originaires des Quatre Communes (Sénégal). In *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des Etudes Africaines*, 2000, Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 565–587. See also the Introduction in COOPER, F. *Citizenship between Empire and Nation. Remaking France and French Africa 1945 – 1960*, pp. 1–26.

¹⁷ JOHNSON, G. W. *The Emergence of Black Politics in Senegal. The Struggle for Power in the Four Communes 1900 – 1920*; DUKE-BRYANT, K. *Education as Politics. Colonial Schooling and Political Debates in Colonial Senegal 1850 – 1914*.

huge colonial territory was the result of French colonial expansion in West Africa in the late 19th and early 20th century. By 1920 it had grown into a union of different colonies: Senegal (beyond the territory of the Four Communes), Niger, French Sudan, Mauritania, the Ivory Coast, Upper Volta, Guinea, Dahomey. Their inhabitants of different ethnic and religious origin became French subjects without any of the rights of French citizens and their relations with the colonial administration were regulated by the series of repressive laws commonly known as the *Code de l'Indigénat*.

On the other hand, the colonial authorities had never ceased to officially proclaim their attempts to transmit the gains of the Revolution of 1789 to Africa, particularly via colonial schooling. Officially supposed to be the pillar of the "civilising mission", the system of public schools in French West Africa was officially established in 1903 on the model of the republican schools in metropolitan France. The authorities in Dakar realised that the curriculums for African pupils in Senegal, French Sudan or the Ivory Coast needed to be different from the ones in France. The adaptation of the curriculums to "African conditions" thus resulted in a number of school reforms in French West Africa during the first half of the 20th century. One of the most pressing subjects of these debates was how to teach African children French history, and the French Revolution of 1789 in particular.

For example, in June 1922, the High Council for Education in Dakar discussed the reports from all the colonial territories of French West Africa about teaching African pupils the French Revolution. Some of them expressed significant concerns that this topic could encourage the people in the villages to revolt against the local prisons or encourage them to attack the French colonial administrators.¹⁸ Another good example is to be found in the methodological guidance for new teachers in French West Africa published in 1923, where the authors strongly recommended to avoid all "topics dealing with our problems and violent regime changes".¹⁹

Nevertheless, the idea that the Revolution could not be completely avoided in education but should be interpreted in the "right way" prevailed in official circles in Dakar. Although there had never been a common agreement on how to teach African children about French history, the topic of the French Revolution had remained in the syllabus at least at the higher levels of primary and secondary schools.²⁰

¹⁸ Conseil supérieur de l'enseignement. Session de 26 et 27 juin 1922. In *BEAOF*, 1922, Vol. 10, No. 50, p. 34.

¹⁹ SONOLET, L., PÉRÉS, A. *Le livre du Maître africain*, (2nd edition), p. 118.

²⁰ On the teaching of history in schools in French West Africa see TRNOVEC, S. *The Conquest of the African Mind: History, Colonial Racism, and Education in French West Africa 1910 – 1945*.

By the 1920s, the system of public schools for African pupils produced a significant group in colonial society commonly known as the *évolués*.²¹ This group of educated Africans with diplomas from primary or secondary colonial schools, predominantly men, was concentrated mainly in colonial cities such as Dakar, Saint-Louis, Cotonou or Bamako. They often regarded themselves as the “African elite” within colonial society and they claimed the right to speak on behalf of other Africans in the colony. As their diplomas had only local validity and were not equal with those in metropolitan France, the colonial administration allowed only a few of them to pursue the education at a university level in France.

Boubacar Ly showed that the French Revolution was an important aspect of the political thinking of educated Africans. He emphasizes that most of them expressed whenever they could their affection towards France and even identified with France, which he attributes to their education at French schools. But on the other hand, they were very likely to refer to the French Revolution and its legacy – liberty, equality and fraternity – whenever they felt injustice or inequality on the part of the colonial administration.²² Until the 1920s, openly anti-colonial or anti-French attitudes among the *évolués* were practically non-existent, and the same applies for (as well as) the demands for self-determination or independence.

However, the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the establishment of the French Communist Party in 1920 significantly reconfigured the dynamic between educated Africans and colonial authorities. The rise of international communism with its strict anti-imperialist orientation and the seductive language of freedom, independence and revolution against capitalist oppression, gave birth to new radical identities among the *évolués*, who sought to challenge the very roots of the existing colonial order.

“Black Revolution” in Paris

According to Françoise Blum, who studies communism in the context of francophone Africa, the discovery and then the specifically African appropriation of Marx and Marxism were first the work of Africans residing in France. The foundation of the French Communist Party in 1920 then became a vector for the

²¹ Important works on the *évolués* was written by GENOVA, J. *Colonial Ambivalence, Cultural Authenticity, and the Limitations of Mimicry in French-Ruled West Africa, 1914 – 1956*; JEZEQUEL, J.-H. *Les “mangeurs de craies”*. *Socio-histoire d’une catégorie lettrée à l’époque coloniale. Les instituteurs diplômés de l’Ecole Normale William Ponty (c.1900 – c.1960)*; LY, B. *Les instituteurs au Sénégal 1903 – 1945*.

²² LY, B. *Les instituteurs au Sénégal 1903 – 1945. Les loisirs et l’engagement politique chez les instituteurs*, pp. 381–432.

transmission of these ideas to French colonial Africa.²³ Until the First World War, the number of Black Africans from colonial territories in metropolitan France was relatively small. Even taking into account the Caribbean diaspora they could hardly constitute a coherent "black community" with a specific political programme.²⁴ They arrived in France predominately as exceptional students who aspired to become lawyers, doctors or engineers. According to Philippe Dewitte, their presence in France contributed to a large extent to reinforcing the French assimilationist discourse and "served to demonstrate that the 'civilizing mission of France' was not an empty phrase".²⁵

The First World War significantly changed these conditions. In order to fight Germany, Paris turned to its empire and recruited approximately 150,000 soldiers, but also dock workers or seamen from Africa and the Caribbean who were sent to Europe. After their demobilisation, thousands of them settled down in France and became an important part of the growing African diaspora in the metropolis. Hakim Adi, with reference to J. A. Boittin, estimates that their numbers increased to 15,000 in Paris alone with thousands of others living in cities such as Marseille, Le Havre or Bordeaux. France thus became the country with probably the largest African population in Europe, originating mostly from French West Africa, French Equatorial Africa and the Caribbean. In addition to them there were also many soldiers, workers and students from various French territories in Africa and Asia: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia or Madagascar and Indochina.²⁶

Shortly after the war, political discussion in France as well as the situation in the colonies led to the radicalisation of many Africans in the metropolis. Firstly, there were debates about the concept of self-determination formulated by American president Woodrow Wilson and their application in colonial territories; another heated debate was about the blood debt and the rewards for the sacrifices the colonised people made for France during the war; and, on the other hand, the war atrocities witnessed by colonial soldiers questioned the very concept of the "superior European civilisation" that officially legitimated colonialism. What is more, French political circles quickly demonstrated that the repressive nature of colonial rule in Africa, including forced labour and the *Code de l'indigénat*, would remain unchanged. And, last but not least, political activists in the colonies as well as in France were put under police surveillance and the repressive actions became commonplace.

²³ BLUM, F. Marx en Afrique francophone. In DUCANGE, J.-N., BURLAUD, A. *Marx, une passion française?*, p. 320.

²⁴ DEWITTE, Ph. Le rouge et le nègre. In *Hommes&Migrations*, 2005, No. 1257, p. 34.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ ADI, H. *Pan-Africanism: A History*, p. 90.

In 1920s Paris, when all these issues were hotly debated, there were two distinct groups of African and Caribbean intellectuals involved in the vital political life of the metropolis. Firstly, the assimilationists for whom the prime goal was to recognize the full French citizenship of all colonial subjects. Despite the fact that they were critical of the nature of French colonial rule in Africa, they still, in one way or another, believed in the colonial project and France's "civilising mission". And secondly, there were those who took up more radical positions. Organised mainly around the platforms connected to the French Communist Party, they called for the end of imperialism.²⁷

The French Communist Party was officially established in 1920 at the congress of the French Socialist Party at Tours, where the majority of delegates voted to join the Comintern. However, as James Genova points out, to join the Comintern meant not only a new political alliance within the old and disrupted socialist movement but also the acceptance of forging a world view that significantly shaped the colonial world. "Communist discourse", Genova argues, "presented new perspectives on the relationship between the metropolis and the colonies and helped to fashion the self-identities of those engaged in the imperial framework".²⁸ According to Genova, the communists understood imperialism as a monopoly of capitalism and the aspiration for independence in the colonies was thus regarded as an expression of the socialist revolution. Anti-colonialism became at the same time anti-capitalism and the liberation of the French colonies was understood as a precondition to defeat capitalism in France.²⁹

The French Communist Party took the "colonial question" seriously. Following the condition of the Comintern to support "not by words but by acts" the struggles of the colonial people, it created the special "colonial commission" and began to organise its members and followers from the colonies. Unlike the authorities in Dakar or the political elites in Paris, who attempted to marginalise the educated Africans and suppress their political activism, the French Communist Party regarded the colonial peoples as "the potential leaders of a movement against capitalism and in favour of communism in the colonies as well as in the metropolis".³⁰

The French Communist Party stood behind the first "international" organisation of the colonial peoples in Paris, *l'Union intercoloniale*, the Inter-Colonial Union, created in 1922. Its members came from different parts of the

²⁷ DEWITTE, Ph. Le rouge et le nègre. In *Hommes&Migrations*, 2005, No. 1257, p. 34.

²⁸ GENOVA, J. *Colonial Ambivalence, Cultural Authenticity, and the Limitations of Mimicry in French-Ruled West Africa, 1914 – 1956*, p. 64.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 73–75.

³⁰ Cited in GENOVA, J. *Colonial Ambivalence, Cultural Authenticity, and the Limitations of Mimicry in French-Ruled West Africa, 1914 – 1956*, p. 67.

French empire such as Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, French West Africa, French Equatorial Africa, Madagascar, the Antilles and Indochina. However, the most important figure in the Union became the Senegalese war veteran Lamine Senghor. The French Communist Party supported the organisation financially and provided its members with training in Marxism. The Union published an influential anti-colonial journal *La Paria* that circulated not only in France but also in the African colonies and the Caribbean. However, many of the African and Caribbean members, including Lamine Senghor, soon became dissatisfied with the little interest by the Union in their Pan-African questions and in the struggles of black workers in France. As a result, in 1926, they founded their own organisation *Comité de défense de la Race Nègre*, the Committee for the Defence of the Negro Race.³¹

Here, Hakim Adi underlines the importance of the use of the word *Nègre* in the naming of the organisation. According to Adi it was a clear demonstration of the prevailing Pan-African trends in the Union and the increasing need to make clear the difference between the Black Africans in the French colonial empire and the North Africans as well as the nationalists from Indochina. The use of the word *Nègre* with a capital "N" was thus the expression of the pride in being "black" and thus the aspiration to distinguish themselves from other black Africans whose prime political concern was the assimilation with the French. Adi argues that the use of the word *Nègre* was not only an act of self-definition but also an important element in the later emergence and development of *Négritude*.³²

The intense internal rivalry within the Committee led the group of its members around Lamine Senghor to leave the organisation soon. In May 1927 they founded a new organisation of black Africans and Caribbeans, the *Ligue de défense de la race nègre*, the League for the Defence of the Negro Race. Kathleen Keller argues that the year 1927 was particularly important in terms of anti-colonial radicalisation in the French empire.³³ In Tunisia, for example, the security services repressed the local communist networks. The Vietnamese Nationalist Party was created and the new communist international organisation League Against Imperialism and Colonial Oppression was founded, which brought together anti-colonial activists from all over the world. It is in this context

³¹ ADI, H. *Pan-Africanism: A History*, pp. 91–92; On the topic of interwar Paris as a hub of anti-colonialism, Pan-Africanism and communism see also GOEBEL, M. *Anti-imperial Metropolis. Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism*, pp. 176–216; BOITTIN, A.-J. *Colonial Metropolis. The Urban Ground of Anti-imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris*, pp. 77–111.

³² ADI, H. *Pan-Africanism: A History*, p. 93.

³³ KELLER, K. *Colonial Suspects. Suspicion, Imperial Rule, and Colonial Society in Interwar French West Africa*. p. 34.

of a thriving radical anti-colonialism that the League for the Defence of the Negro Race was created.³⁴

In June 1927 the League published the first issue of its paper *La Race Nègre*, Negro Race. This monthly tribune of the organisation quickly rose to being one of the most popular anti-colonial journals within immigrant circles in Paris but also in French West Africa. The content of the journal was carefully monitored by the French security service, whose agents wrote reports on selected anti-colonial articles for the Ministry of the Colonies. Still supported by the French Communist Party, Lamine Senghor and his close co-worker Temioko Garan Kouyaté undertook several journeys in and across French West Africa with the aim of militating in favour of the League. They successfully created a network of supporters and established sections of the League in almost every colony of French West Africa.³⁵

Because of their activities, Lamine Senghor and Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté were subject to the suspicion on the part of the French authorities and the police reports referred to them as the most important African figures in radical politics in Paris.³⁶ In 1927 Senghor died from tuberculosis contracted in World War I. Kouyaté took over his position and became the fervent leader of the organisation. Although he is often considered to be one of the first West African communists, he was the kind of activist who cared more about the “Negro question” than the communist cause, which later resulted in severe conflicts with representatives of the French Communist Party.

La Race Nègre

What follows here are examples of the radical anti-colonial and anti-French ideas disseminated in France and French West Africa by the journal *La Race Nègre* in 1929 and 1930. From its very beginnings, *La Race Nègre* veered between the dichotomy of romantic Pan-Africanism and the international proletariat.³⁷ However, the analysis of selected articles reveals that under Kouyaté’s leadership the journal took a more and more radical anti-French and anti-white position.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

³⁵ GENOVA, J. *Colonial Ambivalence, Cultural Authenticity, and the Limitations of Mimicry in French-Ruled West Africa, 1914 – 1956*, p. 77.

³⁶ KELLER, K. *Colonial Suspects. Suspicion, Imperial Rule, and Colonial Society in Interwar French West Africa*, pp. 34–35.

³⁷ DEWITTE, Ph. Le rouge et le nègre. In *Hommes&Migrations*, 2005, No. 1257, p. 34.

In the article "Vox Africae" from March 1929 Kouyaté gave a positive evaluation of the two years of existence of the journal.³⁸ Despite the initial scepticism, he underlined the rising number of subscribers as well as positive responses from all of the French colonies. His article illustrates the mixture of revolutionary and Pan-Africanist discourse. He addresses the particular categories of colonial society that were central to communist agitation in the colonies while underlining the notion of the Black race.

It is therefore a question of continuing the energetic propaganda, of consolidating the positions acquired. In Africa, in the West Indies, it is necessary to continue the creation of the sections in the chief towns of the districts. [...] Tradesmen, planters, cultivators, workers, loggers, civil servants, students, schoolchildren, blacks, mulattoes, in a word, all Negroes aware of the vital interests of the race must join the League and subscribe to *La Race Nègre*.³⁹

On the other hand, he also reminded readers of the difficult social situation of many of the white *colons*, who, under the conditions of colonialism, were subject to a similar exploitation to that of Black Africans.

Small white settlers, small traders and workers also suffer economically. They should not be neglected. In short, a racial problem on the one hand, an economic and social problem on the other.⁴⁰

The article entitled "The Repression is Being Prepared Against Us", signed S. R., is more revealing in terms of radical anti-colonial ideas and provides a perfect illustration of how the League defended "the natural rights of the Negroes" to their independence. The author attempted to persuade readers that colonialism in Africa had never been accepted by Africans in the past and therefore should not be accepted in the present.

We have already proclaimed that the Negroes never accepted colonization as a *fait accompli*, but simply as a temporary situation imposed by the odious principle of the right of the strongest. Against colonization, the Negroes have always proclaimed the inalienability of their right to self-determination. [...] Any act of propaganda in favour of the independence of the Negro peoples currently subjected to French domination will be

³⁸ KOUYATÉ, T. G. Vox Africae. In *La Race Nègre*, March 1929, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 1.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

severely repressed [...] As for us, our position is taken, it is clear. [...] We rise up in permanent protest against colonialism.⁴¹

However, this “independence of the Negroes” remained a very abstract concept in the 1920s and did not go beyond the Pan-African ideal of one large state of all Negroes in Africa. The editors of the journal, including Kouyaté himself, fully realised the complexity of the colonial situation and often lamented the weak political awareness of Black Africans under French colonial rule, especially in comparison with the nationalists from North Africa or Indochina.

Nevertheless, in the article entitled “Towards the Development of a Programme” the League proclaimed its ambition to work hard on such a programme for the colonised “Negroes” not only in Africa or America, but also for “independent Negroes in Liberia and Ethiopia”.⁴² The article openly called for the unity for all colonised people in the French empire in an attempt to destroy the imperial world and build a new one.

Destroy and rebuild, raise national institutions on the ruins of those imposed by the conqueror, this is a programme that responds to the urgent needs of all oppressed peoples, especially the colonized. The Annamites, the North Africans and the Negroes should agree on this essential point in order to coordinate their efforts.⁴³

The programme, like the previous idea of independence, was not specified at all and referred only to the revolutionary premise of “destroy and rebuild”. Despite this fact, it is another fine illustration of the radical anti-colonial discourse, although the authors had a clear idea only about what needed to be destroyed but not about what needed to be rebuilt and how.

One year and a half later, in the issue of November/December 1930, Kouyaté still lamented the weak political consciousness of Black Africans in colonial Africa in general, and in French colonial Africa in particular.⁴⁴ What is interesting here is that he situates the lack of African political consciousness in relation to the lack of industrialisation and labour organisation in Africa. Although a few strikes did occur in Dakar in the aftermath of the World War I, the African workers in French West Africa, for instance, had no right to organise

⁴¹ S. R. Alerte à tous les nègres. Une répression se prépare contre nous. In *La Race Nègre*, March 1929, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 2.

⁴² Vers l'élaboration d'un programme. In *La Race Nègre*, March 1929, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 1.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ KOUYATÉ, T. G. Conquête des larges masses nègres. In *La Race Nègre*, November–December 1930, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 1.

in unions until 1936.⁴⁵ And this was exactly what Kouyaté proposed: strikes as the main tool for politicisation of Black workers in the colonies.

Black Africa, very backward from the industrial point of view, is also very backward from the point of view of labour organization and even politics. [...] Admittedly, in French black Africa we do not have the right to organize. But this must be fought for by mass strikes organized illegally. The strike is our weapon, especially in Africa, where it takes on a distinctly political character against colonial oppression and exploitation, against humiliating racial oppression.⁴⁶

International proletarian solidarity, the solidarity of the oppressed and exploited, must materialize in powerful and energetic protests, in a political strike of the masses, [...] in France, French Black Africa, North Africa and the French West Indies.⁴⁷

In addition to these ideas of the right to independence, strikes and protest, the contributors of *La Race Nègre* used the pages of their journal for fierce attacks on their rivals, especially from the ranks of Black Africans. Their most important target was without doubt Blaise Diagne, the deputy of Senegal in the French National Assembly. Elected in 1914, Diagne personified the pre-war aspirations of educated Africans for their emancipation. In the new context after the First World War, he was more and more viewed as uninterested in the situation of Africans in the colonies but also of African workers in France. Particularly sensitive was the question of demobilised African soldiers and the promises made to them concerning compensation for their war sacrifices that Diagne proved to be incapable to uphold. During 1929 and 1930, *La Race Nègre* published a series of articles that violently accused Diagne of collaboration with the French imperialists and depicted him as a traitor to his own people.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ CHAFER, T. *The End of Empire in French West Africa. France's Successful Decolonisation?*, p. 34.

⁴⁶ KOUYATÉ, T. G. Conquête des larges masses nègres. In *La Race Nègre*, November–December 1930, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 1.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ For example KOUYATÉ, T. G. La France impériale ou la poubelle diagniste. In *La Race Nègre*, November–December 1930, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 1.

For more on the conflict between Kouyaté and Diagne, see GENOVA, J. *Colonial Ambivalence, Cultural Authenticity, and the Limitations of Mimicry in French-Ruled West Africa, 1914 – 1956*, pp. 73–78.

The Truth about French West Africa

As already mentioned, the publication of *La Race Nègre* in metropolitan France was allowed, but its distribution in French West Africa was strictly forbidden. However, this was illegally ensured via the port of Dakar thanks to the Pan-Africanist and communist networks among dock workers, shipmen and employees in the colonial administration.⁴⁹ Here the interesting fact is that *La Race Nègre* quite often published articles about French West Africa and its various colonial territories. Those articles usually informed readers about the injustices and crimes that African workers but also the ordinary people experienced under the French colonial rule. One of the best examples of such an article can be found in the November/December 1930 issue and signed by S. R. Its title “In French West Africa, ‘Development’ will only Benefit the Colonialists and will Aggravate the Misery and General Conditions of the Natives” clearly reflects the aim of its author – to depict colonial rule in French West Africa as ruthless exploitation.⁵⁰

French imperialism considers French West Africa as “its black colony” par excellence. The enormous profits that the capitalists realize each year in French West Africa are more than enough to justify this appreciation.⁵¹

Using the statistics published in October 1930 in the journal *L’Economiste Européen*, the author attempted to denounce the purely mercantile character of colonialism in French West Africa. According to him, the general trade in French West Africa reached the overall figure of 2 billion 870 million: 1 milliard 510 million for exportation, 1 milliard 360 million for importation.⁵² The author used these numbers to demonstrate that:

⁴⁹ ADI, H. *Pan-Africanism: A History*.

⁵⁰ S. R. En Afrique occidentale française la mise en valeur de l’AOF profitera uniquement aux colonialistes et aggravera la misère et les conditions générales des indigènes. In *La Race Nègre*, November–December 1930, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 1.

⁵¹ Ibid.; A good historical analysis of how France profited economically from French West Africa is provided by HUILLERY, E. The Black Man’s Burden. The Cost of Colonization of French West Africa. In *The Journal of Economic History*, 2014, Vol. 74, No. 1, pp. 1–38.

⁵² S. R. En Afrique occidentale française la mise en valeur de l’AOF profitera uniquement aux colonialistes et aggravera la misère et les conditions générales des indigènes. In *La Race Nègre*, November–December 1930, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 3.

[...] every year, the colonialists, who monopolize all trade – the natives being good only for forced labour – take away one and a half billion from the country. [...groundnuts, oil and vegetable filaments, oilseeds, wood, live animals, cocoa], represents nearly one million tons and imposes more than one billion of their junk. At rates of 20%, still well below reality, the profits made exceed 500 million. [...] Despite this [profit], they are not satisfied enough. They find that this exploitation is not intense enough. Too much wealth escapes their greed.⁵³

The main criticism of the article was based on the argument that the government of French West Africa took out a loan of nearly one and a half billion francs for the years 1924 – 1929. Including the 700 million from the budgetary resources of French West Africa, it allocated more than 2 billion francs designated for development projects. However, according to the author's criticisms, most of this money, more than 1.9 billion, was allocated to the development of the infrastructure indispensable for the colonial economy: the construction of railways, improvement of harbours, irrigation and dredging of the Niger river. Only 9 million were reserved for medical assistance and professional schools and "nothing, absolutely nothing for the development of public education".⁵⁴

Regardless of whether these numbers and estimations were correct or not, they served the author to depict French West Africa as a colonial state oriented primarily towards economic profit. In other words, that it was a project oriented towards the benefit of France and not for the benefit of the African population.

[Colonialism] does not shrink from any sacrifice to achieve the intensification of production. To exploit the natives, to drain all the richness of the country, to realize profits on profits, here is all the essence of colonisation.⁵⁵

The author further develops his criticism by writing about how the colonial economy results in the "worsening of the regime of slavery", emphasizing that, in reality, the existence of forced labour means slavery and therefore more suffering and misery for Africans.

⁵³ S. R. En Afrique occidentale française la mise en valeur de l'AOF profitera uniquement aux colonialistes et aggravera la misère et les conditions générales des indigènes. In *La Race Nègre*, November–December 1930, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*; The project of the primary "professional schools" in French West Africa was put into practice in the 1930s. The aim was to improve the agricultural capabilities of the pupils at the expense of their intellectual development.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

No savannah will escape the rapacity of the colonizers. [...] The indigenous people will be hunted down to the most remote ends of the earth, and forced labour, in other words “slavery”, will flourish in all its horror and brutality, on this land of Africa, as the most beautiful gifts of French colonization.⁵⁶

The article then continues by recalling the past arrogance of the French colonial officials in forcing cash crops on to the African planters. As an illustrative example it provides the anecdote about Gabriel Angoulvant, a prominent French political figure who was in 1908 – 1917 the governor of the Ivory Coast and in 1924 – 1928 he held the office of governor-general of French West Africa.

We must also remember the way in which Mr. Angoulvant, Governor of the Ivory Coast, acted, a procedure that has become commonplace today. When he went to a village, he said to the chief: ‘I need a field here that we will call the Governor’s field and where you will plant cocoa. Without that, next year I will throw you in prison’.⁵⁷

In a similar way the author seeks to discredit the French in the eyes of readers by providing the example of a certain Manoumbe Gueye at the beginning of the year 1930 in Kindia, French Guinea. Unable to pay his taxes, Manoumbe came to the local French commandant to ask him for a reprieve. In reply, Manoumbe was allegedly brutally beaten by the guards of the commandant and put in prison, where he soon died from his injuries.⁵⁸

For a better illustration of the “truth” about colonial reality in French West Africa, the author underlines the frequent cases of migration to the neighbouring British colonies:

And people pretend to be astonished that the Negroes from French West Africa manifest a certain dissatisfaction with the regime they are subjected to and leave the country. More than three million individuals have, in fact, crossed the borders of French West Africa to settle in Nigeria, in Gold-Coast or elsewhere.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ S. R. En Afrique occidentale française la mise en valeur de l’AOF profitera uniquement aux colonialistes et aggravera la misère et les conditions générales des indigènes. In *La Race Nègre*, November–December 1930, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ S. R. En Afrique occidentale française la mise en valeur de l’AOF profitera uniquement aux colonialistes et aggravera la misère et les conditions générales des indigènes. In *La Race Nègre*, November–December 1930, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

And last but not least, the author gives the examples of the frequent acts of resistance of various African populations to colonial rule in French West Africa over the previous 20 years. He did not hesitate to describe them as the desire of different African population to free themselves from colonial oppression.

The revolt of the Kados of Soudan in 1908; the revolt of the Abbeys of Ivory Coast in 1909; the revolt of the Fulani of Guinea in 1910; the indigenous revolt in the region of Bamako in 1914; the new revolt in [French] Sudan in 1915 – 1916; the indigenous revolt in Dahomey in 1919.⁶⁰

The article ends with the rhetorical question: "What the natives want?" Here, the author speaks on behalf of all Africans in French West Africa in order to express their will for self-determination and independence.

Today more than ever, the indigenous people driven to misery have deeply rooted in their hearts the hatred of imperialism and colonialism. This hatred is legitimate. The right to independence is imprescriptible for the peoples and the 13 and a half millions of oppressed Negroes in French West Africa have the right to pose in an absolute, categorical way, the problem of their self-determination.⁶¹

Conclusion

At the same time as this article was published, the internal disputes within the League concerning matters of doctrine were reaching a peak. In December 1930 the security services in Paris reported deep divisions between the colonial commission of the French Communist Party and its black members, relating to the publication of the *Race Nègre*. According to the report, the publishers of *La Race Nègre* tended to arouse hatred in Blacks against Whites and detach the Africans from France.⁶² This became unacceptable even for an anti-imperialist organisation such as the French Communist Party. There were also tensions between the Caribbean and African members. According to Hakim Adi, the

⁶⁰ S. R. En Afrique occidentale française la mise en valeur de l'AOF profitera uniquement aux colonialistes et aggravera la misère et les conditions générales des indigènes. In *La Race Nègre*, November–December 1930, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 4.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² AN 20010216/43, dossier 1137–1155, E-3, *La Race Nègre*, Le Ministre de l'intérieur à monsieur le Président du Conseil Ministre des Colonies, A/S des organisations des nègres, 22 décembre 1930, rapport du 16 décembre 1930.

frequent infiltrations of the French security service also played an important role in the decline of the League. In 1931 these internal divisions on several fronts resulted in the final schism of the organisation. One branch led by Émile Faure kept the name *Ligue pour la défense de la Race Nègre*. The second one, grouped around Kouyaté, left the organisation and founded the new journal *Cris des Nègres*.⁶³

La Race Nègre continued to be published as the main tribune of the *Ligue* but its content became more and more oriented towards communist doctrine, primarily the labour question and the international communist movement. The opening article of the issue from February 1932 perfectly illustrates this new orientation. Signed by Luscup-Norbet, it begins with a direct reference to Lenin:

When Lenin decided to fight against all imperialist powers, he spoke thus: 'The Bolshevik Revolution must help all oppressed people to free themselves from their oppressors and all people to gain their independence'.⁶⁴

After several police interventions, the French authorities finally dismantled the League in March 1932.⁶⁵ After his departure from the League, Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté continued to be active within communists and anti-colonialist circles in Paris. However, because of his strong views on questions of race he became more or less isolated, and in 1933 he was even expelled from the French Communist Party.⁶⁶ From then his political career declined although he attempted to establish himself within the different networks of anti-colonial circles. In 1943, he was arrested by the Gestapo in France and transported to the concentration camp of Mauthausen in Austria, where he died in 1944.⁶⁷

Abbreviations

AN - Archives Nationales

ANS - Archives National du Sénégal

AOF - Afrique occidentale française

BEAOF - Bulletin de l'enseignement de l'Afrique occidentale française

⁶³ ADI, H. *Pan-Africanism: A History*, pp. 97–98.

⁶⁴ Luscup-Norbert. Alexandre et le communisme. In *La Race Nègre*, February 1932, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 1.

⁶⁵ BOITTIN, A.-J. *Colonial Metropolis. The Urban Ground of Anti-imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris*. p. 84.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

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