

African Social Activism and The Rise of Neo Pan-Africanism

A look at the UPEC Summit

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Abstract

Dakar, the Senegalese capital, hosted the first *Université Populaire de L'Engagement Citoyen* (Popular University for Civic Engagement) in July 2018, a Pan-African summit of social movements under the auspices of *Y'en a marre*, *Project South*, *Filimbi*, and *Lucha* among others. In total, fifty-five social movements from thirty countries in Africa and its diasporas took part in the summit which concluded with the formation of the *Afrikki network*. This paper argues that *Y'en a marre* and similar movements are spearheading the “revival” of Pan-Africanism, which has entered a new evolutionary phase that I refer to as “Neo Pan-Africanism”. In this regard, Francophone Africa has become the epicenter of 21st century Pan-Africanism enabling social activists to collectively push for good governance, fight against neo-colonial processes and build new transatlantic cooperation.

Key words

UPEC, Neo Pan-Africanism, Afrikki, Francophone Africa, Pan-Africanism, Activism

* More information about the Afrikki Network can be found here:

<https://afrikki.org/>

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Introduction

On Monday, 23 July 2018, the Senegalese capital, Dakar, hosted the first *Université Populaire de L'Engagement Citoyen* (UPEC), a Pan-African summit of social movements under the auspices of *Y'en a marre*, *Project South*, *Filimbi*, and *Lucha* among others. This gathering was in line with similar Pan-African events that took place in other African countries, namely, the 60th anniversary of the All-African People's Conference and the 8th Pan-African Congress organized in Ghana in 2018 and in 2015 respectively. In total, fifty-five social movements from thirty countries were represented in Dakar. As Fadel Barro, a member of the organizing committee, declares: "the UPEC [...] brought together Africans divided by colonialization, religions and ethnic barriers. Anglophones, Francophones, Arab-speaking and Portuguese-speaking people interacted using the common language of hope" (Barro, 2018). Activists across the African continent and the Diasporas were able to transcend the current political environment that prevented them from examining and furthering the Pan-African movement (Barro, 2019).

The premise of this historical gathering occurred two years earlier in Gorée Island, when *Y'en a marre* mobilized activists from Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte D'Ivoire, Congo Brazzaville, Chad, DRC, the Gambia, Madagascar, and Senegal to discuss the state of African social activism with a focus on challenges, solutions, and demands. One of the major achievements of the gathering was the formation of a Pan-African platform for social movements called *Afrikki*, which officially launched at the end of the UPEC summit. Another key initiative was the creation of a structure that protects and shelters African activists threatened by national political forces.¹ As Barro declares, the objective of this transnational network is to "allow social activists to advance the Pan-African cause and discourse and allow social movements to deal with issues that are not only domestic but also affect the continent as a whole" (Barro, 2019). I argue that the organization of UPEC and the formation of *Afrikki* represent a turning point in the history of modern African social activism² and an important milestone in what I term Neo Pan-Africanism³. Neo Pan-Africanism, which I present as the most recent phase of Pan-Africanism, is led by young social activists mostly from Francophone Africa rather than politicians, political institutions, or Western-educated elites. These Neo Pan-African activists inscribe their struggle in a renewed Pan-African framework as they seek to decolonize Africa's relationship with the West, perpetuate democratic transitions across the continent, and rebuild strong diasporic relationships globally.⁴

1 *Afrikki* also seeks to 1) encourage solidarity among all social movements from different African countries, 2) foster civic awareness in Africa and reinforce the image of African social movements through various mechanisms, 3) strengthen social movements advocacy and capacity-building through resources mobilization and strategy-sharing, and 4) put forth funding mechanisms for financial autonomy and support endangered African activists.

2 In the context of the UPEC and *Afrikki* the term "African social activism" constitutes a Pan-African by essence endeavor. Therefore, the term and "Pan-African social activism" are interchangeable.

3 The term "Neo Pan-Africanism" here is distinct from the concept "Neo-Pan Africanism" which designates as Russell Rickford notes, the period situated between 1969-1972 when Black nationalism in the United States rekindled the notion of Pan-Africanism as a guiding nationalistic principle following the demobilization of the Panthers and Black Power movement. Neo Pan-Africanism (spelled differently) as developed in this article, takes roots in Francophone West Africa and refers to an ongoing process that started in the second decade of the current millennium with the proliferation of youth insurgent movements in Francophone Africa.

4 "Decolonizing relationship with Africa" refers to the desire of African activists to fight neocolonialism on the continent be it foreign military interventions, use of a colonial currency and symbols as well as the paternalistic relationships between Africa and the Global North.

In this regard, I attempt to respond to several questions: what is Neo Pan-Africanism? How is it different from earlier utterances of Pan-Africanism? Who are the main actors of this contemporary manifestation of Pan-Africanism? How do the UPEC and *Afrikki* mark a turning point in Pan-African social activism? And finally, why do I consider Francophone Africa as the driving force behind Neo Pan-Africanism? In answering these questions, I argue that *Y'en marre* and similar activist movements are currently spearheading “Neo Pan-Africanism,” a new phase of Pan-Africanism. In this regard, Francophone Africa has become the epicenter of 21st century Pan-Africanism enabling social activists to collectively push for good governance, fight against neo-colonial processes and build new transatlantic cooperation. In doing so, these activists acknowledge the endeavors of the previous generations of Pan-Africanists who continue to be a source of inspiration for their contentious politics (Dimé et al, 2022). In addition to its political engagement, Neo Pan-African activism centers critical global issues such as environmental politics with a focus on black ecologies, foreign exploitation of natural resources, monetary sovereignty (specifically the abolition of the CFA currency), sexual and gender-based violence, and the repatriation of stolen African artifacts. Similarly, international mobility, police brutality and the rejection of colonial legacies are equally important for the Neo Pan-African agenda (UPEC Proceedings, 2018).⁵ As the delegates present at UPEC declare:

African social movements and the African diasporas argue that borders and languages inherited from colonization should no longer divide Africans. They pledge themselves to campaign bluntly for the abolition of all obstacles to the free movement of Africans on their continent. The social movements of Africa and its diasporas recognize the primordial place of African women in the development of Africa throughout history. At the same time, women are still subject to discrimination and atrocities of all kinds, including sexual and gender-based violence. African social movements condemn all these forms of discrimination and cruelty (Afrikki, 2018).

This extract from the Declaration of Dakar echoes renewed interests in the defense of Black sovereignty, mobility and human rights by a young and Afro-optimist generation that engages Pan-Africanism with more inclusivity.

The paper first defines and contextualizes Neo Pan-Africanism as a continuation of earlier (20th century) engagements with the Pan-African concept and movement. It then examines the involvement of *Y'en a marre* and contemporary African activists in the rise of Neo Pan-Africanism with a particular focus on the organization of the UPEC where African and Diasporic activists symbolically ushered in a new era and agenda for 21st century Pan-Africanism. Finally, the paper will interrogate three trends that emerged as a result of the 2018 UPEC summit and their potential impact on the future of Neo Pan-Africanism.

This study is grounded on a Pan-Africanist theoretical framework. The fieldwork for this research was conducted in Senegal (between 2017 and 2021) and Atlanta (2022-2023) and Burkina Faso (summer 2023). Interviews were my primary mode of gathering data, but I was also a participant-observer, as an active participant in the 2018 and 2020 UPEC gatherings. My strong relationship with the *Y'en a marre* movement allowed me to develop a network that facilitated my access to social activists from Senegal, DRC, Burkina Faso, Madagascar, The Gambia, Kenya,

⁵ The struggle against colonial legacies includes renaming streets that bear the name of colonizers, and the removal of statues of former colonizers such as that of Faidherbe in downtown Saint-Louis, Senegal which they succeeded.

Sudan, Chad and The United States. I therefore conducted a dozen interviews. Additionally, I examined recorded presentations given by summit participants to better understand their conceptions of social activism and Pan-Africanism. The interviews confirmed my hypothesis that Africa's youth are developing "New Pan-African Spirit" encouraged and facilitated by their engagement with digital technology. This study also draws from the interventions, speeches and declarations made during the first and second UPEC summits in Dakar (2018-2020) as well as the archives of the *Y en marre* movement. Finally, the paper engages with the vast literature on Pan-Africanism that traditionally disregards the contribution of Francophone activists in the historical and discursive analyses of Pan-Africanism and neglects the relationship between diasporan Blacks and Francophone Africans in their struggle for freedom and dignity (M'baye, 2017).⁶

The Concept of Pan-Africanism Revisited

As a movement and an ideology, Pan-Africanism has been the object of extensive and careful scholarly examinations from academics and practitioners of various disciplines and backgrounds⁷. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates define it as:

[A] wide range of ideologies that are committed to a common political or cultural project for Africans and people of African descent. In its most straightforward version, Pan-Africanism is the political project calling for the unification of all Africans into a single African State to which those in the African diaspora can return. In its vaguer, more cultural forms, Pan-Africanism has pursued literary and artistic projects that bring together people in Africa and her Diaspora (Appiah and Gates, 2005, p.1484).

Pan-Africanism is, thus, a political movement that reunites Africans and people from the Diaspora. In a special issue of *AU Echo* commemorating the twentieth summit of the organization, the African Union (AU) presents Pan-Africanism as:

An ideology and a movement that encourages the solidarity of Africans worldwide. It is based on the belief that unity is vital to economic, social and political progress and aims to unify and uplift people of African descent. The ideology asserts that the fates of all African peoples and countries are intertwined. At its core, Pan-Africanism is a belief that African peoples both on the continent and the diaspora, share not merely a common history, but a common destiny (AU Echo, issue 5, January, 2013, p.1).

Pan-Africanism aims, thus, to promote the formation of a united block for the progress and prosperity of people of African descent regardless of their geographical location. It also invokes the idea of a Pan-African consciousness that continues to manifest itself among diasporic communities (Frehiwot et al., 2022). More importantly, it acknowledges the dialectical link that exists between the struggles of people of African descent and puts forth the necessity for people of African descent to coordinate their struggles against oppression. While the

6 According to Rupert Emerson, this peripheralizing of Francophone Africa was partly due to the fact that many Francophone African leaders identified with the assimilationist colonial policy that they lost sight of the urgency of autonomy and self-determination of African nations. He also argues that many Francophones African leaders disparaged Pan-African ideas as their proponents "were like" to be radicals advocating for total independence from the metropole. Additionally, there was a divergence between WEB Du Bois and the Francophone members of the Pan-African Association that almost led to the cancellation of the 1923 Pan-African Congress. These divergences lingered throughout the decades and caused a prominence of Anglophone in the 20th-century Pan-African movement.

7 Padmore, 1958; Geiss, 1965; 1974; Mazrui, 1977; Esedebe, 1982; Hoskins and Nantambu, 1987; Sherwood, 2011; Rickford, 2016; Adi, 2013; 2018; Clark et al, 2018; Kounou, 2007.

historiography of Pan-Africanism has frequently focused on its leadership, The African Union has, since 2013, embraced a definition of Pan-Africanism that includes governmental and grassroots engagements (Adi, 2018, p.1). This can be viewed as an attempt to disentangle the elitism⁸ that has surrounded the history of the movement. This is all the more important in that the proliferation of anti-establishment youth movements across Africa has recently given a second breath to Pan-Africanism.

It is worth noting that despite an extensive engagement with the history of Pan Africanism and a rich body of work on the landmark events that transformed the movement, scholars tend to sideline the contribution of Francophone Africa in their analyses as they accord prominence to Anglophone contributions. In 1962 already, Georges Shepperson had noted that "French-speaking African participation in the Pan-African movement seems to have been neglected from 1921 until 1945" (Shepperson, 1962, p.354-355). Similarly, Rupert Emerson suggested, the same year, that English speakers "tended to monopolize both the term 'Pan-Africanism and the movements and congresses associated with it" (Emerson, 1962, p.12). More recently, the works of Giulia Bonnaci (2022), Annette Joseph-Gabriel, and Babacar M'baye contend that there is a "systemic" ostracization of the French-speaking world (especially Francophone women) in 20th-century Pan-Africanism and freedom struggle (Joseph-Gabriel, 2020; M'baye, 2009; Rabaka et al., 2020). The marginalization of Francophone Africa is also a consequence of Francophone African leaders' traditional identification with the assimilationist colonial policy, thus losing sight of the urgency of the autonomy and self-determination of African states (Rupert Emerson, 1962). As Rupert claims, many of these leaders disparaged Pan-African ideas as their proponents were likely to be radicals advocating for total independence from the metropole. Additionally, the organizational divergence between W.E.B. Du Bois and the Francophone members of the Pan-African Association represented by Isaac Béton, the then Secretary General of the association that almost led to the cancellation of the 1923 Pan-African Congress did not facilitate a good reception of Francophone leaders in the Anglophone world. And yet, as will be argued, in this text, the current vitality of social activism in Francophone Africa contributes to re-centering Francophone involvement in the history of Pan-Africanism. This is particularly true in the 21st century with the emergence of what I call, Neo Pan-Africanism.

Neo Pan-Africanism can be defined as the 21st-century manifestation of Pan-African ideals through popular/grassroots mass actions with the goal of fostering and rekindling African and Black transatlantic unity while fighting neo-colonial processes and establishing continental democratic transitions and good governance. The concept also denotes a period of "hyper-activism" on the African continent. In this regard, African social movements have recognized a need to exist within a transnational activist network that provides protection, tactical guidelines and an ideological framework. Neo Pan-Africanism can therefore be read as a framework through which modern-day African activism is predicated. In other words, the rise of new African social movements is partly fostered by a renewed sentiment of a shared Pan-African identity based on the understanding that activist movements from different African countries have similar grievances

8 For a long time, Pan-Africanism as a movement was spearheaded and defined by highly educated people who convened the Pan-African congresses and conferences. Following the independence movement politicians and governmental actors played the most prominent part in the movement and ideology. However, in the 21st century grassroots activists and initiatives constitute the locomotive of Pan-Africanism.

expressed through “replicated” repertoires of contention.⁹ In the 2018 and 2020 UPEC summits, the term “Pan-Africanism” remained the leitmotiv of the gatherings and the conversations among activists also proved that a significant number of social movements now gathered in the *Afrikki* network are operating from a renewed understanding of Pan-Africanism that empowers social activists and nurtures grassroots initiatives and collaborations as opposed to institutional endeavors and elite oversight. Thus, Coumba Touré, Co-Coordinator of African Rising for Peace, Justice and Dignity insisted that entities like *Afrikki* are:

[M]ore than a network. We are creating, she claims, a movement to support each other. We can have separate struggles in our respective geographies, but the only way to be strong is to be together. A movement also needs to be multifaceted; fighting for electoral democracy is just one example among many democracies. When we say movement, we are thinking of environmental movement, feminist movement etc. and all of those movements need to connect” (Interview with Coumba Touré, July 2018).

As Touré suggests, the concept and practice of Neo Pan-Africanism, decenters the Pan-African movement, which has, except in the case of movements such as the UNIA, historically been hijacked by political and intellectual elites: Inviting fishermen, hip-hop artists, and shopkeepers to participate in the UPEC summits and sharing their narratives, constitutes a strong statement illustrating UPEC’s commitment to decomplexify Pan-Africanism and center socio-economic and political issues that participate in the continued oppression of the masses.

Furthermore, as national social movement organizations begin to merge into efficient Pan-African entities such as *Afrikki*, their voices become more amplified. *Afrikki* provides, thus, a platform for a “transnationalization” of the movement through direct actions such as the synchronized march against the CFA currency that took place in many Francophone African cities in 2014. “Transnationalization” also occurs via ubiquitous tools like digital technology given that many social movements are echoing the demands of their counterparts through their social media accounts (Ndiaye, 2021). However, this “Pan-Africanization” of national movements remains threatened by the systemic and accrued government overreach and repression of social activists, determined to build a new Africa.

It is important to note that Neo Pan-Africanism is on a strong philosophical foundation. Its leaders are mostly young social activists seeking to engage the masses with the afro-utopian concept of self-reinvention and self-determination that the UPEC participant Felwine Sarr calls “Afrotopia.” Sarr, one of the co-authors of the *Declaration of Dakar*, presented a paper on *Afrotopia* as a civilizational and political project. After touting the positive impact of social movements in redefining African political spaces, Sarr states: “The second step social movements must take is the articulation of a political project, and for this, it is important to work alongside intellectuals, artists, and all continents; driving forces to define this project. This gathering [UPEC] is the premise of that” (Sarr, 2018). Sarr’s discourse resonated with social activists who used his concept (*Afrotopia*) as one

⁹ The concept of “replicated repertoires of contention” here refers to the fact that contemporary African social movements share impactful protest methods and forms of popular oversight on governmental action. For instance, in 2015, *Le Balai Citoyen* launched the “*Je vote, je reste*” campaign to ensure a safe and transparent presidential election. The same campaign was replicated a year later in the Congo when local social activists encouraged a popular oversight of the vote-counting process.

of the guiding principles of the UPEC and contemporary Pan-African activism.¹⁰ Project South's Executive Director and UPEC co-organizer, Emery Wright echoes Sarr's conclusion in an interview when he states:

One of the biggest impacts of UPEC was to start to imagine with some of the leading practitioners of what I call 21st-century social movement governance, what it could mean to have not only these social movements continue to grow in their power and sophistication around re-imagining civil society, and really re-imagining society from the bottom up, but to also do that thinking through continental and Pan-African collaboration at the same time. So, the UPEC broke through a barrier that had existed before and provided this new way of operating within the social movements and convened similar social movements and similar consciousness that exists throughout the African continent to share their ideas and practices. This is developing really a new spirit of Pan-Africanism. This new spirit of Pan-Africanism is part of our responsibility. UPEC is ground zero for that happening (Interview with Emery Wright, January 2023).

While Wright insists on the UPEC summit being the “ground zero for a New Pan-African Spirit”, a concept popularized by Lucha activists from the DRC, he also underscores the idea of reimagining societies through social movements' collective actions. Convergingly, this societal reimagination means for Sarr an invitation for social activists to build a new Pan-African project anchored in an *Afrotopian* vision.

“Afrotopia” is, for Felwine Sarr, “an active utopia, an attempt to reflect and project oneself into the future and give sense to a civilizational, humane and societal adventure that put the African at the center of their project” (Sarr, 2016, interview with Librairie Mollat). Sarr's concept is consistent with the argument that the African continent functions under the directives and injunctions of Northern countries and Western-controlled institutions like the World Bank or IFM which tend to design and impose policies such as the Structural Adjustment Programs, that are rooted in a conception of development and progress founded on the colonial matrix of power. From its political structures to its social policies, many African countries have little to no say in the shaping of their future. Therefore, Sarr contends that Africans must collectively rethink the future of the continent without external influence or Western concepts of development, and civilization. In other words, there is a need for Africans to deconceptualize and reconceptualize notions such as development and not seclude ourselves in the Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism dichotomy given that there are endless possibilities between the two.

It is this work of reconceptualization and active utopia that young African activists take on through grassroots Pan-African endeavors. In the Neo Pan-African context, the notion of Afro-utopia transcends the abstract imagination of the “ideal African society” devoid of its current political features to embrace peaceful regime changes, good governance, the improvement of women's conditions, youth welfare as well as environmental protection. In doing so, activists' resort to what can be called “Preemptive Activism”, meaning they engage in protest to prevent autocratic excesses before they even take place. This has been the case in Francophone African countries such as Guinea, DRC and Côte D'Ivoire. Sensing that the regime in place might attempt to amend the constitution for purely personal/political gains, activists in these countries descended on the streets to

¹⁰ Read The Declaration of Dakar and a collection of participants' presentations [here](#).

protest any *potential* challenge to modify the constitution. Activists also use what I call “Remedial/Curative Activism”, a form of contentious civic engagement that attempts to correct damages occasioned by illegitimate and unlawful governmental actions and policies. This includes for instance protest activities organized by the *Aar Li Nu Bokk #Sunu Petrol*, a network of Senegalese civil society organizations formed in 2019 that included *Y'en a marre*, FRAPP, *Nittu Dëg* among other movements, to call for transparency and a renegotiation of oil and gas contracts signed by the Senegalese government. These entities deem unfair the natural gas exploration and exploitation contracts that Macky Sall’s government signed with foreign companies such as Total Energies. They also denounced a scandalous deal uncovered by BBC in 2019 between President Sall’s brother (Aliou Sall) and Frank Timis, a controversial businessman.¹¹ The notion of remedial or curative activism also incorporates protest activities such as the ones led by *Balai Citoyen* in Burkina Faso that toppled President Blaise Compaoré following his unilateral change of the constitution to stay in power.

Ultimately, as a number of African activists stated in the July 2018 *Azimiyo La Dakar*¹², “the emergence of social movements in Africa and the African diasporas is part of the realization that a radical change in the political, economic and social paradigms of Africans themselves is needed, based on their own history and their cultures” (*Azimiyo La Dakar*, July 2018). In other words, “it is a question of reinventing, on a pan-African scale, a common utopia and of committing ourselves, resolutely and in solidarity, to complete the struggle for the liberation of Africa, begun by previous generations” (*Azimiyo La Dakar*, 2018). These quotes reaffirm the centrality of African cultural paradigms in contemporary social activism and the continuity of the struggle of past generations.

Neo Pan-Africanism and Mass Mobilization/Actions

The proliferation of popular mass actions or “hyper-activism” as Mampilly identifies it have predominantly characterized Neo Pan-Africanism as a distinct evolutionary phase of Pan-Africanism. This is especially noticeable in Francophone African countries where important socio-political and economic changes are engendering predictable clashes between the political establishment and masses and between young activists and neocolonial forces¹³. Francophone West Africa has certainly garnered a lot of attention since 2011 when massive protest movements destabilized the Senegalese regime (led by President Abdoulaye Wade) and toppled the Compaoré regime in Burkina Faso. In Mali, similar protest movements led by Imam Mahmoud Dicko of the *Mouvement du 5 Juin*, resulted in the fall of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta’s regime in 2020. In Guinea, the *Front National pour la Defense de la Constitution* (National Front for the Defense of the Constitution) engaged in a two-year confrontation against President Alpha Condé's third presidential term. The bloody repression that ensued left more than 90 people dead (AFP/VOA, 2020). This culminated in Condé’s removal in

11 *Sénégal, un scandale a 10 milliards de dollars*. BBC report https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqwmXR_QTY8

12 The *Azimiyo La Dakar* is the final declaration African and Diasporic activists issued during the first Pan-African summit of social movements that took place in Dakar, Senegal in July 2018. The document was drafted by the *Y'en marre* activist, Fadel Barro and the novelist and economist Felwine Sarr.

13 Neocolonial forces” refers to the “Françafrique” dynamics that continues to define relationship between France and its former colonies in Africa. It also refers to pushback against the CFA currency, as well as global north corporations and a handful of local elites benefitting from African natural resources to the detriment of the majority. It is also the entities that support autocratic regimes in Africa as is the case in Tchad.

September 2021 by the *Groupement des Forces Spéciales*, an elite military unit led by Colonel Mamadi Doumbouya. In Côte d'Ivoire, a less successful movement took on President Alassane Ouattara who blatantly violated the constitutional order to run for a third term. Turmoil destabilized North Africa a few years earlier when a young street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire to protest the seizure of his merchandise by municipal authorities sparking the Tunisian Revolution and the “Arab Spring”. This new wave of contentious politics can also be “cast as the ultimate challenges to capitalism, a rejection of liberal democracy an uprising by the ‘multitude’, the work of social-media-savvy youth, or an outburst by frustrated middle classes” (Branch & Mampilly, 2015). Mamdani captures this continental turbulence when he states: “the memory of Tahrir Square feeds hopes and fuels government fears in many African polities. A spectre is haunting Africa and its rulers” (Mamdani, 2011). Thus, the year 2011 became a catalyst for the emergence of popular mass actions across the African continent particularly in the Francophone regions connecting to the memories of 1968.

The current hyper-activism in Francophone Africa constitutes the outcome of two major issues; first, undemocratic maneuvers by increasingly repressive regimes which attempt to remain in power at all costs. This justifies the theme of the second UPEC summit in 2020 entitled “*Poussée autocritique: L'action citoyenne en question*” (*Autocratic Advancement: Civic Action in Question*). Secondly, the aspirations of an uninhibited generation to rethink Africa's relationship with the Global North (especially France) and the colonial legacy. The former is mostly characterized by the “Third Candidacy Syndrome” (similar to what Lumumba-Kasongo (2007) terms the “Third Term Syndrome”) or the desire to violate/deliberately misinterpret constitutional orders to force a third term and sometimes to impose a “monarchization” of the political power, whereby heads of state are de-facto replaced by their offspring as seen in Togo and more recently in Tchad. These phenomena continue to destabilize many countries and have resulted in dozens of fatalities and arbitrary imprisonment of activists and protesters and subsequently generating a Pan-African grievance, indignation and support for movement participants in addition to pressing calls to “decolonize” relationships with the Global North, especially France.

Younger generations of Francophone Africans, for example, have recently pushed their governments to profoundly rethink the terms of their economic, political, military and cultural linkages with France. They demand an equitable relationship whereby France does not exercise oversight on the CFA currency and remove the monopoly of French multinationals on certain key economic sectors such as telecommunication, extractive industries, and retail. They also advocate for the removal of French military bases on the continent. This was the case in Ouagadougou when, on January 20th, 2023, hundreds of young protesters waved hostile signs against France such as “*Armée française, dégage de chez nous*” (French army get out). This slogan constitutes a widespread “anti-France” stance in Africa that some scholars and political commentators have termed African “*dégagisme*”. It is a neologism that expresses a popular call for French military and corporations to leave the continent (Premat, 2020; Rigg, 2022; Gassama, 2022). While some people see in the “*dégagisme*” trend a corrosive form of nationalism, many consider it a politics for the reclamation of national sovereignty violated by decades of neocolonial exploitation and French paternalism. As Mohamed Sinon, the leader of the *Collectif des leaders panafricains* (Pan-African Leaders Collective),

stated during the protest against French military presence in Ouagadougou: “We are here to express our full and unwavering support for President Ibrahim Traoré, and for the defense and security forces engaged in the fight against terrorism and the quest for the total sovereignty of our country” (France 24, 2023). The Burkinabe activist equates both the French army and jihadists’ presence with an invasion and a violation of their national sovereignty. In 2022, similar demands were formulated by Malian protesters, brandishing “*Barkhane Dégage*” (Barkhane Get Out) signs resulting in the departure of the *Force Barkhane* from Mali in August 2022 (AFP, August 2022).¹⁴ The Burkinabe and Malian protesters’ discontent also affected a small group of protesters led by Congolese activist Emery Mwazulu Diyabanza who attempted to remove a totem pole out of the Quai Branly Museum in 2020 while declaring, “we are taking it home” (Reucher, 2020).

Diyabanza’s act translates the desire of the young generations of Africans to reclaim the repatriation of “stolen” African artifacts lodged in Western museums (Sarr & Savoy, 2018). The restitution of this African cultural heritage has become a popular Pan-African demand. Burkinabe activist and self-proclaimed Sankarist, Serge Bayala expresses the engagement of Neo Pan-African challengers in this sense when he asserts, “our historical heritage, testimony to the intelligence of our ancestors has been stolen, it is a crime against science and humanity...we have made the restitution of our heritage a battle” (Interview with Serge Bayala, July 2023). In 2021, France returned twenty-six works of art to Benin after several years of restitution requests by the West African country, while Germany and the United States also pledged to return African artifacts to their places of origin. Aware of the significance of these restitutions, activists gathered at the UPEC “have strengthened calls for Western [museums] to repatriate priceless cultural artifacts” (Gbadamosi, 2020). Conversely, they called for protecting African consumers’ economic and financial interests against the power of multinational corporations.

Along the same lines, several social movements such as *Y en marre* and *Balai Citoyen* staged nationwide and online protests against the French telecom company, Orange, for high prices and low service quality. Campaigns such as “#OrangeIsTheNewMafia” (in Cameroon), #BoycottOrangeSenegal (in Senegal), and “Stop aux arnaques de Orange Mali” (in Mali) were successfully followed by consumers forcing the company in some instances to reduce their pricing (Barma, 2018). Similar calls for mobilizations and actions were launched by Lucha and other Congolese social movements in 2019 to force telephone companies to provide better service quality and lower prices. Activists lamented that Orange customers in France pay less than their counterparts in Africa despite the latter being in a more precarious economic situation.

This sentiment of an overbearing French presence remained highly palpable during the 2018 UPEC. It was even more noticeable after the presentation of Nadia Tourqui, a social activist from Comoros whose talk focused on the continued use of the CFA currency and France’s occupation of Mayote. She states:

I think that in all our countries the term «incomplete independence» is recurrent. We are independent, but we are not really independent because there is the CFA and interference [from France]. But on top of all that, there is definitely a part

¹⁴ In Mali, the government engaged the Russian militia, Wagner to support them in their operation to rid the country of the jihadist threat. In Burkina Faso, protesters had brandished the Russian flag as a sign of rapprochement with Putin’s country. While many approve of the calls for the French army’s departure in both countries, they also warn against the rapprochement with Russia, as the objective is not to replace a “questionable” military power with another one.

of our territory [Mayotte] that is occupied by France. Although we have been independent on our four islands since July 6, 1975, by a legal maneuver, France has decided to keep an island (Tourqui, 2018).¹⁵

Tourqui's statement epitomizes a general malaise about France's oversight of the CFA currency and its continued political as well as military dominance on the continent. This phenomenon that Floribert Endong terms "Francophobia" as an expression of Pan-Africanism in Francophone Africa" continues to foster a Neo Pan-African denunciation of Francophone African leaders as well as the French government. Echoing many UPEC activists' sentiments towards France, Endong argues:

In effect, French continuous – yet un-avowed – political, economic and military domination in its former African colonies has triggered the emergence of both underground and overt nationalist movements which have rooted their mantras in French-bashing and anti-French agitations. Thus, in many francophone African countries, the perceived evidence of French neocolonialism – manifested by French military presence, pro-French economic policies, the domination of French multinationals, the prevalence of colonial currencies (the CFA Francs or *Françafrique*) and France's purported pernicious alliance with unpopular ruling elites among others – have turned out to fuel massive anti-French sentiments in various Francophone African countries (Endong, 2021, pp.117-118).

In addition to the economic and military dominance of France, Endong signposts the connivance between some African leaders and France, another phenomenon vigorously denounced by African activists present at the 2018 UPEC. Chadian activist, Nadjo Kaina stated:

As in the case of our friends in Burundi and the Congo, our situation [in Tchad] is very complicated, but here, it is enabled by the blessing of France and the international community who support [President] Déby. They clearly tell you that human rights are not as much a priority today as the fight against terrorism. So Déby can do whatever he wants (Kaina, 2018).

Not only does Kaina condemn France's blind eye on human rights violations in Tchad, but the former metropole's unequivocal support to Mahamat Déby's high jacking of the political power following the death of his father, President Idriss Déby, testifies to a paternalistic "*Françafrique*". The latter continues to fuel the current protest cycle happening across Francophone Africa, thus turning the region into the epicenter of 21st-century Pan-Africanism.

What Perspectives for African Social Movement Governance?

The UPEC revealed three trends mostly characteristic of Francophone African movements: the progressists, the gatekeepers and the moderates. These trends agree on the necessity of Pan-Africanism as a guiding principle of African activism. Yet, they differ on the ways activists ought to contribute to social change in their respective countries. These trends can be divided in three categories: the progressists, the gatekeepers and the moderates.

15 «Je pense que dans tous nos pays ce terme «*d'indépendance inachevée*» est récurrent. Nous sommes indépendants, mais nous ne le sommes pas vraiment car il y a le CFA, car il y a une ingérence. Mais nous en plus de tout cela, il y a carrément une partie de notre territoire qui est occupée par la France. Sur nos quatre îles, bien que nous soyons indépendants depuis le 6 juillet 1975, par un coup de passe-passe juridique, la France a décidé de garder une île » (My translation).

The “progressists” believe that social movements should move beyond protest and denunciation to actively participate in the entire political process by morphing into political parties. They understand that elective positions at the local and national levels (national assemblies, city council, mayoral positions) are essential to the realization of profound socio-political change and argue, consequently, for the importance of running for office. Occupying a decision-making position helps operate, they believe, the necessary mutations that the continent needs. For these progressists, social change goes beyond the mere fact of switching people within an already corrupted system; it is rather an organic process whereby an entire system deemed faulty is substituted with a new one. This was mainly the position of Cameroonian activist/rapper Abe Gaston, popularly known by his hip-hop pseudonym General Valsero who represented *Jeunes et Forts* and *Our Destiny*, two prominent social movements from Cameroon. Valsero publicly rejected the notion that people engaged in social movements should be “apolitical,” a term he argued, many contemporary African activists continue to misuse since the mere fact of participating in social movements is a political act. By “apolitical,” Valsero means that it is paradoxical that many African activists are willing to combat the political establishment to bring social change, but at the same time remain reluctant to assume elective positions. Valsero contends that: social activists must move away from the grievance stage and ask themselves what part they can play in finding solutions to socio-political issues (Valséro, UPEC 2018).

Valsero and the Progressists’ position sharply contrasted with the stance of the *Balai Citoyen*. The delegates of this Burkinabe movement consider the role of African activists as that of watchdogs vis-à-vis the political power structure rather than that of politicians running for office. I call them the “gatekeepers” in that they consider that the rightful place of an activist is not in the national assembly, the city council, or the presidential palace but on the streets with the masses. To reiterate the importance of the gatekeeping mission of African activists, Souleymane Ouedraogo, spokesperson of the *Balai Citoyen* at the UPEC claims:

After the 2014 insurrection in Burkina Faso, *Balai Citoyen* benefitted from a legitimacy that could easily allow the movement to appropriate the transition period. We could have gotten positions in the government, we could have become members of parliament in the Transition National Assembly, we could have monitored all the transition process but hélas, we chose to keep playing our gatekeeping and civic monitoring role instead” (Ouedraogo, UPEC 2018).

Ouedraogo clearly disagrees with Valsero and the progressists. His understanding of the role of the activist is rooted in the common conception that the notoriety of African activists following popular insurrections is often construed by many as a rite of passage for assuming higher public/elective responsibilities. However, the transition from activism to politics remains a delicate move in a continent where the term “politician” is frequently associated with demagoguery, corruption and fallacy.

The third trend represented by the *Y’en a marre* movement, represents the median between progressists and gatekeepers. Followers of this trend, the “moderates”, adopt a middle-of-the-road position in the world of contemporary African activism. They argue that African activists can run for public office while effectively safeguarding their integrity. These Neo Pan-Africanists would serve their communities just as any regular non-governmental organization would. Fadel Barro articulated this viewpoint when he states:

The positions of both camps (Progressists and Gatekeepers) are an interesting ongoing discussion and it is well-elaborated in the summit's proceedings. I think it is an interesting issue that movements will discuss among themselves [...] Personally, I believe that our movements should be like the ANC (African National Congress) when it was first established; meaning, we mobilize to defend a cause, but at the same time, we can conquer the political power while still remaining *Enda Tiers Monde* which was a big NGO that used to help communities to stay aware of issues. So, I believe that both (running for political positions and playing the role of a gatekeeper) can go together. I have faith in social movement leaders that they will choose the best course of action based on their socio-cultural realities (Interview with Barro, July 2019).

Barro's statement epitomizes the third way in the future of African activism and like the two previous positions, it confirms that youth movement activism is not a static process. It is rather in a state of permanent transformation to adjust to the social, political and cultural dynamics of the time. However, it should be noted that the issue of occupying public office constituted a point of contention within the *Y'en marre* movement itself when Barro decided to run for a parliamentary seat in 2017. The movement's leadership argued that Barro was free to seek a parliamentary seat like any eligible citizen, however, he was not allowed to remain a member of the movement if he chose to run for office. Faced with the dilemma, Fadel Barro renounced his political ambition to remain the coordinator of the *Y'en marre* movement until March 2019 when Aliou Sané replaced him as Spokesperson of the movement. Since then, Barro has put forth a political coalition named "*Jammi Gox Yi*" to participate in electoral biddings.

The ternary between progressists, gatekeepers and moderates remained a highlight of the 2018 Pan-African summit in Dakar. The advent of these currents not only poses challenges for social movement governance. It also projects a new direction for social activism on the continent. Will current social movements morph into traditional political parties to respond more efficiently to popular grievances? Will they develop into socio-economic entrepreneurial entities similar to international NGOs? Though we do not have definitive answers to these questions, it should be highlighted that many activists who participated at UPEC have either created or joined political parties/coalitions. This is the case of Fadel Barro who left *Y'en a marre*'s leadership to create a political coalition called *Jàmmi gox yi* alongside other members of the Senegalese civil society. Similarly, in 2017, Kenyan activist Boniface Mwangi, who also participated in the summit, formed the *Ukweli Party* and ran for a seat in parliament. At any rate, African movements are bound to adapt to the changing political realities and challenge career politicians who tend to dominate the political landscape and monopolize power. Therefore, what can be referred to as "African social movement morphism" becomes a necessity. In other words, African activists must be prepared to mutate their movements' structures to fit the contextual demands of the socio-political reality in their respective countries. In the meantime, activists can continue to work on collective strategies that accommodate the needs and concerns of the masses in their march to establish true democracies, good governance and fight neocolonialism.

Conclusion

The UPEC symbolizes a key Francophone initiative and a transformative experience for activists in the Black Atlantic as a whole. It served as the first major transnational platform for radical youth movements in contemporary Africa that not only dealt with civic awareness and political change but also with the welfare of social activists. It offered a space where social movements agreed on a collective agenda and a road map to building what its initiators call a "New Africa". In this respect, Fadel Barro asserts that the UPEC "was [partially] born from the realization that Africa's public space was missing a forum where [activists] could talk about their problems and project themselves in 'active utopias'" (Barro, 2019). In addition to the question of solidarity between social movements and the diagnosis of their individual experiences and shared interests, the UPEC allowed social activists to revisit recent events that have challenged principles of democracy and the rule of law in Africa as well as the challenges to human dignity in the diasporas. They also seize the opportunity to analyze past and current socio-political and cultural challenges in relation to the idea of a "New Africa" young people want to see emerge.¹⁶ More importantly, the summit stood out as an incubator for a new partnership whereby movement leaders and participants, policy-makers and scholars interacted to foster change with the clear consciousness of a shared destiny. Finally, the UPEC subscribed to the continuity of Pan-African resistance against alienating internal and external forces which Barro insists on in the final report of the summit. He asserts:

The old colonial power choked the budding utopia that was Pan-Africanism, which was the goal of the great figures of African independence such as Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba or Nnandi Azikiwe.⁷ Ultimately, they were condemned to be protesters of unjust political, economic, and cultural order without ever having had the opportunity to structure and carry out their project [Pan-Africanism] of the necessary transformation for an Africa traumatized by colonization. Today, our generation faces the same problems, and we must invent our own answers to these problems. (Barro, UPEC Proceedings, 2019).

Barro's statement reiterates the new generation of activists' determination to follow the footsteps of their Pan-African predecessors. In addition to highlighting decades of exploitation and poor governance, Barro underscores the fact that Africa still trails the same political, economic and social issues that partly emanated from the colonial experience. Facing these challenges contemporary African activists have adopted new methods with the intent to propose political alternatives that completely sever colonial and neocolonial ties. It is in this regard, that the UPEC birthed activism trends that are interested in profound systemic transformations of African/Diasporic societies even if their visions of the ways to achieve them are different.

Finally, we can say that after a long noticeable Pan-African grassroots demobilization, contemporary African and diasporic social movements have rekindled popular interest in Pan-Africanism. They open a new phase (Neo Pan-Africanism) for a movement and concept that contributed to the liberation of Black people globally. Therefore, Neo Pan-Africanism constitutes an evolutionary phase and a conceptual

¹⁶ "New Africa" is a term that many activists used during the UPEC to refer to the emergence of free and democratic continent devoid of corruption, mismanagement, foreign exploitation and spoliation.

framework for African social movements who acknowledge the necessity of the internationalization of civic engagement. Given their similarities, the threat of neocolonialism and the increasingly repressive nature of African regimes, Black social activism's strength lies in transnational forms of organizations. Therefore, the organization of UPEC and the formation of *Afrikki* mark a turning point in the building of the "New Spirit of Pan-Africanism". They strengthened the alliances that exist between African and diasporic social movements in this current protest cycle. Despite the emergence of different currents at the 2018 UPEC summit, the activists who participated in the summit all agree that their salvation will come from Pan-Africanism and that only sustained grassroots consciousness and struggles will foster lasting socio-political and economic transformations.

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