Economic Regionalism Reversed? France-West Africa Relationship and the Challenge of Eco-Currency Integration[1]

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Abstract:

Economic regionalism is a 21st century attempt to facilitate trade partnerships, bilateral agreements and the facilitation of the free movement of goods and people between neighbouring countries on the continent. Several geopolitical regions have formed economic alliances in Europe, the Americas, Africa and Asia for mutual economic benefit. West Africa is one of the regions that made early efforts at economic cooperation following the establishment of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975. Economic integration in West Africa is being driven by the proposal of the West African heads of state and government to introduce a common currency called Eco' in 2020. However, this gigantic project is being thwarted, interrupted and blocked by France under the pretext of conditionality, which is keeping the leading country, Nigeria, from the project. This study examines how the economic relations between France and the West African states affect the proposal to introduce a common currency and how this setback will affect economic regionalism in the zone. A historical and contemporary political economy method was used for the study. The data was collected from documented sources and analysed using content analysis. The study finds that France's close relations with and tight control over francophone countries constitute a new form of imperialism that prevents independent decision-making on economic cooperation in the region. The economies of West African countries will thus remain dependent on France, which is not conducive to independent economic growth and development. The study therefore suggests that West African heads of state must develop the will to diplomatically break away from excessive French control in order to enable strong economic cohesion for self-reliance and regional economic cohesion.

Keywords:
Eco Currency; Economic Regionalism; France; Integration; West Africa; Sahel.

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Introduction

West Africa, a sub-African continent with fifteen member countries, is an interesting area of study for several reasons. Most of the states in this African zone are mineral and resource rich countries, but they are politically unstable, economically volatile and socio-culturally prone to negative life indicators. West Africa is home to numerous states that have established an extraordinarily advanced pre-colonial political and economic system that sets them apart from other societies (Ajayi & Crowder, 1972). These include the Benin Kingdom, the Oyo Empire, the Hausa Kingdom and the Borno Empire in Nigeria, the Akan, Ashanti and Akamu in Ghana, the Songhai Empire in Mali and several other significant kingdoms that succeeded in creating exceptional socio-economic and political systems that are repeatedly referenced in African history (Mabogunje, 1972).

West Africa came into contact with the outside world through various processes and phases, including ancient trade activities with the Middle East via the trans-Saharan route, contact with religious missionaries from the Middle East and Europe, slave trade, imperialism and formal colonisation by European industrial nations and later political freedom (Mabogunje, 1972). West Africa is considered one of the success stories of economic and security regionalism in the 21st century. The countries, led by Nigeria, founded the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS/CEDEAO). The aim of the regional organisation was to facilitate and promote the free movement of goods and services with fewer problems, economic cooperation and regional hegemony (Ukaigwe, 2016). But the huge security problems in some member states such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and others led to the formation of the military wing of the organisation, ECOMOG (Herpolsheimer, 2021).

The West African states were colonised by Great Britain and France. France secured indisputable control over its colonies in West Africa after early contacts and later after official territorialisation and deterritorialisation at the Berlin Conference in 1884–85 (Ginio, 2006). While Britain pursued an approach of Indirect Rule, France opted for complete assimilation. Britain allowed the natives to govern themselves in the Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. In granting political independence, Britain ceded absolute power to its former colonies, retaining only a cultural reunification under the Commonwealth of Nations and opting for a minimalist or reductionist presence in the former colonies that allowed for full emancipation (McNamara, 1989). Francophone countries in West Africa, however, have had a different experience. In essence, France continued to exercise excessive control and undue influence over its colonies. In short, France refused to accept the reality that its former West African colonies were now at least politically free, but continued to colonise them by indirectly controlling their monetary transactions and finances, mining and owning their mineral resources, and politically determining the direction of these former colonies (Bloom, 2008).

The relationship between France and West Africa is an expression of an asymmetrical political economy in which the former continues to exploit the latter. It is expected that the emergence of economic regionalism within ECOWAS in 1975 and security co-operation will reduce the impact of the French presence in West Africa. As demonstrated by the functioning economic and political cooperation within the framework of the European Union, ECOWAS is convinced that it will soon achieve the same feat (Francis, 2017). However, the constant control of mining resources, the use of the CFA and other control measures hinder successful economic integration in West Africa. Anglophone countries are free and willing to pursue regional integration, but the total control of Francophone countries hinders this endeavour (Oloruntoba, 2016). In recent years, West African countries have embarked on a process of monetary integration by adopting a single currency, the 'Eco, similar to the Euro in Europe. Unfortunately, France, dissatisfied and sensing that the introduction of a common currency in West Africa would be a setback to its financial interests, thwarted the process.

This raises the critical question of the nature of ECOWAS and the future of regional integration in West Africa under the continued and uncontrolled grabbing of France's former colonies, which make up ten of the fifteen ECOWAS members. The stalemate in efforts to introduce a common currency has implications for the economies of West African states. This means that the USD will continue to serve as a means of foreign exchange in a fluctuating economic environment, while France will continue to oppress the former colonies and expand colonisation by other means. It is surmised that this is the key reason why the mineral endowed states of West Africa remain poor despite possessing expensive and valuable metals and stones such as uranium, oil, gold, manganese, iron ore, copper, plutonium and several others. This paper critically examines the relationship between France and West Africa, focusing on the recent impact of France's role in rejecting the proposed introduction of a common currency (Eco) and how this phenomenon affects or reverses regional integration in West Africa. The paper draws on documented sources to compile the data. The data obtained were discussed and interpreted using content analysis, with an emphasis on historical and contemporary analysis of political economy approach.

The paper contributes to the discourses on the historical and political economy of the West African sub-region, Africa and the studies of developing countries. By linking past and present, a future is projected through the prism of the impact of regional integration efforts. It should be clear that the dialectic of Africa's political economy is altered and disrupted by the external forces of imperialism, capitalism, colonialism and neo-colonialism. However, one aspect that is not sufficiently analysed is how regional integration efforts are continuously influenced by past and present experiences. Using the example of France, one of the major colonial powers that exploited Africa, this study uniquely explains how the ECOWAS sub-region is economically disempowered through the apparatus of political instruments. While Europe is an excellent example of successful regional integration both economically and politically, the same members that endeavoured to achieve this feat are now thwarting its replication in the ECOWAS sub-region. The study will further enrich the literature on African political economy by showing how and why France's contact with West Africa continuously stifles economic development in the region. The recommendations will provide policy makers with insightful practical examples of ways out of the dilemma so that West Africa can not only harmonise its relations with France and other countries of the world but also experience mutual respect and benefit in the course of the relationship. The paper is divided into an introduction that sets the background, West Africa, the background and the study of France in West Africa; Challenges of Post-Colonial African Political Economy, an analysis of ECOWAS and the challenge of economic integration in West Africa; current relations between France and West Africa; the Eco-movement and France's response; and a conclusion.

West Africa: A Background

France's presence and influence in West Africa can be better understood by considering West Africa's historical antecedents. West Africa did not come into contact with France by chance, nor was France the first external contact. West Africa already had a high degree of well-organised political and economic systems before the beginning of external relations. Rodney (1972) notes that even before the first contacts with the imperialists, Africa was already forming a strong socio-economic and political system with lasting legacies. West Africa emerged from a long history of human movements, invasions, displacements, migrations, marriages and relationships between the various peoples of the region (Mabogunje, 1972). West Africa is characterised by extensive eastern belts that contrast sharply with the north in the south. The region covers 50 to 250 degrees north latitude and 170 degrees west to 150 degrees east longitude (Mabogunje, 1972). West Africa covers 2.4 million square miles of forests and grasslands, dry deserts and shrubs and herbs interspersed with oceans, rivers, streams, lakes and sandy deserts in the Sahel (Mabogunje, 1972). Mabogunje (1972: 33) argues that West Africa is dominated by "Africans with slight admixture of members of the Caucasian ethnic group". Some of these Africans are the Malinke, the Bambara, the Mossi, the Songhai, the Hausa and the Kanuri. The other group are the Tukulor, the Wolof and the Serer, known as the Senegambia or Fulani group, and the Songhai in Mali (Mabogunje, 1972). The forest dwellers consist of the Niger-Congo group of the Ibo, the Edo, the Yoruba, the Nupe, the Fon and the Ashanti. Further west live the Kru, the Kpelle, the Temne and the Mende (Mabogunje, 1972).

In the prehistory of West Africa, there is ample evidence of civilisation and the active progress and development of mankind from prehistoric times through the Stone Age to the Iron Age, as shown by recently discovered scientific archaeological finds (Shaw, 1972). States and stateless societies flourished in West Africa. Examples of stateless societies are the Igbo in Eastern Nigeria, the Tiv in Central Nigeria and some of the Liberian and Cross River or Niger Delta groups in Nigeria (Horton, 1972). Many states such as Borno, Hausa, Songhai, Akan, Akamu, Benin and Oyo have been shown to have had centralised and efficient political structures and administrative systems for many centuries (Ajayi & Crowder, 1972). Dahomey is considered (Monroe, 2014) to be another centralised West African state that had a significant impact on the Transatlantic Slave Trade and legal trade along the coast for many centuries. The legacy of the pre-colonial decentralised states still haunts the current political arrangement, which requires a decisive change that considers the culture and legacy of pre-colonial structures as observed in Senegal (Wilfahrt, 2022).

In religious terms, West Africa has internal traditional religious practises mainly characterised by witchcraft mythologies, voodoo, myths, superstitions, shrines and other traditional practises. In the 10th century AD, Islam entered West Africa through the Trans-Saharan Trade when Arab merchants from North Africa introduced Islam through the medium of trade (Obeng, 2006). Islam gained acceptance and popularity in West Africa as many rulers in Songhai, Borno and Hausaland embraced the faith, made it official in their palaces and made pilgrimages to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, where international diplomacy was established with the Middle East, North Africa and later Ottoman Turkey (Kane, 2016). Christianity came to West Africa through missionary activities dating back to the 13th century, but it could not gain a foothold because the missionaries were ostracised by the mosquitoes. In the fourteenth century, another attempt was made, but the missionaries failed to secure access because health was endangered, and security was threatened. Thus, as Nkrumah (1965) noted, missionisation and colonialism arrived in Africa simultaneously. Christianity took hold in Africa when colonisation began, or rather, missionary activities shortly preceded official colonisation.

France in West Africa

The most accurate and reliable early history of French contact with West Africa is the period of the slave trade. It spanned the period of the 17th century, when slave raiding and slave trading attracted Europeans to West Africa, among whom France emerged as a major player. The French slave buyers established their stations along the African coast, which consisted of Goree, Senegal, El Mina, Ghana, Ouidah and Benin (McNamara, 1989). The Transatlantic Slave Trade continued for almost two centuries until the advent of the industrial revolution and the tendency towards legal trade outlawed the phenomenon in the first half of the nineteenth century (Kelin, 1998). The trading posts near Dakar, Senegal, were the main centre for French slave collection and transport. This dates to 1638, when the French and the Senegalese, through the agents of the Compagnie Normande, a chartered company established under the policy laid down by Louis XII's first minister, Cardinal Richelieu, entered into a trading collaboration that brought the first French ownership and control of some influence in West Africa (McNamara, 1989).

However, France did not have an easy time penetrating West Africa, as many would have us believe. From 1688 to 1817, the French presence in Senegal was attacked three times by Britain when it came to control of slave supplies and areas of trade influence (McNamara, 1989). Immediately after the abolition of the slave trade, the French declared the territories of Senegal a colony to trade there and exercise direct political control. In the colony of Senegal, France pursued a policy of assimilation (McNamara, 1989). Under General Faidherbe, who was appointed governor of Senegal in 1854, France succeeded in building an empire in West Africa. He began an aggressive expansion of the French colony in West Africa, starting with Senegal, where he increased French influence in the country. General Faidherbe opened trade routes into the interior, linking the upper Niger basin with French-controlled ports on the coast (McNamara, 1989). By the 1880s, France had achieved the status of building a mega-empire in West Africa, stretching from the shores of the Mediterranean to the Congo River. The greatest expansion was towards Gabon and Congo, where the French naval squadrons established a base on the adjacent Central African shores. The expansion gradually continued as far as Dahomey (Republic of Benin) in 1861 and the Ivory Coast in 1893 (McNamara, 1989).

France's main colonial measures are "assimilation" and "association" These terms have strongly influenced relations between France and its colonies even in the post-colonial period, to the extent that the former French colonies have continued to be colonised by other means. This is in stark contrast to what was achieved in the British colonies in West Africa, where a system of "Indirect Rule" was introduced that defines the additional measure of freedom of Anglophone West African states in the contemporary period (Miles, 1994). The term assimilation refers to the state of complete indoctrination and absorption into the French way of life and culture. Essentially, the people in the colonies were acculturated as French through absorption. The system of assimilation worked very well in West Africa, but met with fierce resistance in North Africa, particularly in Algeria, where Fanon (1972:1) argues that the French "introduced colonialism by force, imposed it by force, and it was countered successfully only with greater spontaneous violence". The attempt to assimilate the Algerian people backfired and led to violence on the part of the colonised, who were traumatised by the excessive brutality of the French (Kalman, 2013). Ake (1981) sees the phenomenon of colonialism as a truncating historical and cultural distortion and a political and economic stagnation that negatively altered the evolutionary destiny of Africa.

French economic policy in West Africa was characterised by stagnation, exploitation and an asymmetrical relationship between the metropole and the satellite that favoured the former over the latter. For example, when the energetic colonial minister Albert Sarraut initiated an integrated economic development plan for the provision of infrastructure in 1921, the National Assembly voted in favour of the plan but refused to approve it and provide the funds for the project (McNamara, 1989). Instead, the colonies were taxed in order to promote the growth and development of France and to rebuild the destroyed economy of the interwar period. In 1927, French West Africa, the AOF contributed a large sum of 19.4 million francs to the French budget (McNamara, 1989). Moreover, after the Second World War, France made its West African colonies the most important suppliers of raw materials for French industry and a protected market for French industrial goods and services. This view was aptly echoed by Rodney (1972), who emphasised that African states were developed in the pre-colonial era, used to develop Europe, and later underdeveloped and stagnated by the same Europe. The French themselves did not mince their words when it came to revealing their motives for their presence in Africa. Nkrumah (1965:7) reports on the

French colonial secretary in West Africa, Jules Ferry, who affirmed that France was in Africa for "three reasons": raw materials, cheap labour and an open market for the goods produced in France".

French religious policy was not only segregating, but also brutal and restrictive. Most of the French colonies in West Africa were deeply rooted in Islam for many centuries before contact with France. The French attitude towards Islam was extremely negative. The first step the French took against Islam in Senegal was to hire secular teachers from France to teach secular education to young Muslims (Harrison, 1988). The French lived in constant fear of Islam throughout their stay in West Africa and devised various measures to suppress the application of Islamic law and jurisprudence, some of which were successful and some of which were not (Harrison, 1988). The reason for these fears was the power of powerful religious scholars such as Alhaji Umar in Senegal and Abdulqadir in Algeria, who the French believed would shake their authority in the West African colonies (Harrison,1988). According to Harrison (1988), the French attitude towards Islam remained hostile and oppressive until the years of political independence in the 1960s.

On the military front, the French maintained a strategic recruitment and training programme for the black West African army, which fought side by side with the French under the L'Armee'd Afrique and gave France a decisive victory in the Franco-Prussian War and World War II (Clayton, 1988). Many West African black armies were recruited by the French in their thousands and integrated into the main French forces to fight French imperial and colonial interests (Keller, 2018). In fact, the French military organisations during the colonial period could be divided into four groups: Armee Metropolitaine, L'Armee'd Afrique, Troupes Coloniale and Troupes de Marine. The Troupes Coloniales were deployed to subjugate and overpower the colonies, but they were later supplemented by the black armies recruited from the controlled colonies. L'Armee'd Afrique helped French troops to victory on many war fronts in the 1940s and 1950s (Clayton, 1988).

Challenges of Post-Colonial African Political Economy

The first information showing how precarious the African postcolonial political economy is was extrapolated by Nkrumah (1965). In his analysis, Nkrumah (1965) raised awareness among Africans that the interface between Africa and the colonizers left little room for a future independent Africa. A pioneer among Ghanaian Presidents, he recognized this in the installed economic system, which was outward-looking, exploitative, superficially controlled by the former colonies and designed to favour the confinement of African states to the production and supply of raw materials to Europe, while Europe maintained a superior trade advantage. According to Ake (1981), post-colonial Africa was structured in the same way it was structured during the colonial political economy. This, according to Ake (1981), is the dialectic of global political economy through imperialism, capitalism and colonialism, and neo-colonialism have altered and truncated the evolutionary destiny of Africa by creating classes, institutions, processes and structures subservient to global capitalism. During colonialism, the European exploiters, in search of an open market, raw materials and cheap labour, integrated the African economy into the metropoles for convenience and for their continued exploitation (Nkrumah, 1970). This, as Nkrumah (1970:7) stated, was unequivocally expressed by the French Colonial Secretary Jules Ferry.

Relations between post-colonial African states and Europe were characterised by underdevelopment. Rodney (1972) believed Africa was behind the development of Europe, while Europe was responsible for the underdevelopment of Africa. But how is this possible? This was due to a long-term commitment of unequal trade and domination. Frank (1989) explains that the developing post-colonial economies (including Africa) could not compete with their rich counterparts because they were underdeveloped, even though both may have been undeveloped before the contact that characterised asymmetric relations. This, according to Frank (1989), was because the economies and politics of African states in the post-independence period were taken over by the former colonies in what Fanon (1972) described as a total usurpation of African economies, politics, identity, culture and values. As blacks, their character and economy were Europeanised and Africans lost their identity. This is further explained by Hoogvelt (1997) who notes that the economy and politics of post-colonial Africa are comfortably dominated by Europe and America in relationships that ensure that Africa's mining industry and mineral resources remain undervalued, controlled and exploited by European industry. The Africa in the equation only produces raw materials it does not control, even takes products it does not want, gives up its products for foreign ones and lets its economy go bust.

To further exacerbate Africa's dominance and maintain a firm grip on its economy and politics, Ake (1996) states that the non-functioning democracy imposed on Africa was unworkable. It merely serves to install Europeans' stooges and proxies in the respective African economies to facilitate the comfortable exploitation of African resources. As Fanon (1972) noted, France is the most devastating case of all, as it ambitiously continues to oppress its former colonies and keep them under tight political and economic control. Africa's politico-economic nemesis is exacerbated by the new scramble in Africa with the entry of new players and emerging economies seeking to grab their share of Africa's spoils. The new powerful economies of China, India, Russia and other similar members continue to push into Africa to gain access to valuable mineral resources and stones for their industrial development. African leaders are supported with foreign funding for electoral victory to influence their economic policies, which are constantly subservient to the interests of foreign powers (Carmody, 2017). As Beckman (1982) and Oloruntoba & Falola (2020) noted, the contemporary African political economy belongs more to predatory captors in Europe and other parts of the world than Africa itself.

Based on the above structures, African states found themselves in a repeated process of entrapment that made escape insurmountable. Debt traps and ominous economic pills such as Structural Adjustment Programme and constant neoliberal packages ensured that Africa remained forever indebted to Europe and the West, economic development continued to be stalled, and Africa's economy was subjected to sabotage and servitude (Büscher, 2015). This was achieved by Western-trained so-called technocrats from the West taking control of African politics. Once they took power, they were accountable to the masters who installed them and not to the African people they ruled (Langan, 2018). Moreover, crises are being fomented in places that are very rich in minerals, such as Congo, Sudan, Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, the Republic of Niger and some other African countries (Crawford & Botchwey, 2018). The conflict entrepreneurs who are believed to come from the same Europe. In this scenario, Africa's political economy is surrendered completely to European control. The explanations discussed in this section have to do with why Africa fails to adopt sound domestic economic policies, including regional integration.

ECOWAS and the Challenge of Economic Integration in West Africa

ECOWAS was established in 1975 under the Protocol of West African Co-operation and Movement to Remove Barriers to Free Trade in the Region. It has fifteen member countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo, ECOWAS covers a total area of 1.98 million square kilometres, 424.34 million people, a total GDP of $760.56 billion (0.76%) of the world economy and an estimated annual export of $146.75 billion in 2022 (World Data, 2023). The ECOWAS states possessed expensive minerals and precious metals, including oil, gold, iron ore deposits, manganese, uranium, coal and others. In terms of agriculture, the region has cocoa, rubber, timber, arable land for the cultivation of food and cash crops such as rice, maize, millet, wheat, sorghum, soya beans, cotton, cowpea and livestock such as camels, cattle, sheep, goats and various other ruminant and non-ruminant mammals and birds (World Data, 2023).

ECOWAS was one of the earliest efforts at regional economic integration in Africa and the world. The main objective of the organisation is to promote trade cooperation and harmony, strengthen the bloc to achieve regional hegemony status in global trade negotiations, facilitate the movement of goods and services among member states and adopt a common protocol for security and political stability through institutionalisation of democratisation. ECOWAS established its free trade area in 1990 and adopted a common external tariff in January 2015 (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2023). However, ECOWAS has not achieved its goal of regional economic integration as expected but has made enormous progress in the area of security in West Africa and even as far as Central Africa. The outbreak of civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone led to a paradigm shift from economic to security regionalism in West Africa, where a military wing of ECOWAS, ECOMOG, was formed (Dauda, 2011). ECOMOG succeeded in suppressing the violence in Liberia and Sierra Leone and restoring order in West Africa. In addition to West Africa, ECOWAS also intervened in other security crises in Africa with the help of ECOMOG, including in Congo, Sudan, the Central African Republic and other places (Herpolsheimer, 2021).

ECOWAS failed to realise economic regionalism due to several factors. One of them is the weak economic outlook. All member countries are still important producers and exporters of unprocessed raw materials to industrialised nations. ECOWAS members have not succeeded in exploiting the potential of their natural resources for the industrialisation and processing of their minerals (Deme, 2013). As a result, trade relations remain outward-looking, with members trading with America, Europe, China, India and other industrialised countries to a greater extent than with other members. For example, the US alone had a total trade volume of $14.1 billion in 2017, while ECOWAS exported $4.8 billion worth of goods and imported $9.3 billion (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2023). Europe accounts for about 28% of ECOWAS exports (ECOWAS, 2023). But intra-regional trade between ECOWAS members accounts for $12.7 billion (11.2%) of total exports of $113.6 billion in 2021 (Economist Intelligence, 2023). Nigeria was the largest contributor at $3.3bn, but it remains insignificant, accounting for only 5.9% of total exports of $56.3bn (Economist Intelligence, 2023). Similarly, imports from ECOWAS account for $12.9 billion (10%) of the $128.9 billion in 2021. The largest importer is Nigeria with $2bn (3.4%) of the country's total imports of $57.4bn (Economist Intelligence, 2023). With the above trade pattern, it is therefore practically impossible to achieve economic integration. ECOWAS is economically more permeable and more susceptible to external influences than to co-operation from within. From this perspective, ECOWAS has a Herculean task ahead of it.

An important factor hindering the realisation of economic integration in ECOWAS is French influence. The former French colonies in West Africa, 10 out of 15, remain under the undue influence of France and the excessive control of the political economy of Francophone countries under the permanent domination of France. France sees its control over the Francophone countries of West Africa as a continuation of economic prosperity and hegemonic strength (Chafer, 2002). A good example is France's direct control over the production and supply of foreign currency in West Africa. France continues to exercise monopolistic control over mining resources in Francophone West Africa, as well as the direction and flow of foreign exchange reserves and foreign investment, imports and exports (Oloruntoba, 2016). As a result, West Africa remains highly polarised, and France does not allow meaningful cooperation within the country. Despite President Nicolas Sarkozy's declaration to loosen currency controls and allow Francophone West Africa to adopt its local currency, France continues to control the CFA in West Africa, sometimes unnecessarily devaluing the currency to the detriment of host economies. It is believed that the common currency "Eco" introduced by member states in 2017 was sabotaged and thwarted by France because it would reduce French economic influence and control over Francophone members if it were successful. This is a major setback for economic regionalism.

Another valid explanation for the failure of ECOWAS economic regionalism is political instability and socio-economic crisis. Barely six years after gaining political independence, the West African region was hit by a fierce wind of coups and countercoups, leading to a setback in democratisation and the emergence of military rule (Piccolino & Minou, 2014). This era was followed by political violence, civil unrest, international conflicts and other forms of violence. A genuine democratisation of the region is still pending in the 21st century, as the coup in Niger in July 2023 has shown. The political elites have failed to harness the region's resources for economic development, resulting in countless socio-economic crises that have manifested themselves in burning poverty, hunger, unemployment, illiteracy, disease, corruption and mismanagement, ultimately leading to the outbreak of various national and international security threats that manifest themselves in terrorism, banditry, secessionist aspirations, militancy, piracy, political violence and social vices, including transnational organised crime (Akinyemi et al. 2019). ECOWAS members have failed to secure the area and are seeking outside assistance. These security threats and political crises will not allow the region to achieve economic prosperity and regional cooperation.

Current Relations Between France and West Africa, the Eco-Movement and France's Response

France maintains close economic, political, security and cultural relations with the Francophone countries of West Africa. At the economic level, France remains the most important player in French West Africa in the mining sector (David, 1998). Imports and exports between France and its former colonies in West Africa also remain higher than between the member countries. France still arrogantly believes that Francophone West Africa belongs to it, and it is not far from direct colonisation. Amin (1973) claims that neo-colonialism continues where colonisation in West Africa left off. Senegal's resources and other natural resources are being exploited by the colonisers, especially France. The same view is held by Nkrumah (1965), who believes that imperialism and colonisation never left Africa. If anything, they have changed their form in a disguise known as neo-colonialism. In 2007, France's former President Nicolas Sarkozy said in a speech in Senegal, known in France as the Discours de Dakar, that Africa's problem is that "the African man has not gone down in history enough" and " African men are presented as prisoners of their own culture, characterised by irrationality and the inability to contemplate the future" (El Yattioui, 2020). The above insensitive statement shows what and how France feels and views the countries statutorily. Economic injustice prevails in the former French West African colonies. Thus, 60 years after independence, the former colonies are obliged to deposit 50% of their currency reserves in the French treasury (El Yattioui, 2020).

The CFA is regarded as French currency imperialism in Africa. The CFA franc, originally the French colonial franc for Africa, was officially created on December 26, 1945, by a decree of General de Gaulle (Sylla, 2017). Rather than allowing the former colonies to forge their common destiny of regional integration, Sylla (2017) notes that "France promoted economic integration between the colonies under its administration, thus controlling their resources, economic structures and political systems, and this destiny was maintained under post-colonialism". The CFA is subject to several imperial caveats. One of them is the pegging of the exchange rate to the euro. The second is the French guarantee of unlimited convertibility of CFA francs into euros. The third is the centralisation of foreign exchange reserves at the Central Bank of West African States (BCEAO) and the Bank of Central African States (BEAC), which are obliged to pay 50% of their reserves into a special "operating account" of the French Treasury '(Sylla, 2017). Although the CFA is not cited as a cause of impoverishment of user countries, the continued use of the CFA currency by Francophone West Africa is reported to benefit France and harm West Africa. This situation has recently been contested by several Francophone countries, so much so that in 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron reiterated France's willingness to abolish the CFA franc in Africa if countries so wished (Sylla, 2017). The resentment over the continued use of the CFA franc by Francophone countries in West Africa arose on the eve of the introduction of a common currency in West Africa, Eco, which was believed to have been manipulated and held up by France.

France's failure to move to a middle ground and its authoritarian, arrogant approach is costing the country a huge fortune and causing a backlash in the region. Not only in West Africa, but most Francophone African countries in the Central African Republic, Gabon, Algeria and several others have decided to sever their military ties with France (Finighan, 2023). France was involved in security breaches in West Africa during the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), in which it supported the Biafran secessionists with arms and logistics. This did not augur well for relations between Nigeria and France for many decades (Gambari, 1980). The military coups that took place in many Francophone countries in the 2020s also have an undertone of an accusation that France is compromising security. Mali and Burkina Faso, for example, claimed that the presence of French troops did not support the fight against terrorism in their countries. And this despite the presence of over 5,000 French troops (Melly, 2021). During the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, France was accused of escalating the crisis to such an extent that French President Emmanuel Macron flew to Rwanda in 2021 to apologise (Melly, 2021). Macron announced in 2022 that France would withdraw its troops from Mali, and in 2023 Burkina Faso demanded that French troops leave the country. This was followed by Niger in August 2023 after the military coup (Forster, 2023).

Politically, France is gradually losing ground in West Africa after the Commonwealth of Nations announced that it would accept new members from Gabon and Togo (Forster, 2023). France pursues a cultural and political policy in Francophone Africa within the framework of the Francafrique policy, a sphere of influence over Central and West African Francophone states (Roberts, 1963). Francafrique was created during the Cold War to maintain the umbilical cord between France and its former colonies. This helped France to achieve the regional hegemony of a world power (Forster, 2023). France is a privileged partner for most Francophone leaders in West Africa, maintaining partnerships in intelligence and military co-operation, political alliances, the possibility of military interventions and development aid (Cohen, 2022). However, the young population in West Africa despises this romantic relationship between their countries and France. Currently, France has lost about six African states to coups d'état between

2020 and 2023: Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, the Republic of Niger and Gabon. The jubilation that heralded the coups, the warm welcome given to the military junta that carried out the coups, and the expulsion of the Nigerien military and envoys indicated the deep hatred and desire for liberation from excessive French control in Francophone West Africa and beyond (Guiffard, 2022).

In 2017, ECOWAS members planned to introduce a common currency, the Eco, to be operational by 2027 (Forster, 2023). This will replace the use of CFA francs in 10 West African countries, a currency system founded by Charles de Gaulle in 1945. It is believed that France invisibly lobbied Francophone West Africa to prevent the introduction of the Eco in West Africa. Before the Eco was proposed, Francophone countries announced their intention to abandon the CFA franc for local currencies. After preparations for the introduction of Eco had progressed far enough, eight Francophone countries made a counterproposal in December 2019 to introduce a new currency called Eco to replace the CFA. This was seen by the Anglophone countries of West Africa as a deliberate attempt to stall progress on the unification of the West African currency. In January 2020, the Anglophone finance ministers in West Africa condemned the move by the Francophone countries as sabotage (Norbrook et al. 2020). A strong link to France was reported, where some countries within the BCEAO admitted that "it was President Macron who imposed this agenda on us. Macron specifically talked about the CFA franc in Abidjan" (Norbrook et al. 2020).

However, it is not only the French connection that is hindering the successful arrival of Eco in West Africa. Only five countries (Cape Verde, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Togo) fulfil the criteria of the single currency, i.e. a budget deficit of no more than 4% and an inflation rate of no more than 5% (Norbrook et al. 2020). In addition, the large differences in the composition of the members raise a critical question. Nigeria alone accounts for 67% of ECOWAS GDP and 50% of the region's population. This means that the introduction of a common currency will mean an increase in naira in the region (Norbrook et al. 2020). Furthermore, the abolition of the CFA is not as simple as it seems. Francophone countries deposit 50% of their currency reserves with the French Treasury. As expected, a practicable formula for unravelling this long-term agreement, which has existed since 1945, is not feasible. So, France will not give it up so easily, or rather, the Francophone countries in West Africa may not be able to break away from the CFA by consensus to form and operate the Eco (Norbrook et al. 2020).

France has succeeded in convincing Francophone West Africa that the CFA is stronger than most Anglophone currencies, creating the Anglophone-Francophone dichotomy that always exists and emerges from time to time. Francophone countries are convinced that by dumping the CFA, they risk instability, which is guaranteed by the way the CFA works in terms of value and inflation control (Mugabi, 2021). Essentially, France believes that if Eco is successful, it would lose significant financial influence in West Africa to rival Anglophone Nigeria. However, the introduction of a common currency by ECOWAS is expected to facilitate trade, to reduce transaction costs and promote payment transactions between ECOWAS countries (Dewast, 2019). But West African currencies are not immune to shocks and fluctuations that can emanate from unforeseen global economic developments (Dewast, 2019). Even if France willingly abandons the CFA and allows for the free adoption of the Eco, the challenges of meeting the criteria are a headache for members. This will have an impact on West Africa's economic integration (Kazeem, 2019). Other factors that could hinder integration include financial volatility, vulnerability to security threats, susceptibility to import-export dominance and economic backwardness affecting the region.

Conclusion

This paper examines the past and present relations between France and West Africa, the ways in which these relations influence the direction of the political economy in West Africa, and the current challenges affecting these relations. West Africa is considered one of the regions that have made an early breakthrough in promoting economic regionalism since 1975, but the goal of economic co-operation has failed due to several factors. France continues to exercise excessive control over Francophone West Africa. The imbalance in trade and intra-trade problems between members hinder economic integration as all countries are primary producers of commodities that cannot co-operate with each other in international trade. A major step in 2017 was the proposal to introduce a common currency, Eco, which is believed to promote trade partnerships, boost trade activities between members and facilitate trade between them. Unfortunately, the invisible hand of France, which has imposed the CFA on Francophone West Africa, has thwarted this process. However, the newspaper notes that while France is willing to allow Eco to operate, most of the ECOWAS members could not meet the minimum criteria for the adoption and operation of the proposed currency. Besides the economic challenges, political instability as manifested in the recent resurgence of coups in Francophone Africa, socioeconomic crises, and other poor indicators of development performance will continue to hinder ECOWAS's ambition for greater economic integration.

The study reminds Africa that it still has a long and hard road ahead of it to truly emancipate itself economically and politically. Far from being free, the continent is severely cornered by the same powers that have extorted and exploited its resources through various processes, starting with slavery, imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism, which today masquerades as globalisation. The African sub-regions and the continent as a whole have no choice but to strive for integration that will promote economic cooperation, political freedom and regional harmony. The way Europe is pursuing its integration should be a good model for Africa. The study also suggests that the former colonial powers will not leave Africa free. An aggressive and evasive approach is needed. This can now be seen in some countries, particularly in the Francophone West African states currently under military rule, such as Burkina Faso, Mali and the Republic of Niger. They are busy fighting and resisting the neo-colonial arrangement that France has imposed on their economy, trying to decouple themselves. However, they are even being pushed back by their neighbors in West Africa who are under the influence of France. France, which refuses to give up direct colonialism, is now being challenged by the efforts of its former colonies, which are struggling to wrest control of their political economy from France. This may not be as easy as expected. Other African countries are motivated by this boldness. The neo-colonialists are fighting back, and they will continue to fight. But Africa will not remain an arena of experimental conflict where its resources are extorted through the promotion of harmful policies and conflicts. The forces of globalisation will expand alliances for Africa, as is currently evident in the BRICS movement and the increasing activities of China, India and Russia on the continent. New alliances and other forces will change the direction of relations, which will eventually bring better benefits to Africa.

Therefore, providing practical policy implications that will set ECOWAS on the path of genuine development and integration is urgently needed. One of the panaceas, a necessary but difficult one, is for the West African states to boost their economies by initiating industrialisation. The huge diversity of resources possessed by ECOWAS members should be extracted and processed within their countries. African countries, especially West Africa, need to develop indigenous industrialisation policies that facilitate the extraction and exploration of their abundant natural resources and exploit them for processed finished products that bring in respectable and favourable international trade. This will enable an increase and improvement in trade partnerships in manufactured goods among members, which, in return, will boost the economy and guarantee political stability, socioeconomic development, and progress that will qualify the countries to adopt a common currency.

The neo-colonial economic order that constantly subordinates West African states to the interests of the West must be reorganised in favour of the sub-region by abandoning all forms of agreements and informal subjugations that are detrimental to the African economy. The unfair trade arrangement between France and her former colonies should be peacefully renegotiated in a more beneficial manner to increase the flow of wealth to the owners of the resources. In addition, ECOWAS should utilise the population bulge and exploit the service sector to create wealth instead of over-relying on raw material production alone. Another practical suggestion is that West Africa and Africa should focus on internal trade partnerships and economic alliances rather than engaging outside the continent. This will utilise the countries' economic and technological capacities. In addition, Africa should diversify its global trade relations with other emerging economic powers in Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and other parts of the world to have alternatives to the West and its monopoly on the exploitation of African economies. This should also include the clause of technology transfer and technical assistance.

Conflict of Interest

The authors hereby declare that they have no financial interest in this manuscript.

Notes on Contributors

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