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Beyond 'Fashoda Syndrome': The Rwandan Civil War and the Politics of _La Francophonie_ in Africa

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Kate Spowage, University of Leeds

Abstract

This article uses a case study to interrogate the politics of French in Africa. It examines French involvement in the Rwandan Civil War (1990-1994), and argues that by conceptualising institutions such as La Francophonie as 'cultural' bodies, we risk obscuring their properly political functions. Through a consideration of the history of language in French colonial thought, and the translation of that history into the post-colonial idea of 'Francophonie', the article foregrounds the political and economic benefits that France has received as a result of the spread of its language and culture. And, it provides an account of the role played by language and culture in France's decision to support the Habyarimana government in a war that culminated in genocide. Ultimately, it argues for the importance of recognising linguistic organisations as political entities.
Keywords: francophonie, French in Africa, Rwandan Civil War, politics of language, cultural materialism, international relations, linguistic politics, language in Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

This article will consider one aspect of the politics of language in Africa: the importance of the French language to French intervention in the Rwandan Civil War. From 1990–1994, evidence suggests that France provided military support to a dictatorial regime, and, allegedly, to the genocidal interim government that took control following the death of Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana on April 6 1994. The notion of 'Fashoda Syndrome', which holds that France views itself as in a perpetual cultural war with 'anglophone' states (the UK and US, in particular), is central to a number of analyses of French intervention in Rwanda. Prunier (1997, 102; 205), for example, argues that the French government has often been willing to provide military resources to African allies in order to defend "global *francophonie*" and resist the "cultural death" of French. Wallis (2006) and Chafer and Cumming (2010) also feature 'Fashoda Syndrome' prominently in their investigations. In this article, I argue that this focus on a putative 'cultural war' both de-politicises our understanding of the French language and obscures political and economic motivations that were in reality central to France's intervention in Rwanda. Thus, I attempt to reframe the argument that France intervened in Rwanda as a result of 'Fashoda Syndrome', demonstrating that it relies on the culturalist conceptualisation of *francophonie* that is sanctioned by the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* (OIF): that *La Francophonie* is a fundamentally cultural enterprise. In response, I draw on work that views *La Francophonie* as a properly political network (e.g. Aldrich and Connell, 1989; Martin, 1989; 1995; see also Calvet, 1974; 1994) in an attempt to go beyond the culturalist narrative of *La Francophonie* by considering its political and material underpinnings and implications.

First, it is necessary to define terms. I take *'francophonie'* to refer to the supposed group of French speakers around the world; to defend "global *francophonie*", then, is to ensure that French speakers around the world continue to use French. The OIF, which is sometimes called *La Francophonie* for short, is a specific organisation that forms the central pillar of organised *francophonie*. In this article I will use *'La Francophonie'* to refer to the network of institutions and relations that comprise organised *francophonie*; these include the OIF, the annual summits, and the personal relationships between individuals who represent countries within *La Francophonie*.[1] The intervention in Rwanda took place at the end of the "golden age of French influence in Africa" (Lavallée and Lochard, 2018, 392–393; 395), and in fact it became a catalyst for the modest reform of French policy towards Africa (Kroslak, 2002). However, the importance of *La*

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[1] OIF (2005, 4) provides a useful list of institutions that form part of *La Francophonie*. See also Aldrich and Connell (1989).

Francophonie to this pivotal moment in history remains unclear, at least beyond the broad claim that France intervened to prevent the death of its culture. This is an important lacuna: with ostensibly cultural organisations continuing to operate in Africa – including *La Francophonie*, the British Commonwealth, and the Confucius Institute – it is imperative that we gain a better understanding of the relation between 'cultural' bodies, politics, and language. My contribution to this issue will argue that France defended its language in Rwanda, not out of fear of "cultural death", but because it was part of a network that allowed France influence and access to geostrategic and global-economic interests in Central Africa.

2. "FASHODA SYNDROME": A CULTURALIST READING OF INTERVENTION

Rwanda became independent in 1962, by which point Belgium had ruled it as a colony for almost fifty years. Kinyarwanda was (and is) spoken by virtually all of the population, the majority of whom belong to one of two social groups: the Bahutu and the Batutsi.[2] The terms 'Bahutu' and 'Batutsi' distinguished population groups in pre-colonial Rwanda, but the Belgian administration worked to turn the existing "difference and inequality into group boundaries, into ethnicity" (Cooper, 2002, p.7). Under colonialism, the Batutsi formed an administrative class, while the Bahutu were made into a large laboring class. For most of Belgian rule, the Batutsi were given particular privileges, and were treated as racially superior to the Bahutu, but inferior to the white Europeans. On the eve of independence, democratic elections were held to determine who would rule the new Republic of Rwanda. The winning party was PARMEHUTU, which ran on a platform of ethnic nationalism that represented the Bahutu as authentic Rwandans, and the Batutsi as aristocratic invaders (Mamdani, 2001). Thus, the Bahutu and Batutsi were defined as social, ethnic, and political groups.[3] The PARMEHUTU victory was marred by pogroms against Batutsi in the late 1950s and early 1960s, which in turn created waves of Rwandan refugees that sought asylum throughout the Great Lakes Region of East Africa. In exile, segments of the Banyarwanda diaspora never abandoned the idea of repatriation (Mamdani, 1996, 25–26). Mamdani (2001) argues that refugees in Uganda faced some of the worst conditions, as their legal status changed under different governments, and many spent

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[2] I follow historian Mahmood Mamdani (1996) in referring to Rwandan groups using the prefixes found in Kinyarwanda. "Mu" is singular, and "ba" is plural. "Banyarwanda" refers to the people of Rwanda.

[3] Cooper (2002) is clear that to understand the distinction between Bahutu and Batutsi, one must understand how the groups have developed in the specific historical circumstances of Rwanda. There is not adequate space here to do this subject justice, but see Cooper (2002, 6–9) for a useful summary. See also Newbury (1998) for an account of the debate around the history of Rwandan ethnic groups, and Magnarella (2005) for a history of the two groups from pre-colonial times to 1994.

decades living in refugee camps. The 1980s served as a catalyst for Banyarwanda refugees: despite many fighting to bring Yoweri Museveni to power in the Ugandan Civil War, it soon became clear that they remained in unwelcome in Museveni's Uganda. Armed with military experience, but without a right to return, a number of Museveni's former soldiers formed the élite corps of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a paramilitary force that invaded Rwanda from Uganda to force President Habyarimana to repatriate refugees.[4] The RPF invasion began in 1990, and the civil war lasted four years, culminating in the Rwandan genocide.

Since 1994, scholars and journalists alike have scrutinized the role of France in the conflict. French policy in Africa is largely the preserve of the French President, whose prerogative in foreign policy is enshrined in the French constitution (Kroslak, 2002, 61). In October 1990, President Mitterand made the decision, without the consultation of parliament, to send troops to Rwanda to protect Habyarimana's government from what Callamard (1999, 158) argues was considered to be "external aggression". By 1991, France was attempting to secure peace; indeed, the presence of French troops was probably instrumental in bringing Habyarimana's government to the negotiating table (ibid, 162). However, peace was not achieved, and French troops remained in Rwanda, and in fact were reinforced in February 1993. Recent accounts (see for example Wallis, 2006; Melvern, 2009) provide evidence that Mitterand's government provided substantial financial and military aid to Habyarimana's government: it provided the *Forces armées rwandaises* ("Rwandan armed forces", FAR) with some six thousand élite paratroopers, alongside arms, military vehicles, and legitimate banking channels that permitted the import of approximately $100,000,000 worth of munitions between 1992–1994 (Wallis, 2006, 31).[5] As Wallis puts it, the Élysée "made sure their Rwandan allies were not going to be outgunned": in 1992, France sent the FAR nine Eurocopter Gazelle SA 342 helicopters, worth $7.5m in total and capable of being armed with cannons and rocket launchers (ibid, 30–31). In October 1992, one such helicopter destroyed a column of ten RPF vehicles, and it was alleged that a French soldier trained the pilot, and may have been in the helicopter with him (ibid, 31). France intervened in Rwanda at great cost, and, according to Prime Minister Édouard Balladur in 1994, did so in order to support "the regular/legal government of Rwanda", with it only being "revealed afterwards that this government was not as regular as it claimed" (as quoted by Callamard, 1999, 157). However, the notion that France was ignorant of the character of President Habyarimana's government has been met with general skepticism, with one legionnaire

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[4] Among the élite corps was future Rwandan President, Paul Kagame.

[5] It is worth noting that, in McNulty's view, "the overwhelmingly military nature of this support, through training and major arms transfers from France to Rwanda, was not exceptional in the overall context of French military involvement in Africa" in the period since political decolonisation (2000, 106).

arguing that France prolonged the war by arming the FAR (Wallis, 2006, 48), which, if true, may have given "intelligent, professional, university educated people" time to plan the genocide (ibid, 5; 103).[6] Wallis (2006) provides an in-depth exploration of French involvement in the civil war (and, potentially, the genocide) but for our purposes we must ask why France staked so much on the Habyarimana regime.

One reading of French involvement in the Rwandan Civil War foregrounds the importance of language. It offers a culturalist explanation, wherein France intervened in order to prevent an anglophone takeover of Rwanda. This rests on the characterisation of the opposing sides as not only social, ethnic, or political groups, but also linguistic ones: the Habyarimana government, representing the Rwandan Bahutu, are seen as 'francophone', and the RPF, having grown up in Uganda, are viewed as 'anglophone'. This overdetermines the linguistic affiliation of each group. A large majority of citizens in Habyarimana's Rwanda were uneducated and extremely unlikely to speak much French. And while there were certainly a number of RPF soldiers whose Ugandan educations allowed them to speak English, as the war progressed a greater number of uneducated soldiers, including young boys, joined the ranks (Prunier, 1997, 117), thereby diluting the general English competence among the RPF. Nevertheless, the conceptualisation of the RPF as an English-speaking force was politically important: Habyarimana's regime "claimed they were more Ugandan than Rwandan, and played on the 'English' history of Uganda by contrast with Rwanda's Frenchness" (Ager, 1996, 137). This narrative was also presented by France:

> From the start, Paris was keen to portray the RPF as nothing but the Ugandan army, which it accused of arming it and training it … Paris portrayed Rwandan Tutsis as Ugandan anglophones. It was pointed out that most of the RPF spoke English instead of French and had been to military academies in the USA rather than Paris. (Wallis, 2006, 26)

This portrayal of two groups that were opposed linguistically as well as ethnically has become the foundation for a culturalist interpretation of French motives for intervention.

As a conflict involving French-speakers and English-speakers, the Rwandan Civil War has been understood by some in terms of 'Fashoda Syndrome', which offers one way of understanding conflict in Africa between the perceived representatives of the UK/US and

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[6] However, Alan J. Kuperman argues convincingly that a lack of knowledge was a crucial reason that international meditation failed to prevent bloodshed in Rwanda. He demonstrates that UN negotiators viewed the conflict in overly simplistic terms, and were unaware that by compelling President Habyarimana to sign a peace accord they were essentially "rais[ing] the insecurity of Rwanda's elite to the breaking point" (Kuperman, 1996, 222). See Kuperman (1996) for an account of how and why mediation efforts failed in the Rwandan Civil War.

France. It is named for an 1898 conflict in Fashoda (now Kodok, Republic of South Sudan), where Lord Kitchener's British forces and Captain Marchand's French troops intersected one another. Fashoda represented a strategic interest to both empires, and, ultimately, Marchand was ordered to withdraw and Fashoda fell under the control of the British. Over the following century, in which Anglo-French relations south of the Sahara were "essentially characterized by competition rather than cooperation", 'Fashoda Syndrome' became shorthand to refer to "Anglo-French rivalry" in Africa (Chafer and Cumming, 2010, 1130–1131). Importantly, it has been re-evaluated in cultural, rather than military, terms: Prunier argues that it manifests today as an imagined cultural battle between the French and the 'Anglo-Saxons, with the French facing a threat of "cultural death" (1997, 104–105). In this view, the epitome of the 'Anglo-Saxon' is someone who speaks English and threatens French interests (Wallis, 2006, 26).[7] For Prunier (1997, 105), this was "still very much a part of French political thinking" in the 1990s; in fact he argues that it was "the main reason - and practically the only one - why Paris intervened so quickly and so deeply in the growing Rwandese crisis". It is worth examining this claim. For even if it is true that Yoweri Museveni was "the very embodiment of an Anglo-Saxon, for he spoke English and threatened the French" (Wallis, 2006, 26), it is also generally accepted that the UK and US stringently avoided direct involvement in the Rwandan Civil War (Chafer and Cumming, 2010, 1131).[8] In fact, Wallis (2006, 103) argues that there was a "cynical disregard by Clinton's America and its client British government of John Major for the lives of these 'Black Africans' in a country of no economic importance". He argues that, because Rwanda was home to few exploitable resources, NATO, the UK, UN, and US were indifferent (ibid, 7). Accordingly, President Mitterrand's policy in Rwanda was, at the time, virtually unchecked.

The key to understanding the role of culture in the French intervention may lie in the use of Rwanda as "a pawn in [Mitterrand's] francophone game" (Wallis, 2006, 7). This is one strength of 'Fashoda Syndrome': it highlights the fact that France (though by no means France alone) continues to have interests in Africa, and particularly so-called 'francophone Africa'. It acknowledges the conceptualisation of former French and Belgian colonies as France's *chasse gardée* (literally "hunting preserve") or *pré carré* (literally "square meadow", but referring to an area that is one's territory or domain), that is as uniquely within France's sphere of influence. But Prunier's (1997, 107) argument that in the final analysis "blind commitment" led the French

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[7] Thus, the 'Anglo-Saxon' is not necessarily British. Ager characterises Anglo-French rivalry as "americanophobia" (1999, 98–116), demonstrating the extension of the conflict beyond its Anglo-French roots.

[8] This is not to say that Britain and the US have no culpability. Hazel Cameron argues that Britain may be guilty of criminal omission, because, in her view, it ignored its legal requirement to prevent genocide (found in Article I of the Genocide Convention). The role of Britain lies outside the scope of this article, but see Cameron (2012; 2013) for an in-depth account.

government to back "an ailing dictatorship in a tiny distant country producing only bananas and a declining coffee crop" relies on a culturalist explanation that obscures political and economic motivations for French involvement in Rwanda. That is, the narrative of 'Fashoda Syndrome' posits French intervention as a decision that was overridingly motivated by cultural and linguistic interests. It may usefully point to the important role of French in African politics, but it provides no theory of precisely what that role entails. In the remainder of this article, I will suggest that we can only understand role of language and culture in French intervention if we situate it historically within the development of *La Francophonie.*

3.   THE POLITICAL ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN LA FRANCOPHONIE

The French intervention took place from 1990–1994, that is, towards the end of the "Golden Age" of French influence in Africa. *La Francophonie* encountered specific problems at this time: the deaths of a number of its founding figures, and a lack of clarity regarding its role in the changing international order of the post-Cold War world (see Ager, 1996; Powell, 2016; Lavallée and Lochard, 2018, 392–393). In 1989, Aldrich and Connell considered whether *La Francophonie* was defined by "Language, Culture or Politics". As they put it, "[e]xactly what Francophonie represents … is not clear" though it implies "the inclusion of people outside France in the culture (in a broad sense) of France itself" (Aldrich and Connell, 1989, 172). Ultimately, they argue that by 1989 "a primarily cultural and linguistic phenomenon … [came to exist in] a political and economic arena", with the function of its various institutions shifting from the cultural to the political and the economic, and the French government increasingly dominating the agenda (ibid, 190–191). Yet while Aldrich and Connell's reading usefully demonstrates the political and economic bent of *La Francophonie*, it neglects to question the "cultural and linguistic" foundations of the group and gives little consideration to the political role of language, arguing only that French is "an element in more nebulous post-colonial influence" (ibid, 184). Spolsky is clearer about the importance of language: the "apparent raison d'être" of *La Francophonie* is language diffusion, but its "goal appears to be rather the maintenance of associated power and influence" (2009, 207). The key to understanding Spolsky's contention is in the history of *La Francophonie*: specifically, it is vital to understand how language became viewed as a bedrock for close political alliances between France and a global French-speaking élite.

Language was central to French colonial thought, as it was considered to be emblematic of France's unparalleled 'civilisation'. 'Civilisation' has a specific meaning here: in the discourse of

the 'civilising mission', indigenous European cultures were represented as 'civilised', while non-Europeans were generally excluded from that status. As Folliet (1835, as quoted by Costantini, 2008, 84; see also Costantini, 2008, 82–85) put it, some were considered "so wretched and so deprived that one must refuse to apply the term 'civilisation' to them." The early 'civilising mission' was driven by the principle of 'assimilation', which held that because French civilisation was supreme, the French people had an obligation to spread their language and culture to colonised subjects, in order to render them "French in mind and spirit" (Ager, 1996, 12; see also Betts, 2004). Crucially, not all colonised subjects were equal targets for 'civilising'. Mamdani (1996, 16) argues that the question at the heart of the colonial state was how a "tiny and foreign minority" could rule over "an indigenous majority". In French colonialism, culture became part of the answer: France would create a new, indigenous colonial élite, culturally distinct from the pre-colonial élite (ibid, 16–18; see also Genova, 2004). Education was the vehicle for the formation of this new class, and it became both an arbiter of social status and an ideological support for colonial rule. In the French and Belgian contexts, schooling created a "distinct subject/category": the *évolués* (literally "evolved" or "developed") an élite urban class that often saw itself as aligned with the 'civiliser', and the local rural population as in need of 'civilising' (Genova, 2004, 48–49). In part, the *évolués* were distinguished by language, as the case of the Belgian Congo highlights. Here, French was taught in European-style schools, but only to those with whom the administration planned to work directly (Nyembwe, 2010, 7; Hulstaet, 2018, 824). Thus began a situation in which education could provide one with "social promotion through knowledge of the French language" (Hulstaet, 2018, 827). Waged labour was only available to those who had learnt French in European schools, and the language provided one with social capital (the opportunity for 'ascension' alongside socially-important people) and cultural capital (because to be an *évolué* presumed that one was 'cultured', and vice versa) (Nyembwe, 2010, 14). Moreover, one's success at learning French was viewed less as evidence of the relative privilege of access to education, and more as a mark of superior intelligence vis-à-vis those who could 'only' speak Congolese languages (ibid, 15). The cultural and social capital derived from a knowledge of French, then, alongside an alignment with French culture, contributed to the legitimacy of the *évolué* class.[9]

After the First World War, French colonial rule became guided by the principle of 'association', which ostensibly foregrounded the importance of indigenous cultures and

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[9] See Hulstaert (2018) for an interesting investigation into how Congolese students who attended an élite school in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s experienced the relationship between French and their education. She demonstrates that the continued prioritisation of French on Congolese education was consequential in terms of how individuals understood the role of the French language.

institutions. Yet, despite a greater focus on African culture and the pre-colonial élite, little changed in practical terms, and the 'civilising mission' continued (Betts, 2004, 166–174; Genova, 2004). Formal education continued to produce *évolués* "steeped in French culture" who were increasingly aware of their importance as links between Europe and Africa (Genova, 2004, 53). Indeed, because 'association' was indirect, the influence of the élite grew: "[a]lthough French was still to be taught [and] barbaric custom to be banished … French civilizing efforts would [henceforth] be preoccupied with wooing the elite, traditional and modern" (Conklin, 1997, 211). The context of 'association' raised serious questions about France's authority to rule African countries, and, on the basis that France was unable to understand the "mentality" and "traditions" of local societies, the Senegalese intellectual (and Paris-based *évoluè*) Léopold Senghor argued in 1937 that the *évolués* were indispensable for the French administration going forward, as only they could adequately alleviate "the economic and political discontent of the masses" (Genova, 2004, 65). Ultimately, "[t]he favor showed to the Parisian *évolués* by the French government positioned them well in the developing struggle for political dominance in Africa" (ibid, 66). As independence loomed, the existence of a dominant, French-speaking class in African colonies became consequential for the imagining of post-colonial international relationships.

The question of culture again came to the fore in the independence movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Charles de Gaulle ascended to the French presidency in 1958, following the August Revolution in Vietnam and the Algerian War of Independence. Given powers to reshape the political structure of France, De Gaulle crafted a new constitution that created the *Communauté Française* ("French Community"), an association between France and its African colonies in which "France retained control over external affairs, defence, finance, strategic raw materials, and higher education, and the official language was French" (Ager, 1996, 20). All African colonies except for Guinea voted in favour of the creation of the Community; Guinea declared independence on October 2 1958, causing French settlers, soldiers, and administrators to leave immediately, and all French foreign aid to be stopped (ibid). The disintegration of the Community began as early as 1960, when De Gaulle accepted Mali's claim to national sovereignty, beginning the process that would see all of France's African colonies gain independence within the year. The basic idea of the Community remained, however, and in 1961 the government replaced the *Secrétariat d'Etat aux relations avec les Etats de la Communauté* ("State Secretariat for relations with the States of the Community") with the *Ministère de la Coopération* ("Ministry of Cooperation"), which sought to design bilateral 'cooperation agreements' between France and its former colonies (Walsh, 1999, 76). These became the basis for post-colonial

relations; they entitled former colonies to French aid, but also allowed France to maintain particular strategic, economic, and political advantages (ibid, 45–46). The agreements were inflected, both implicitly and explicitly, by the "persistent theme of a francophone cultural (and even 'spiritual') community", using the French language as a powerful symbolic link between France and the new African heads of state (ibid, 47). After independence, French generally remained restricted to the *évolués* throughout so-called 'francophone' Africa, with Adebajo estimating that even by 1997 only 15% of the population included in *La Francophonie* actually spoke French (1997, 148). Due to the vast area covered, and the problems with defining one's fluency in a language, it is difficult to be precise: certainly, the level could be much lower than Adebajo suggests. To speak of 'francophone' Africa, then, is to define diverse countries on the basis of the élite that rules them.[10] In reality, the linguistic link was between officials in Europe and Africa.

The (limited) spread of French throughout the colonial period allowed the territory held by the former French and Belgian empires to be redefined as culturally homogeneous space. This was through the idea of an international French culture: *'francophonie'*. In fact, the term had originally been coined in the late 19th century, but it soon fell out of use, being revived in 1962 by Léopold Senghor, by then the first President of Senegal. Senghor wrote *'Le Français, langue de culture'* ("French, language of culture") in an issue of *Esprit* entitled *'Le Français, Langue Vivante'* ("French, Living Language"), to which Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba also contributed. Here, Senghor (1962, 844) praises French as a "marvellous tool", the "sun that shines outside the Hexagon". France and its former colonies, he argues, have passed into a stage of "symbiosis" (characterised by the doctrine of 'cooperation'), with French culture inseparable from the cultures of its colonies (ibid, 841). For Senghor (ibid, 844), *francophonie* is this "symbiosis of 'dormant energies'", and this "humanism" that has "weaved itself around the Earth". He is clear that the bedrock of *francophonie* is the élite, many of whom "think in French" and "speak French better than their mother tongue" (which is "stuffed … with *francismes*" at any rate) (ibid, 839). By redefining political space as cultural space, Senghor argued for an enduring link between France and its colonies, which would not be affected by the process of independence. That *francophonie* was an élite project at its inception is indicated by its main champions: Canut (2010, 146) argues

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[10] It is also worth noting that even those who hail from 'Francophone' Africa and actually speak French may not consider themselves to be part of an international 'Francophonie'. Vigouroux's (2008) work with French-speaking migrants in South Africa demonstrates that they only sometimes construct a Francophone identity, and when they do it is "as part of their strategies to position themselves in their new, often adverse ecology" (ibid, 431). She shows that one's feeling of affinity with 'Francophone' identity is strongly dependent on context and local value systems; she also demonstrates that "institutional Francophonie's ideal of a community united by a common language and culture across national boundaries is not empirically grounded" (ibid, 430).

that Senghor and Bourguiba, alongside Hamani Diori and Félix Houphouët–Boigny (inaugural presidents of the Republic of Niger and Côte d'Ivoire respectively) pursued "*francophonie*" as the framework for cooperation with Paris, becoming the greatest allies of French political and economic dominance in Africa. As Walsh puts it, "[w]hat was left after France's official departure in 1960 was a discourse and a set of cultural ideals that legitimised future close relations based on a shared cultural heritage" (1999, 65–66). The French language was a key part of this, becoming a cultural touchstone to express a tangible link between states.

The 'cultural *francophonie*', then, became the rhetorical basis for post-colonial association between France, its former colonies, and the former Belgian colonies. In particular, the rhetoric of *coopération culturelle* marked the elaboration of ideas that led to *La Francophonie*. Cultural cooperation agreements were bilateral, signed by France and a given country as part of a broader aid agreement. Between 1960–1963, eighteen African states signed them, including the then Republic of the Congo[11], Rwanda, and Burundi (Lellouche and Moisi, 1979, 113). These agreements detailed French assistance to the media, cultural centres, and schools, with the French government taking near control of higher education sectors until the late 1960s and the early 1970s (Walsh, 1999, 80). One template, used as a basis for the agreements, characterised the relations as reinforced by "*la solidarité morale et spirituelle des nations d'expression française*" ("the moral and spiritual solidarity of French-speaking nations") (ibid, 81). Echoing the deep cultural link discussed by Senghor, the template was permeated with an emphasis on shared language and cultural identity (ibid, 81–83). An agenda-setting policy document published in 1963 (*The Jeanneney Report*) provided a comprehensive rationale for cultural cooperation. It "[set] aside" arguments of self-interest on France's part, and detailed the "real reasons" for French aid as France's "duty to humanity", and the fact that "France desires more than any other nation to disseminate her language and culture" (ODI, 1964, 16–21) Thus, cooperation agreements suggested that it was natural for France to maintain a dominant role in post-colonial relations (Walsh, 1998, 81–83), and the continued involvement of France in the affairs of former French and Belgian colonies was represented as altruistic, cultural, and, importantly, apolitical.[12]

The notion that 'francophone' countries were linked by cultural affinity is important because it privileges the cultural over the material, becoming the foundation of the culturalist narrative of *La Francophonie*. The *Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique* ("Agency of Cultural and Technical Cooperation", ACCT) was founded in 1969, with the stated purpose of gathering

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[11] Later the Democratic Republic of the Congo, then Zaire, then the Democratic Republic of the Congo once again.

[12] Martin notes that in the 1970s the cultural cooperation agreements were revised at the request of African élites, but he argues that the new agreements "still g[a]ve exorbitant privileges to France" (1995, 4).

together French-speaking countries "in a non-political organisation for … cultural and technical co-operation" (Aldrich and Connell, 1989, 181–182). In Canut's view, the ACCT became the key institution to "defend … a common culture" that was "menaced by the 'flood' of English" (2010, 146–147). The ACCT in turn formed one of the central institutions of *La Francophonie*, and the culturalist narrative was incorporated into discourse on the latter. Thus Hamel calls *La Francophonie* "the most consistent and explicit resistance and barrier against English dominance", which seeks not only to diffuse and defend French but to resist the encroaching dominance of English (2005, 25–26). Clearly, the central elements of the 'Fashoda Syndrome' are present here. However, as Baneth-Nouailhetas clarifies, the narrative of cultural similarity and the idea of the *francophonie* depoliticises "francophone" space, and suggests that it is determined by "language alone" (2006, 15). Rather, it is useful to understand *La Francophonie* as a network of personal, uncritical relations between 'francophone' élites.

Beginning in 1958, De Gaulle "nurtured a special relationship with those francophone African nationalist leaders who thought that if they could share in the creation of a new France they would also have a part in her success" (Martin, 1995, 3). Though his Community did not endure, a form of personalised politics have remained central to *La Francophonie*. And "[b]ecause they are said to be based on historical links, geographical proximity, and linguistic and cultural affinity, relations between France and francophone Africa are invested with a special quality in the sense that they are particularly close and intimate, almost familial" (ibid, 6). Aldrich and Connell trace De Gaulle's 'clientelist' approach to the institution of regular Franco-African summits, which began under Georges Pompidou in the 1970s. Senghor emphasised their cultural and political role, and Houphouët-Boigny represented the agenda as generally economic; either way, they provided a forum for regular interaction between 'francophone' heads of state (1989, 185–186). In 1986, Mitterrand introduced "francophone summits", which were directly concerned with 'francophone' countries and which the Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney hailed as "the birth of a new international club more or less analogous to the Commonwealth" (as quoted in Aldrich and Connell, 1989, 187); *Le Monde* was more direct, titling its editorial "The Birth of Francophonie" (ibid). The familiarity of these meetings facilitated a "permanent *tête-à-tête* … between the French President and each of the francophone Heads of State" (Martin, 1995, 7). On the theoretical basis that its member states were 'francophone', *La Francophonie* became a nexus for relations between Paris and capitals throughout 'francophone' Africa.

On the basis of language, La Francophonie allowed cultural similarity to be converted into political influence and, ultimately, economic advantage. French policy towards Africa became viewed as "the perfect example of international clientelism" (Bourmaud, 1995, 58). Clearly, there

was a political incentive to the "purposefully informal" political practice of nurturing French-speaking élites, as member states of *La Francophonie* were often willing to provide vital support to France in matters of global diplomacy, and, in return, the French government repeatedly ignored the human rights records of individual leaders (Bourmaud, 1995, 60; Rusamira, 2007, 5). But critics argue that French support of African governments is not a question of cultural affinity but one of strategic value. As Martin put it in 1995 (19), "[w]hile officially proclaiming support for democratization and human rights, France continues in reality to back the regimes and leaders of what are the core countries in terms of her economic and politico-strategic interests in Africa". It is to a consideration of relationship between culture and French "economic and politico-strategic interests" that I now turn. The French political theorist Jean Leca (1974, 233) argues that, in the cooperation agreements, the promotion of culture was part of a project to attain and exert influence, in the aid of eventually attaining concrete material gains. The same may be true of *La Francophonie*: the network of personal, uncritical relations between French-speaking élites in Africa and at the Élysée, ostensibly cemented by culture, in fact facilitates France in its acquisition of strategic raw materials and, ultimately, economic capital. This is a vital point for understanding the Rwandan Civil War.

4.   PROTECTING THE 'PRÉ CARRÉ': RWANDA AND THE SECURITY OF FRENCH INTERESTS

If the rhetoric of linguistic similarity ultimately facilitates political and economic gain, we are able to re-read the 'Fashoda Syndrome' from a cultural materialist perspective. I will suggest two ways in which it was important for France to fortify the 'francophone' President Habyarimana: as part of the clientelist politics that defined Franco-Rwandan relations in the "Golden Age", and, perhaps more importantly, in defence of France's influence and material interests in neighbouring Zaire. Prior to the genocide, France had cultivated a close relationship with Habyarimana. President Mitterrand, in particular, regularly gave Habyarimana a "red carpet welcome" in Paris, along with "banquets, shopping trips, and business deals to cement relations" (Wallis, 2006, 12). Policy was influenced through "personal ties, deals done over bottles of wine and contacts made in Paris clubs and Brazzaville mansions" (ibid). The linguistic connection cannot be denied: André Sibomana (1999, 25) discussed Habyarimana "quot[ing] French poetry to President Mitterrand", while one commentator (as quoted in Prunier, 1997, 103) stated that "Paris's African backyard remains its backyard because all the chicks cackle in French". But the 'francophone' networks remained political. They became literally familial when President Mitterrand's son, Jean-Christophe, was appointed head advisor for African affairs in 1986 . Jean-

Christophe provided 'francophone' heads of state with luxury gifts and, allegedly, access to "French prostitutes", and he fostered a close relationship with Jean-Pierre Habyarimana, the Rwandan president's son (Wallis, 2006, 12; 21). Frank Smyth summarised thusly:

> Rwanda's dictators have long been welcome in Paris. One of President Habyarimana's closest friends abroad was French president Francois Mitterrand, an interventionist throughout francophone Africa. It has been reported from Kigali that their sons, Christophe Mitterrand and Jean-Pierre Habyarimana, have caroused together in discos on the Left Bank and in Rwanda at the Kigali Nightclub. (Smyth, 1994)

The close relationships ensured mutual support, and, in Prunier's view (1997, 103–107), fostered the belief that the PARMEHUTU regime would have French backing regardless of its actions. In this context, the RPF taking control of the Rwandan state would not just entail an 'anglophone' takeover, it would entail the loss of a close relationship with a loyal 'francophone' government. Indeed, Wallis (2006, 23) argues that because of Mitterrand and Habyarimana's "cosy client relationship", "[i]t was in neither president's interest to have a powerful Rwandan opposition", meaning that Mitterrand's push for 'democratisation' was "a matter of words more than deeds". This underlines an important point: any change of power, including to another 'francophone' Rwandan, would threaten French interests, because it would signal the end of the client relationship. To say that France defended French in Rwanda is to miss the political nuance of the situation, and the importance of French influence with a specific Rwandan leader. In this case, it appears that a focus on language actually *masks* the reality of the situation. By employing the narrative of a 'language war', we obscure the fact that the defence of a language may in fact be an alibi for involvement, rather than a reason. In fact, language is important for its conversion into political influence, and for the fact that it facilitates material gains.

We cannot understand the intervention as purely cultural or clientelist. It is true that Rwanda is a small, landlocked country, whose main exports in the early 1990s were coffee (the price of which had crashed in the late 1980s (see Kamola, 2007)), and bananas. But France had more covert economic stakes in the war. An important point is that France exported weaponry during the conflict; according to Wallis, it sold $24m of arms to Rwanda from 1990–1994, "though this figure does not include non-authorised grants", and it is clear that "'secret deliveries' outside the knowledge or authorisation of the ministry of defence were taking place" (2006, 32; see also McNulty, 2000, 108–115). The French Military Cooperation Mission, a body within the Ministry of Cooperation, made regular direct arms transfers to Rwanda, nine out of nineteen of which were not subject to compulsory authorisation controls (McNulty, 2000, 112). But the account of

arms transfers is not one of pure profit: evidence suggests that the Habyarimana regime made certain purchases that were funded by large loans from the French state–owned bank *Crédit Lyonnais*; and it is possible that other transfers were in fact financed through the budgets of the Ministry of Cooperation and the Military Cooperation Mission, rather than by the Rwandan government (ibid, 113–114). If France was in fact providing weaponry free of charge, there must be an economic rationale elsewhere. McNulty notes that the discursive justification of French intervention changed from 1990–1992, initially arguing that there was a need to protect French nationals in Rwanda, and later claiming that France's involvement was crucial to prevent the destabilisation of Rwanda (ibid, 11). In fact, this latter justification may bring us closer to understanding the French rationale for intervention.

It must be recognised that the 'destabilisation' of Rwanda threatened to create or exacerbate problems in the wider '*pré carré*'. Of particular concern was Zaire (today the Democratic Republic of the Congo), which shares a border with Rwanda. Mobutu Sese Soko deposed the government of the Republic of the Congo in 1960, with support from the US. He took control as a military dictator in 1965, and by the 1970s began to distance himself from Washington. At this point, "France became an important military supplier, and Zaïre became a leading participant in the francophone movement" (Huilaras, 1998, 595). Mobutu had already signed a cultural cooperation agreement with Paris in 1963, and a military cooperation agreement followed in 1974. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, President of France from 1974-1981, oversaw growing political engagement with Zaire as part of his policy to extend French influence beyond France's former colonies (Powell, 2016, 65). Zaire was depicted as a member of the Francophone family; in 1975 the French ambassador to Zaire called it the "second largest Francophone country in the world" (as quoted by Powell, 2016, 65), ignoring the fact that only a small minority of the population actually spoke French. The rise of French influence in 1970s Zaire is in some ways primed to be interpreted as exemplary of 'Fashoda Syndrome'; we can see 'Anglo-Saxon' influence waning and French influence growing alongside the culturalist rhetoric of 'Francophonie'. But one cannot overlook that Zaire was in possession of "vast mineral wealth": it was "the largest producer of cobalt and industrial diamonds, the world's sixth largest copper supplier, and the site of vast quantities of manganese and tin, as well as zinc, iron, gold, and other minerals" (Powell, 2016, 65). In 1978, French direct investment in Zaire totaled $20m (compared with $200m from the US and $800m from Belgium), so France's economic stake in Zaire was relatively low. But the country's mineral wealth indicated vast economic potential, and such "potential commercial interests" were recognised by France (ibid, 65–70). In 1977–78, France staged a military intervention in Zaire in order to protect Mobutu's government against

the Shaba I and Shaba II invasions (see Powell, 2016). Powell (2016) argues that, in 1977–78, economic factors only played a minor role in the French decision to back Mobutu, but by the 1990s France's commercial interests in Zaire had become significant.

Throughout the "Golden Age", France saw material benefits from members of *La Francophonie* in two ways that are pertinent to the Rwandan Civil War: it received preferential access to markets, and to strategic materials.[13] Simply, "France's balance of trade, which [was] in chronic deficit with the rest of the world, [had] always been positive with Africa" (Martin, 1995, 10). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Africa represented a vast market for French goods. In 1993, as preparations were being laid for the Rwandan genocide, France profited by 47bn francs (approximately €11.5bn, July 2019 equivalent) from trade within *La Francophonie,* or by 44.8bn francs with African members alone (approximately €10.7bn, July 2019 equivalent) (Ager, 1996, 202). For France, *La Francophonie* was an "economic success" (ibid, 104). Zaire played a key part in this, as it was the biggest African market for French exports. In 1993, France imported relatively little from Zaire in quantitative terms (89m francs worth of goods), but its exports amounted to 9.63bn francs, a number only exceeded by exports to former North African colonies and Belgium/Luxembourg (Ager, 1996, 202). Thus France's balance of trade with Zaire was 8.74bn Francs (approximately €2bn, July 2019 equivalent). African trade was also strategically important, because the continent represented a "source of raw materials" to France, supplying necessities for the functioning of "high-technology industries" (such as aeronatuics, nuclear energy, and weaponry), some of which, ultimately, could be sold back to African countries as manufactured goods (Martin, 1989, 105–107; 1995, 9–11). Cooperation agreements, alongside defence agreements, contained provisions that gave France preferential access to strategic materials such as oil, natural gas, and uranium, and restricted the sale of those materials to third countries (Martin, 1995, 10). By the late 1980s, France was reliant on Africa for a large portion of its manganese (35–76%), bauxite (68–90%), phosphate (83%), and uranium (87–100%). Particular interests were in Zaire: France was prospecting for uranium there, and, perhaps most importantly, it relied heavily on Zaire and Zambia for copper (32–57% of its total supply) and cobalt (59–100%) (Martin, 1989, 106; Martin, 1995, 9).[14] The preferential terms of trade were inseparable from the narrative of cultural similarity and the dynamic of clientelist politics.

The economic importance of Zaire is signified by the assertion made in 1982 by Guy Penne, Mitterrand's adviser on African affairs, that "Zaire is the most important francophone country

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[13] A third way that is less pertinent to the Rwandan context is control over the *Communauté finacière africaine* ("African financial community", CFA). See Stasavage (1997) for the politics of monetary and fiscal policy in the CFA.

[14] These upper and lower estimates are based on conflicting figures given by Martin (1989; 1995). At least in some cases, the figure is significant whichever estimate is closest.

after France" (as quoted in Ndikumana and Boyce, 1998, 210).[15] Zaire's stature as a copper producer grew during the 1980s, as Zambian copper reserves became depleted and Zaire became Africa's largest producer, and the fifth largest producer globally (Prasad, 1989, 522). However, due to political turmoil, Zairean copper production was beset by problems in the early 1990s, with its production dropping back below that of Zambia from 1990–1994 (Edelstein, 250; 260). Zairean cobalt production was similarly troubled in the 1980s and early 1990s: from 1987 to 1994, Zairean cobalt production fell by 82%. Despite this precipitous drop, it remained the world's largest producer in 1991, and accounted for 35% of global cobalt production (Mobbs, 1994, 943; Shedd, 1991, 447; 454). Indeed, Zaire's potential was vast. Its problems, such as the collapse of the Kamato mine, could be fixed; they were not geological, as Zairean reserves were far from depleted (Shedd, 1994, 227; 255). Even at its lowest productivity, Zaire processed 1,800 metric tonnes more than the third largest African producer, Botswana (ibid, 255). Signs of recovery in the industry were visible on the eve of the genocide, with cobalt output increasing by 57% from 1993 to 1994, in what was viewed as a "rebound" of the Zairean mining industry (Mobbs, 1994, 943). Zaire was, then, a leading exporter of a key strategic metal, with vast resources and a regime that had signed cooperation agreements with the French government.

There is ample evidence that French officials feared a domino effect if Rwanda fell to the RPF. Wallis (2006, 25) holds that in 1990 the French government knew "[t]hey needed to stop this francophone country becoming the first domino to fall in the feared anglophone 'invasion'", a contention that was fuelled by Habyarimana "play[ing] up the fear of an anglophone Tutsi plot to carve out a large new central African kingdom". One memo, reputedly from French government circles and subtitled 'considerable political and geostrategic interests are hidden behind the Rwandese heap of corpses', concluded that:

> The region cannot be left in the hands of an English-speaking strongman completely aligned to American views and interests. This is why since 1990 France has supported the late President Juvénal Habyarimana in order to fight the RPF. (as quoted in Prunier, 1997, 279)

Bruno Delaye, a French diplomat, captured the argument succinctly: "[w]e cannot let anglophone countries decide the future of a francophone one" (as quoted in Prunier, 1997, 279). Prunier (1997, 279) argues that this describes the situation as it was viewed by the French government. But the position evinced in Delaye's comment is misleading precisely because it

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[15] Mobutu (1989) himself called Zaire the largest francophone country in the world, a claim that would be defensible in terms of land surface but necessarily ignored the fact that the Zairean élite had a stronghold on the language.

focusses on language. An understanding of the economic importance of Zaire to Rwanda gives a new significance to the arguments quoted above: avowed fears of cultural loss actually index the threat of losing influence and the associated economic gains, a particularly serious concern if Rwanda were to destabilise Zaire (as it eventually did).

The framework of 'Fashoda Syndrome' is inimical with Martin's observation that "[i]n the final analysis, France's military presence in Africa is determined by three main factors: the size and degree of her economic interests and involvement; the number of French residents; and the nature of the links existing between France and the national ruling elites" (1995, 14). Precisely because the culturalist explanation relies on using apparent linguistic and cultural links to understand French intervention in Rwanda, it prevents a serious consideration of the political and material interests that relate to language. In Rwanda, language may have been *affected by* war, but it did not *effect* war. Instead, we must consider that because France was at risk of losing its preferential access to the Zairean market, and the associated cobalt and copper, it acted under the guise of protecting 'coffee and bananas' and its treasured language in Rwanda. In doing so, and despite its efforts to find a peaceful solution at Arusha, it may have extended the Civil War and enabled the mass murder of almost a million people. This stands France alongside other non-African countries that have supported dictatorial or despotic regimes in order to ensure long-term access to strategic materials.[16] Ultimately, military intervention in Rwanda served to protect the integrity of France's *pré carré* in Central Africa.

5. CONCLUSION

In spite of French intervention, the RPF took control of Rwanda in 1994. And, in fact, the conflict further destabilised Zaire, and ultimately led to the deposition of Mobutu in 1997, with Laurent-Desiré Kabila as president of the now Democratic Republic of the Congo. After 1994, Rwanda was pointedly disinvited from the Francophone Summit for the first time since the country joined *La Francophonie* (Wallis, 2006, 185). Following this, it was asserted that Rwanda had no interest in maintaining relationships within *La Francophonie,* and that the only surprise in the RPF government's 2006 decision to cut ties with France was that "it [hadn't] come sooner" (BBC, 2006). It wasn't until 2009 that 'normal' diplomatic relations were resumed, though the context surrounding that diplomacy had changed significantly (McGreal, 2009; Gourevitch, 2010). English had been elevated to official language status, and it had become the sole language

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[16] See, for example, Lee and Shalmon (2008) on Chinese support for the Khartoum government in (now North) Sudan. In spite of the Darfur genocide, Lee and Shalmon argue that China defended its oil interests in the country, both to protect its investments and attempt to ensure long term access to crude oil.

of education, while Rwanda had joined the British Commonwealth. Nevertheless, relations improved, and in 2019 President Macron became the first French head of state to order an inquiry into France's role in the Rwandan genocide. In the same year, Louise Mushikiwabo, a Rwandan national, became Secretary General of the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie.*

The Rwandan genocide, alongside the end of the Cold War, signified the end of France's "Golden Age" in Africa. The impact on French policy in Africa was important, and by the turn of the new millennium there had been significant political, economic, and military reforms (Kroslak, 2002, 61). However, Kroslak (ibid, 80) argues that there are also continuities, with the network of élite officials continuing to play an important role in linking Paris and Africa. It is worth asking whether the representation of the relations within *La* Francophonie as largely cultural and apolitical in nature has shielded the idea of 'Francophonie' from some of the criticism that has been directed at France's record in Africa. Certainly, the links formed within *La Francophonie* show no signs of being dissolved.

The Rwandan Civil War constitutes a valuable flashpoint for interrogating the utility of 'Fashoda Syndrome' as a framework for understanding France's involvement with Africa. Claims that there is an ongoing 'cultural war' between France and the 'Anglo-Saxon' are not necessarily false, but the definition of that phenomenon in cultural terms obscures profoundly political manouevres that are facilitated by way of linguistic and cultural ties between élites in France and Africa. Equally, the obfuscating effect of 'Fashoda Syndrome' should not be taken as unique to Franco-African relations; rather, we must question whether a culturalist understanding of linguistic organisations at large prevents us from undertaking thorough investigations into their political implications. The politics of language may be an important, under-researched area not just in 'francophone' Africa, but 'anglophone' and 'lusophone' Africa too. It is critical to recognise that such concerns may be effectively de-politicised if approached through a culturalist framework.

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