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French West Africa Money

The parceling out of the African continent by European nations is in part told through this object. A story of continued colonization and subjugation explains this French West Africa banknote from 1952. This particular note, in a long line of colonial currency dating back to 1902 and even 1853 with the Bank of Senegal, was minted from 1943-1954¹. It is an interesting piece because it showcases how French colonialism was enforced and opens up conversations about how it continues to harm African nations and people today. The banknote highlights colonial concepts of subjugation and authority.

This money object is inextricably tied to the colonization of the African Continent by Western powers, specifically reflecting French colonialism. European countries such as France, Britain, Portugal, and Belgium created different imperial zones in which the same colonial currency was forcibly used². In 1945, the colonization of West Africa by France created the Franc Zone, “destroying the indigenous monetary practices”³. France benefited from this system in which wealth was extracted from French West Africa for the gain of the metropolis. The new form of money was not only responsible for France’s economic power, it was also an artistic reflection of conquest and colonization. African people are being domesticated, stereotyped, and exoticized by France through this currency.

The viewer can see the French empire’s thoughts, feelings, and wants on this bank note, in the way that they represent African people. On the obverse side of the bank note there is a

¹ “100 Francs Type 1945.” The banknote Numizon catalog. Accessed April 7, 2024.

² Ndong Samba Sylla “Moving Forward to African Monetary Integration: Lessons from the CFA Franc.” (*Africa Development / Afrique et Développement* 45, 2020) 40.

³ Sylla, “Moving Forward to African Monetary Integration,” 41.

woman depicted, naked, harvesting fruits and vegetables. Governments have a long history of using money as a way of expressing authority and ownership over subjects. What they are depicting on their money is theirs to depict. They are not only showing their conquest of this woman by putting her on the face of this bill, they have depicted her naked, to other, stereotype, and exoticize her. This is a colonial tool of oppression not just used by the French, but also the Portuguese on their colonial African bills⁴. Furthermore, this woman is seen harvesting fruit, she is laboring and producing, but also looks content. This is an example of a new type of colonial depiction that arose in the 50s, that alluded to how colonization ‘bettered’ those that were colonized⁵. The themes of conquest and colonialism continue on the reverse side of the bill.

The back of the bill depicts a couple with a baby between them in the foreground, with rolling hills and a herd of animals in the background. The depiction of the family is an interesting utilization of ‘newfound’ domesticity of African people. Historically, domesticity has been used as a “force for civilizing”, that also signals modernity in the colonized indigenous group⁶. The French are conveying that their presence is civilizing the African people through this domesticity, though not fully, because the woman is still uncovered and therefore the other. The background highlights the production and labor of farming zebu (cattle), which the French can exploit. These colonial attitudes are not left in the past on this mid 20th century bill, but rather still positively impacts France and therefore negatively impacts West Africa today.

Still fourteen West African countries are under the French banking system set up in the early 20th century with the sole goal of reaping the benefits of West Africa's wealth. These

⁴ Wambui Mwangi “The Lion, the Native and the Coffee Plant: Political Imagery and the Ambiguous Art of Currency Design in Colonial Kenya,” (*Geopolitics*, 2002), 37.

⁵ Mwangi, “The Lion, the Native and the Coffee Plant,” 37.

⁶ Victoria Haskins, “Domesticating Colonizers: Domesticity, Indigenous Domestic Labor, and the Modern Settler Colonial Nation,” (*The American Historical Review*, 2019).

countries are still under French economic and therefore political influence⁷. There is a new wave of advocacy for the abolition of this system, the issue is no one can agree on the best way to move forward. This complex piece in our collection is a symbol of the destructive European colonialism that cruelly exploited and continues to exploit the African continent and its people.

⁷ Sylla, "Moving Forward to African Monetary Integration," 39.

Bibliography

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