*Global Discourse* • vol XX • no XX • 1–17 • © Authors 2024
Online ISSN 2043-7897 • https://doi.org/10.1332/20437897Y2023D000000030
Accepted for publication 30 November 2023 • First published online 02 January 2024

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# 'Speaking proper French': citizen bids for state recognition in Chad and Côte d'Ivoire

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Theories of international recognition posit that states' identities are formed through dialogical relations with other states. However, they often overlook the ways in which weaker states' struggles, constrained within the languages of the powerful, produce misrecognition and inhibit identity formation. This is the experience of many post-colonial francophone African states whose search for international recognition has been inhibited by their special relationship with France, their former coloniser. This article shows how such struggles for recognition can fail. It draws on two examples of francophone African countries, showing how their search for recognition sprung from the misrecognition of colonial experiences. Each has made explicit attempts to attract richer forms of state recognition through purposive acts but has continued to do so within post-colonial conditions. Using citizens' understandings of these struggles, the article explores what drove them, how they manifested and how they unravelled. It draws on Frantz Fanon's account of misrecognition, making a novel interpretation based on his concept of 'speaking proper French', or how experiences of 'identity alienation' can only produce further misrecognition.

**Key words** Fanon • misrecognition • Chad • Côte d'Ivoire

**Key messages**

- Struggles for recognition by post-colonial states can produce further misrecognition.
- The article understands how this happens using Franz Fanon's concept of 'speaking proper French'.
- It uses examples of expressions of agency by the governments of Chad and Côte d'Ivoire.
- It unpacks these through the perceptions of citizens in each country.

To cite this article: Daga, M. and Gallagher, J. (2024) 'Speaking proper French': citizen bids for state recognition in Chad and Côte d'Ivoire, *Global Discourse*, XX(XX): 1–17, DOI: 10.1332/20437897Y2023D000000030



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## Introduction

This article borrows Frantz Fanon's description of the Black man who attempts to 'speak proper French' in order to win recognition but ends up experiencing 'dislocation, a separation' from himself (Fanon, 2008: 14). The act of 'speaking proper French' is 'to take on [another] culture' by emulating the other rather than speaking for oneself (Fanon, 2008: 14). In Fanon's argument, attempting to 'speak proper French', a bid for recognition on the coloniser's terms, produces only further alienation. We use this idea to think about the mechanisms of state misrecognition in international relations. We show how two post-colonial francophone states, inheriting the misrecognition experienced during colonial rule, pursue recognition in the world by attempting to 'speak proper French', and we explore how such attempts produce further misrecognition.

Lindemann and Brincat frame this special issue around the question: what does an actor have to do to be recognised? This 'to do' is the basis for their suggestion that bids for recognition are rooted in expressions of agency, 'that the desire for recognition is not simply a desire for social goods, for status or for statehood, but for more agency – more capacity to act' (Epstein et al, 2018: 787). As Lindemann (2018: 923) puts it, recognition is rooted in the ability to contribute through demonstrations of 'creative agency' in order to express oneself 'through words and deeds in social reality'.

Two expressions of agency are of interest to us. One is the way actors choose to appear to others, that is, how they attempt to shape the way they are seen and understood. The other is found in the things they choose to do in relation to others. Under the apparent control of the subject, but always with reference to another, these expressions of agency together curate subjectivity by making things and showing them as a way to create oneself in relation to the world. This is similar to an object-relations approach, where actors create a 'working model' of the world that they use to make sense of it and themselves in it (Gallagher, 2016).

Many existing interpretations of agency (for example, Lindemann, 2018) build from Hegel's theory in which recognition is mutually constitutive because the master and the slave pursue self-consciousness in relation to each other. However, for Fanon, reciprocity is impossible between the coloniser and the colonised subject. This is because, unlike the Hegelian master who seeks recognition through the gaze of the slave, the coloniser 'laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work' (Fanon, 2008: 172). Our interpretation of agency follows Fanon. We explore how misrecognition (or the coloniser's refusal to seek recognition from the colonised subject) leads to the alienation or a 'displacement' of colonised subjects from their own culture. From a Fanonian perspective, agency is assumed within two distinct paths. The first is the violent encounter between the coloniser and the colonised, the violent overthrow of the coloniser and a resulting affirmation of the colonised's self-consciousness: a real recognition. When this violent overthrow does not occur, the result is alienation. In the second path, agency is expressed through emulation, or by 'speaking proper French'. This type of agency, according to Fanon, does not enable recognition; it only leads to further misrecognition, as the colonised end up being ersatz agents to both themselves and the coloniser.

Perhaps it is easier to describe things that go wrong. While we think Fanon's account of misrecognition is a powerful way to understand the post-colonial condition, his


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depiction of 'real recognition' (whether it is achieved through violence or not) is less convincing. Recognition is something that is chased but never accomplished; it is not as simple as throwing out the coloniser or making a space for yourself in the social order (Bourdieu and Paliwal, 1990). This is because recognition is inter-objective, always shifting within unstable relationships that constitute unstable selfhoods. The closest we might get to 'real recognition' is an appreciation of the discomforts of misrecognition (Gallagher, 2016).

The subjects of this article are states and how they are realised through projecting onto, and acting in, the world. To create a state appearance implies making state-like attributes and possessions: buildings, constitutions and rituals, as well as paraphernalia like flags, currencies and uniforms. These are, like 'internal objects', things that create a 'working model' of statehood (Gallagher, 2016) that creates relations with the external world. To act like a state in the world involves, among other things, participating in international bodies, pursuing diplomatic relations, making trade deals and going to war. Through acts like these, the state becomes an agent, posting diplomats, taking positions, forming alliances and performing acts of military aggression or intervention: 'Statehood is therefore both a gathering together and making sense of internal objects on the domestic level, and the capacity to exercise agency beyond itself, on the international level' (Gallagher, 2018: 884).

However, agency is often limited for post-colonial states. They enter at independence into an established international system where they are expected to look and perform in prescribed ways (Holm and Sending, 2018). Their struggle for recognition can be reduced to acting and looking in ways that fit into acceptable forms already established without their consent by older states in the international system – more emulation than self-assertion. This is clearly the case when a new state is materially dependent on conditional support from other states: only the powerful or the brave can afford to look and act on their own terms.[1] However, invisible constraints are at work too, shaped by the emotional and intellectual alienation produced by years of colonial rule (Thiong'o, 1986). Thus, for many African states, there has been little room for divergence from international norms. This has been particularly the case with francophone countries, most of which remained within a tight-knit community under French influence from 1960, the year of independence (Staniland, 1987; McKesson, 1993; Le Vine, 2004; Taylor, 2019).

In this article, we explore two examples of post-colonial African states' pursuit of international recognition within these constraints. Our intention is to explain how recognition is sought by taking action and creating images through emulation, and to trace how alienation and further misrecognition are produced in the process. Our first example is that of Chad's military intervention in Mali in 2013. Chad, newly emerged from a long tradition of civil war that had left it impoverished and weakly institutionalised, sent its armed forces into a conflict in which it had no direct interests. This was a deliberate choice to act: Chad was not threatened and had apparently little to gain. The interventions were framed within a discourse of humanitarianism locally interpreted as an attempt to turn the country once called a "failed state" into the "gendarme of Africa".[2] Our second example is that of Côte d'Ivoire's state-buildings programme, a bid for recognition made by looking state-like. In the first 25 years after independence, the Ivoirian government created an image through architecture to rival the West in its projections of modernity, monumentalism and power.


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We explore the degree to which these cases were exercises in emulation rather than self-assertive framings or acts that could elicit substantive recognition. Each used ideas and expressions of what being a 'proper state' entailed – acting as a humanitarian agent or making buildings that were 'as good as' those in the West. In Chad and Côte d'Ivoire, the recognition produced by such acts was expressed in the idea of measuring up, acting or looking like a 'real state' – 'speaking proper French'. They are examples of how statehood is 'performed' within a given structure (Holm and Sending, 2018: 830). Holm and Sending (2018) argue that such performances can only frustrate struggles for substantive recognition. As we argue, they can produce 'a dislocation, a separation' that reproduces alienation and misrecognition.

In order to examine how such acting and image making work in practice for recognition-seeking, post-colonial states we need to open up the infamous 'black box' of the discipline of international relations (IR) (Blarel and Paliwal, 2019) – the conceit that international relations are governed by surface-level, 'ping-pong ball' interactions and that histories, ideas and emotions do not affect what happens. Opening this up is to follow Berenskötter's (2014: 264) call to understand 'international relations as a realm of reflexive communities constituted and guided by structures of meaning' in order to look underneath the appearance of how states act in the world and into their internal workings as revealed through narrative. We do this empirically through the eyes and words of citizens. Our premise is that citizens' perspectives, which both constitute and describe experiences of the state, can help uncover something of 'state subjectivity', 'the shared inner life of the subject … the way subjects feel, respond, experience' (Luhrmann, 2006: 345). To do this is to try to understand forms of recognition accorded to the state from below (Gallagher, 2017). What do citizens see and think about their state forms and actions? To what degree can they identify with them? How do they understand and evaluate them as bids for recognisable statehood? To what extent might they produce the sense of a viable, substantive state? To what degree might they produce 'dislocation' or 'separation', that is, a misrecognition? It is thus our contention that these citizen perspectives can work as a proxy for 'state subjectivity'.

Most of the empirical material for the article was gathered through fieldwork carried out in Chad (by Daga) and Côte d'Ivoire (by Gallagher) from 2018 to 2020. We listened to citizen perspectives in a series of 36 focus-group discussions (FGDs) with adults who lived and worked in urban parts of Chad (Abeche, Doba and N'Djamena) and Côte d'Ivoire (Abidjan). Our interviewees were drawn from non-elites and included a wide social mix, from graduates and professionals to labourers and street traders. Like many people in post-colonial contexts, many of them have had indirect contact with Western culture; very few of them had travelled abroad. Our interviews were organised through gatekeepers, representatives of civic groups who recruited some of their members to participate. We preferred working with groups where members knew each other (or at least felt they belonged to a familiar group), finding that this created an atmosphere of trust (Duchesne, 2017). Gallagher, working with Ariane N'djoré, conducted discussions in French in Abidjan; Daga conducted discussions in French and local Arabic in Abeche, Doba and N'Djamena.

We use the cases as examples of different aspects of the misrecognition attached to 'speaking proper French'. Both are West African countries, formerly parts of French colonial Africa, each of which has maintained cordial relations with France. We chose them as good examples of states that have bid for recognition within conventional


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international norms. We begin, in the first section, with Chad's military intervention in Mali, which we frame around Fanon's work on alienation and the struggle for recognition. This section explores how language structures Chad as a post-colonial state, from the outside and inside, within dynamics of misrecognition. It explores how alienation drives the search for recognition through emulation by creating narratives of intervention within liberal-Western terms. In the following section, we move onto state architecture in Côte d'Ivoire, created to emulate or surpass Western examples. Here, we focus on how these creations also produce new forms of misrecognition. Citizens' descriptions of their state buildings illustrate the mixture of pride and alienation produced by the state presented in these buildings. In sum, the article therefore treats the two examples as different expressions and aspects of recognition seeking that illustrate the relationship between 'speaking proper French' and state misrecognition. People's ideas and the words they used to describe them enable us to look inside the black box of the state and to develop insights into the creation and effects of its struggle for recognition.

## Fanon, language and Chad's bid for recognition

Language is central to recognition for Fanon, who wrote that 'to speak is to exist absolutely for the other' (Fanon, 2008: 8). Language represents the basic moment of the intersubjective process because it conveys status and therefore recognition of one person's identity by another. As a result, for Fanon, colonial domination hinged on a refusal to hear the language of colonised people. It was a way to deny them humanity, a profound misrecognition, a 'mental domination' (Thiong'o, 1986: 5). In turn, such misrecognition drove the colonised towards 'assimilation' in the quest of an identity (Sekyi-Otu, 1996): the reclamation of their humanity appeared only possible with the adoption of the coloniser's civilisation (Mazrui, 1993). As Fanon (2008: 9) put it: 'the colonised is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards'. Core to this quest was the colonial language. Gibson (1999: 17) writes that 'speaking "proper" French is a symbol of authority. Dialect not only places one geographically and socially, but it is a way of thinking.'

However, redemption offered on the terms of the coloniser could only produce further alienation, producing more misrecognition. In attempting to speak proper French, the colonised could not gain a new selfhood but only become further estranged from their own identity. Fanon describes this in a vivid account of a Black man who returns to Martinique after living in France. He appears 'radically changed … his phenotype undergoes a definitive, an absolute mutation' (Fanon, 2008: 10); 'He no longer understands the dialect, he talks about the Opéra, which he may never have seen except from a distance … he adopts a critical attitude towards his compatriots. Confronted with the most trivial occurrence, he becomes an oracle. He is the one who knows' (Fanon, 2008: 13). The transformation produces enormous respect among his fellow Black men: those who 'master' the language are 'inordinately feared'. People say about him: 'keep an eye on that one, he is almost white' (Fanon, 2008: 11). Yet, every move and utterance is suspiciously monitored: how profound really is the transformation? What indeed does 'almost white' actually mean? The homecomer must be careful. His compatriots watch for any misstep that suggests that his French is wanting: 'The slightest departure is seized on, picked apart, and in less than forty-eight hours it has been retailed all over Fort-de-France. There


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is no forgiveness when one who claims a superiority falls below the standard' (Fanon, 2008: 14).

This colonised man, in search of recognition, was thus pushed into a language that condemned him to 'experience his being through others' (Fanon, 2008: 418), and while it created potential respect among his compatriots, it also alienated him from them and ultimately from himself. Thus, for Fanon, in the colonial and post-colonial context, the struggle for 'recognition inevitably leads to subjection' (Coulthard, 2014: 42). Speaking 'proper French' could not fix the problem of his misrecognition; at best, it could only give a shaky impression of selfhood, and at worst, it created alienation, or the 'dislocation' from both community and self.

Chad's 2013 military intervention in the Sahel is our example of how a state tries to 'speak proper French'. Chad contributed more than 2,000 soldiers to the international coalition of forces led by France against insurgency groups in Mali. This was the largest contribution of troops by an African nation to the conflict, second only to France.

Many scholars have used Bayart and Ellis's (2000) extraversion theory to explain the motivations of the Chadian elites as rent seeking, a projection of behaviours likely to draw approval and ultimately financial support (Magrin, 2013; Marchal, 2016; Hansen, 2017). Such explanations highlight the ways in which a dependent country can create and use leverage with powerful international partners. This may indeed have been part of the Chadian government's motivation for involvement in the intervention. However, this explanation is a surface one, framed in behavioural terms. It does not get us inside the black box and therefore tells us nothing about how alienation might have driven the intervention or the degree to which it might exemplify a bid for recognition. We need to look at the language used around the intervention and the degree to which this was structured within Fanonian tropes of misrecognition.

It is striking to see how French officials and intellectuals have used language to contrast France's and Chad's military presences in Mali. When justifying France's involvement, French descriptions focus on the historic responsibility of France in defence of liberal and humanist values. For example, during a speech in Dubai, then President François Hollande (2013a) claimed: 'France has a singular responsibility because it is France. Not because we have interest in Mali – we have none – but because we have the capacity to intervene.' In line with the principles of liberal interventionism, Hollande dissociated the intervention from the material interests of France, instead presenting it as a selfless action driven by moral and liberal values alone. 'Gifts' of freedom and independence, other values associated with liberal interventionism, were again highlighted in Hollande's (2013b) speech during a visit to Bamako, the capital of Mali:

> I am speaking here in front of the monument of independence, to pay tribute to your history but also to tell you that your country will experience a new independence which will no longer be, this time, victory over the colonial system, but victory over terrorism, intolerance, and fanaticism. That is your independence.

As Brincat and Lindeman (2024) point out in their introduction to this special issue, gifting is the preserve of the dominant actor, and it can work to undermine the agency of the receiver. Hollande's argument here is that France's moral intervention



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will eradicate horror and enable true independence in Mali: Mali's rosy future is a gift from France, just as, it is implied, was independence.

In contrast to this depiction of the French intervention, French officials and intellectuals found a very different justification for Chad's presence in Mali. Their discourse instead highlighted the naturalistic and biological aspects of the Chadian soldier. For example, the French scholar Philippe Hugon was quoted in *Le Monde* as praising the Chadian soldiers for their ability to 'endure the extreme heat' and arguing that they are seasoned for desert-style battlefields, and this is why Chad went to war (Le Monde, 2013). Berthemet (2013), a journalist for *Le Figaro*, made a similar analysis about the contribution of the Chadian army: 'the experience of the Chadians in the desert lands made their commitment even more valuable'.

This pattern of misrecognition goes well beyond the start of the war in Mali, and it is representative of a world view deeply rooted in the consciousness and rhetoric of French statesmen. It is the expression of 'paternalistic humanism', which presents 'as intrinsic to the soul of the former colonised and practically pigmentary the ideological labelling of the colonisers' (Chretien, 2008: 13). To support this, we can look at the brutal quote attributed to the then French President Jacques Chirac: 'Chad is not a state but a territory bounded by the borders of neighbouring states and over which warlords rule' (Soudan, 2006). Chirac went on to say that if Chad cannot even qualify as a state, there is no point in considering it at the same status level as France and other Western states. This is the status recognition that a state like Chad cannot enjoy because it is failed, undemocratic and run by an authoritarian regime. The misrecognition was further reinforced by a later French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, in a speech made in Dakar, where he claimed that 'the tragedy of Africa is that the African has not fully entered into history' and the continent had failed to grasp progress (Chretien, 2008; see also Diop, 2008). More recently, French President Emmanuel Macron faced criticism and anger when he summoned five leaders from Sahel to France to address 'anti-French sentiments' in the region. He was criticised for lacking solemnity and treating African heads of states as office boys (Diallo and Roger, 2019).

The French discourse describes a relationship of patronage between France and Chad, which corresponds to what Fanon describes as the process of demeaning the Black man to his most elemental and naturalistic characteristics. Fanon (2008: 127) stressed that for the colonist: 'the Negro is only biological. The Negroes are animals. They go about naked.' The denial of status recognition to the Chadian intervention reflects Fanon's understanding of the racial construction according to which Black, colonised people can express themselves only through their physical attributes and are incapable of superior intellectual or moral effort.

In the French discourse on Chad's role in Mali, the physical attributes of individual soldiers are written into the actions and interventions of the state itself. Chad, animated only by the bodies of its soldiers, lacks capacity to think or reason its acts. The discourse plays into a long one of 'state failure', in which post-colonial states lack the institutions, norms and objectives of proper statehood (Jackson, 1991; Zartman, 1995). Chad's involvement in the war in Mali was not recognised by France as a proper intervention, defined as one animated by either liberal principle or realist calculation – Chad did not act like a proper state, a member of the state community.

The intervention was read entirely differently by ordinary people in Chad, many of whom welcomed it as an activity likely to produce international recognition, to 'put the country on the map'. They described it in terms that closely referenced those used by



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French media and officials to account for France's military presence in Mali. Our Chadian respondents did not talk about their soldiers' physical attributes. They used terms like "beacon of human rights"[3] and "homeland of freedom and liberty"[4] to describe the Mali intervention. Their implicit rejection of the international misrecognition of Chad's intervention made a claim for an action in intellectual and ethical terms, a bid to be recognised as having the ability to speak. However, the terms they used tended to conform to French self-descriptions. This 'speaking proper French' allowed people to make sense of, and give coherence to, the political community, though within the French lexicon.

During one conversation in the city of Abeche, a student made the following remark: "Chad's intervention in Mali as such is not bad even if we are not from the same region. Although Mali is in ECOWAS [Economic Community of West African States] and we are in Central Africa, there is a humanist duty that we felt, and Chad intervened to limit the damage."[5] It is striking how the Chadian military intervention is justified on liberal terms: this man argued that Chadians felt a "humanist duty" to stop Mali being overrun by a terrorist organisation. In other words, the people of Chad were standing against the terrorists in Mali in order to protect a social order based on the values and aspirations of Chadian society. He also clearly expressed the idea of the Chadian nation taking selfless action to rescue the Malian nation. This idea closely resonates with Hollande's Dubai speech: France intervened in Mali not because it has a material interest but because it is France and it has the moral responsibility to protect freedom and peace in Mali.

Our respondent illustrated a similar approach with the following comment:

> 'As Africans, we share values with all other Africans, such as security, peace and stability, and, even more, the respect for human life. And it is on this basis that we should intervene because northern Mali is home to many communities that have now regained access to education and health. Before, the civil servants sent to these communities would not go because of the risks, and these risks are now lifted thanks to Chad's intervention in Mali.'[6]

Here, the humanist duty is extended to further 'liberal values', such as respect for human life, access to education or the responsibility to maintain peace and security. This provides a narrative that Chad is in Mali because the Chadian people believe in these values and support the military intervention because it helped restore their integrity threatened by the terrorists.

Another respondent saw a deeper, historical thread to Chad's Mali intervention, one that drew on a long record of principled intervention:

> 'Today, we have this pride because we were the first country to respond militarily and financially to the call of the international community, to the call of the Malian people to save this people. We did not wait for the other countries to make the same commitment before defending this brotherly country. History reminds us that Chad was the first colony to respond to General De Gaulle's call. Even in Africa, we are the first to intervene.'[7]

This comment tells us that Chad leads, and has always led, on principled interventions. It is a bold statement of agency and describes a state that thinks and acts. Its historical record demonstrates that this is an enduring part of the Chadian way. Furthermore, the



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point is made that Chad is exceptional in this – its position as 'the first' is made again and again. However, even if the state thinks and acts, it does so not on its own initiative, and recognition is only suggested on the idea of emulating France by responding to the call of its leaders. Although the idea of making the first step may be about originality, it reproduces an understanding of agency as acting within a prescribed system.

These citizens stressed dignity and values in Chad's involvement in Mali, rejecting discourses that reduced its performance to the physical attributes of its soldiers. The assertion that Chad's state thinks and acts on deeply held and morally focused principles, and that it is exceptional in the way it does this, challenges the misrecognition that has been afforded it. The intervention is read as an assertion of state agency in a bid for recognition and is seen to be "politically beneficial"[8] for the status of the Chadian state on the global stage. People believe that their state is more respected[9] following the intervention and that they can now "proudly claim to be Chadians".[10]

Yet, the discourse is uncannily similar to the French descriptions of its own intervention: the 'humanist duty', the focus on 'human rights', 'freedom and liberty' and the emphasis of being 'the first' all echo discourses about France's 'singular responsibility' to triumph over 'terrorism, intolerance and fanaticism'. If there is pride in Chad's ability to act on the international stage, it appears to be shaped around its capacity to 'speak proper French'.

The pride is motivated by a rejection of misrecognition, but within the new discourse were hints of anxiety, indications perhaps of further alienation and misrecognition. Speaking of the consequences of the war, for example, a respondent mentioned a wider sense of "abandonment" by the international community. People believe that Chad has "thrown away its meagre resources"[11] to fund the intervention while receiving no subsequent assistance from its partners. In trying to appear grand and respectable on the global stage, Chad was caught up with its reality as a poor nation. The illusion of grandeur ultimately made the state appear void and hollow in the eyes of its own citizens, as the following comment reflects:

> 'Foreigners see and represent Chadians through war. They think all we know to do is to wage wars, that we are a brutal and a violent nation. It's true that we went to Mali because we are compassionate, and we want to save them. But the image that is reflected is war and violence.'[12]

It therefore appears possible that the struggle for recognition, grounded in a grammar of alienation, leads to further misrecognition as the Chadian state becomes estranged from itself, somehow unable to project itself as "compassionate", seen instead as "brutal and violent". Chadians are uncertain that their discourse is reflected back from the international community, and this is a source of unease.

Our second case study, to which we now turn, goes more deeply into the unease generated by attempts to 'speak proper French'. In a discussion of state buildings in Côte d'Ivoire, we read a similar path of alienation leading to further misrecognition as the consequence of another post-colonial state 'speaking proper French'.

## Ivoirian architecture: from spectacle to misrecognition

From the first days of independence, Côte d'Ivoire's political elites created architecture to depict the state as a recognisable, active agent. The country's founding president, Félix



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Houphouët-Boigny, was famous for his ambitious construction projects in Abidjan, the capital city he inherited.[13] The central Plateau district was redeveloped to house a series of stunning modernist masterpieces, including a new presidential palace (built on the site of the colonial governor's headquarters within a year of independence), the Cité Administrative (five skyscrapers to house the country's government departments), a striking indoor marketplace called La Pyramide and a new cathedral. He lavished millions of francs on a series of flagship schools, universities and luxury hotels. In an even more audacious reframing of the physical state, in 1983, he moved the capital to the modest town of Yamoussoukro, where he built enormous new government buildings, a peace foundation, another presidential palace overlooking a lake filled with crocodiles, more luxury hotels and the world's largest Catholic basilica.

This dramatic, concrete re-creation of the Ivoirian state appeared to make a strong bid for recognition, both domestically and internationally. Independence and agency were expressed in bold new shapes on monumental scales that replaced old colonial structures. Visually impressive structures described potency and confidence, both to citizens at home and to the world at large. As if to reinforce this, the old colonial capital in Grand Bassam, some 30 km east of Abidjan, was left to rot, its late 19th-century buildings weed-covered and crumbling, exhibited to tourists as evidence of a ruined civilisation.

However, we argue that this architectural state embodiment hints at an alienation that stems from its origins and purpose, and is manifest in the deeply rooted unease it provokes in the minds of citizens. From the perspective of its relationships in the world, Ivoirian state architecture is not an assertion of a self-state, of state agency, but one of emulation driven by a desire to impress outsiders. It is a representation of Ivoirian attempts to 'speak proper French'.

Notably, virtually all Houphouët-Boigny's architectural icons were designed by European architects; many were made using imported materials and labour; some were explicitly designed to copy or compete with famous foreign buildings. The Basilique de Notre Dame de la Paix in Yamoussoukro is the pre-eminent example of a building designed to express self-confidence but with an anxious eye on emulation of, and acceptance by, others. It was designed by Pierre Fakhoury, a Lebanese-Ivoirian architect, with a classical design of pillars and dome that mimic St Peter's in Rome. It is touted as the largest Catholic basilica in the world.[14] The building was made with imported materials, including stained glass from France, chair leather from Italy and a sound system from the US. Reputedly, the only local material used was the sand to mix the cement (Hiltzik, 1989). Construction was estimated to have doubled the national debt (McGovern, 2011: 11). The Pope was persuaded to preside over its dedication, agreeing to do so on the condition that a public hospital be added to the complex. Elleh (2002: 159–60) writes of the Basilique that it 'is primarily a façade designed to demonstrate the extent to which the president was able to accept his former colonizers' culture'. Houphouët-Boigny was indeed one of the most francophone of the African leaders, well known for his 'affection for France and Europe' and, alongside Leopold Senghor of Senegal, for 'pronouncements in favor of the French' (Alalade, 1979: 122). For Elleh, the building reifies the great distance between Houphouët-Boigny, properly assimilated and properly 'French', and his Ivoirian compatriots – rather like Fanon's Antillean returning to Martinique talking of the opera.

Much of the Ivorian architecture is described in comparison with the West. Ivorian citizens proudly refer to Abidjan, whose dramatic skyline is filled with high-modernist



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buildings, as a 'little Manhattan' (Diabaté, 2021: 218) and its central presidential palace as a 'petit Versailles' (Yahmed and Houstin, 2017: 21). The towers of the Cité Administrative (designed by Louis Renard and Jean Sémichon) jostle with the dramatic outlines of La Pyramide (designed by Rinaldo Olivieri) and the Cathedral of Saint Paul (designed by Aldo Spirito) – all best observed from the Hôtel Ivoire, which, according to Hertz et al (2015: 344), is 'one of the most luxurious hotels in sub-Saharan Africa' (designed by Heinz Fenchel, Thomas Leitersdorf and William Pereira).[15] The hotel is used by wealthy tourists and as a venue for state functions where foreign diplomats and investors are often entertained. The stunning views of the city across the Ebrié Lagoon offered to visitors reinforce the notion of an extraverted state (Bayart, 2000) being served up for foreign admiration.

These buildings were at the forefront of architectural modernism, in tune with contemporary international architecture movements (Koffi, 2021: 213), a 'living model' of the evolution of modern architecture.[16] They were touted as the biggest, the most luxurious and the most innovative; they were meant to put Côte d'Ivoire on the map, both architecturally and politically. Local accounts of the achievement are often supported by foreign sources – from the Pope's blessing (Fraternité-Matin, 1990b) to the much-quoted French President Chirac's opinion that people who criticise the Basilique are small-minded, mediocre and in the business of negating culture, civilisation and faith (Fraternité-Matin, 1990a: 16–17). It is as though the buildings must be evaluated through the eyes of the wider world rather than as locally derived self-expressions.

This perspective of state buildings in relation to the world was supported by Abidjan residents we spoke to. In our FGDs, people often saw and evaluated them through comparison. One feature of this was the way people referred to their state buildings in a detached way as "perfect"[17] or "magnificent",[18] "architecture but also art".[19] They viewed the buildings as ideal, from a distance. One man, in a conversation about the Basilique, said: "I am always struck, fascinated, by the quality of work … it is an actual architectural masterpiece … it is impressive for an African country to succeed in such a work."[20] A student told us about a visit to the Hotel le Parlementaire in Yamoussoukro: "I thought maybe I was in London or in other countries because I couldn't imagine that in my own country."[21] A civil servant said of the Basilique: "It is impressive for an African country to succeed in such a work."[22] Always, there was this external measurement to hold the architecture against: the more the buildings could be compared to European standards, the better. Turning this around, the buildings were also seen to provoke admiration and envy among visitors, particularly from other West African countries. A group of students talked about visitors from Mali and Burkina Faso being "blown away" or "silenced" by Ivoirian architecture.[23] Their value often appeared to lie at least as much in the way they were evaluated by others as by Ivoirians themselves. The more Ivorians perceived these buildings to match European standards, the more they felt admired by other Africans. As Fanon (2008: 9) would have said: 'the colonised is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards'.

However, there was an anxiety attached to this pride. The admiration appeared brittle and barely covered a fear that the state and its buildings are "a masquerade".[24] Citizens experienced the state in its buildings as extraordinary, as if of another world. At the same time, the state was opaque and illegible: its prosaic workings were hidden behind structures designed to provoke wonder and inhibit engagement. This combination produced a sense of fragility: the state might be an empty shell.


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Take this story, told in every single FGD, about the origins of the Presidential Palace in Abidjan, a building designed by an all-European team led by Pierre Dufau and completed between 1955 and 1962:

> 'I heard, well, it's not checked because everybody talks about it and it's not from today … that the CI [Côte d'Ivoire] Presidential Palace does not belong to Côte d'Ivoire: the Presidential Palace is rented from the French.… This is not pretty to see in your own country.'
>
> 'Does what is in Abidjan belong to us? Because I see that [even] the Presidential Palace itself does not belong to us. What proof is there?'
>
> 'What is in Plateau, they say, is not for Côte d'Ivoire because it is rented. The state must also build its own palace.'[25]

The story was told in the same way everywhere we went; it had the status of a horrible rumour that was half believed and half denied. If true, people seemed to suggest, it would be a terrible admission of state failure.

Scratching at the surface of other state buildings revealed more horror stories. A group of elders talked about La Pyramide, "one of the most beautiful buildings in history, and today it is abandoned.… There are trees that have grown in the roof and people have been asked to evacuate [it] … it's shocking when you walk by."[26] Another man agreed, adding his thoughts on the Cité Administrative: "From the outside you can see, but when you get in there it's just bullshit."[27] Some of Abidjan's bridges that join Plateau to the rest of the city – the subject of great pride for their extraordinariness – were rumoured to now be unsafe. One man said: "Currently, the iron there, everything is rotten."[28] He described how his heart beat faster with fear when he crossed and how he thinks about what lies in the structure's foundations: "To sink the pillars, we say it's our neighbours the Burkinabe who came, but they all died there."[29] In another group a woman described how Yamoussoukro 'is abandoned on all levels, the roads are degraded, there are no streets … there are some schools that are abandoned. There is also the House of Members [accommodation for MPs] which is abandoned, and there is also the parliament, which is abandoned'.[30]

The popular discourse around Côte d'Ivoire's state buildings sounds uncannily like Fanon's man returning from France able only to speak French, knowing everything. However, popular opinion, at first apparently impressed, is on the lookout for missteps and soon spots the inconsistencies and failures. It becomes apparent that Houphouët-Boigny's state spectacle, his operatics, might be hollow. The story gets around fast. It catches not only the ambivalence towards those who 'speak French', the admiration it attracts, but also the sense of its fakery, its lack of substance.

In the desire to impress the outside world, Côte d'Ivoire's state is embodied by architecture that describes a 'masquerade'; it is built on misrecognition. In making buildings that 'speak proper French', the state has won not real recognition from the wider world but a recognition only of an effort to adopt and emulate, to look like a 'little Manhattan' or a 'petit Versailles'. This is not to underestimate Côte d'Ivoire's remarkable architectural feat; however, it is to question the degree to which it has established a sense of a state with agency defined on its own terms. Citizens see this. The buildings feel distant, opaque, other. On the surface, the state they embody



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appears extraordinary, but under the surface, it is weed-ridden, rotten, abandoned, described in ways that appear closer to images of colonial Grand Bassam's decay. People's astonishment at the extraordinary feat of such a building programme, as well as its lack of solidity, is a clear indication that the state is only able to 'speak proper French' instead of speaking 'proper Ivoirian'.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have used Fanon's descriptions of the relationship between language, alienation and struggles for recognition to see how misrecognition plays out in post-colonial contexts. We have shown how colonial alienation that describes African states in physical, animalistic terms continues to drive their pursuit of international recognition and how this is characterised by attempts to live up to Western norms of how states look and act. For Chad and Côte d'Ivoire, the agency displayed in this pursuit appears to be constrained within existing structures of what such norms are or should be. The images and acts they have produced – a complex military intervention and a bold architectural programme – are grand and significant. Yet, they appear also hollow, expressions of statehood within others' parameters, a kind of acting by numbers. We saw this through the eyes of citizens who can at once applaud the spectacles they produce and express an understanding of them as hollow. The resulting uneasiness suggests citizens' perceptions of states that are not properly recognised and remain uncomfortable in themselves.

The misrecognition resulting from state architecture in Côte d'Ivoire and military intervention in Chad also speaks about the dependency between French and francophone African elites. The desire of Chadian and Ivorian elites to emulate and impress only reinforces the narrative on Franc-Afrique, which describes France's ongoing influence on its former African colonies, especially through the control of their monetary policies through the CFA Franc and their tendency towards military interventionism. Both have come under strong challenge in recent years. Popular demonstrations in the streets of Bamako, Niamey and Ouagadougou, reinforced by anti-French military regimes that came to power through coups d'etat against France's protégés, brutally put an end to France's military presence in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. These developments point to a weakening of ties between France and some of its former colonies, suggesting that Franc-Afrique is becoming 'unattractive' (Taylor, 2010). Chasing recognition by 'speaking proper French' may become less attractive too.

### Notes

[1] One example is Guinea, formerly a French colonial possession that, at independence, refused to join the post-independence French zone of influence. Its first president, Ahmed Sékou Touré, publicly turned his back on France and was punished by the withdrawal of financial support (Cruise O'Brien, 2003).

[2] Focus group with professional women, Doba, 24 May 2019.

[3] Focus group with professional women, Doba, 24 May 2019.

[4] Focus group with students, N'Djamena, 23 August 2019.

[5] Focus group with students, Abeche, 4 May 2018. ECOWAS members are Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.

[6] Focus group with students, Abeche, 4 May 2018.



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[7] Focus group with entrepreneurs, Abeche, 4 August 2019. Our interviewee is referring here to General De Gaulle's infamous speech on 18 June 1940 from the British Broadcasting Corporation in London to the French people, calling on them to resist German invasion during the Second World War, calling for La France Libre. Chad was the first French colony to respond to the call.
[8] Focus group with young entrepreneurs, N'Djamena, 28 August 2019.
[9] Focus group with professionals, Abeche, 4 August 2019.
[10] Focus group with young entrepreneurs, N'Djamena, 28 August 2019.
[11] Focus group with youth church leaders, Doba, 20 May 2019.
[12] Focus group with students, Abeche, 4 May 2018.
[13] This building project, described by Guillaume Koffi (2021: 213) as a 'rapid an extraverted growth', was achieved during Côte d'Ivoire's cocoa-fuelled 'economic miracle' (Bamba, 2016).
[14] A display in the basilica museum shows its size relative to Notre Dame and Sacre Coeur in Paris (both of which it could swallow easily), as well as its proportions in relation to St Peter's, which it outdoes on height.
[15] All of these iconic buildings were designed by foreign architects: Renard and Sémichon were French, Olivieri and Spirito were Italian, Fenchel and Leitersdorf were Israeli, and Pereira was American. The country's dependence on foreign architects continues: 'Guillaume Koffi (cabinet Koffi & Diabaté) and Yolande Doukouré (DSY Architects), estimate "that barely 5% of the constructions erected in the cities of Côte d'Ivoire are the work of local architects"' (Vermeil, 2021).
[16] The quote is from the state newspaper's account of the president's visit to St Paul's during the early stages of the building work in 1984, which noted that it coincided with a visit of 20 US university representatives who came to see a 'living model' of the evolution of modern architecture (Fraternité Matin, 1984: 3).
[17] Focus group with women, Abidjan, 8 January 2020.
[18] Focus group with public sector workers, Abidjan, 20 June 2019.
[19] Focus group with private sector workers, Abidjan, 9 August 2019.
[20] Focus group with public sector workers, Abidjan, 20 June 2019.
[21] Focus group with students, Abidjan, 29 March 2019.
[22] Focus group with public sector workers, Abidjan, 20 June 2019.
[23] Focus group with students, Abidjan, 29 March 2019.
[24] Focus group with self-employed workers, Abidjan, 19 June 2019.
[25] Focus group with private sector workers, Abidjan, 9 August 2019.
[26] Focus group with elders, Abidjan, 21 January 2020.
[27] Focus group with elders, Abidjan, 21 January 2020.
[28] Focus group with teachers, Abidjan, 8 August 2019.
[29] Focus group with teachers, Abidjan, 8 August 2019.
[30] Focus group with private sector workers, Abidjan, 9 August 2019.

**Funding**

This article is based on research funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 772070).

**Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.


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