

Europe Has Developed Thanks to Africa's Wealth

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"You must know a great fighter, he is a personality in his country" – the French worker of North African origin who introduced him to me told me. It was rigorously true. For many years Mamadou Mansaré has embodied the voice of the Guinean workers' movement in the National Confederation of Guinean Workers (CNTG). We are at an obligatory stop in French trade unionism: a mansion in the middle of a natural habitat given to the Nazi occupants to be used as a brothel, and that the first resisters who entered Paris with their rifles took away from their former owners, and then converted it into a training centre for class struggle.

Because internationalism is acts and not words, Mansaré was being gratuitously hosted by the CGT, "the union whose comrades were by my side in my country, during the gun battles". He was undergoing medical treatment. His pleasant voice did not allow us to guess that long trajectory in the front line of battle. Despite his fragile state of health, we agreed to an interview that finally lasted more than two hours. We barely noticed.

Mansaré had recently returned to Guinea. And only a few days ago he left us, on October 6. He was 64 years old and fought until the last moment for the humble of that plundered continent. His return is a message for the new generations: a whole life dedicated to social combat is worth living. Chapeau bas, monsieur !

We leave you with this interview published as a tribute. In it, Mansaré breaks into a thousand pieces the story of national history based on the work of a few individuals, restores the true history of African Independence and points out without cover those responsible for this deadly capitalist machinery.

Alex Anfruns: How did Guinea's independence come about?



Mamadou Mansaré: Guinea gained its independence on 2 October 1958. It was the first country of the French colonial empire to say "No" and to obtain independence in a

referendum. That “No” of September 28 was perceived by De Gaulle and the whole West as a snub. My country had to pay a high price for having made this choice, for having said that “we prefer freedom in poverty to opulence in slavery”.

AA: How important is Guinea in the region?

MM: Guinea is the third largest bauxite producer after Australia, but it is the largest reserve in the world. And they are also quality reserves. We have the best iron, with extraordinary deposits. We have uranium, gold, diamonds, large expanses of arable land, our waters are abundant with fish... It is said that Guinea is the “Water Tower” of Africa, because all the great rivers of West Africa have their origin in Guinea. We have the Senegal River, the Niger River and the Gambia River, which originate in Guinea. It is as if we were talking about the importance of the Nile for Egypt.

AA: Guinea was on the right path to development. What happened then?

MM: What happened is that France withdrew all its teachers, destroyed all the documentation of the colonial administration, including our birth certificates that were burned. They left us nothing. Those who came to replace them to teach us in Guinea were Russian, Bulgarian, Haitian and Dahomey teachers – at that time already called Beninese. So I was educated by Russian professors throughout my cycle, until I graduated from university. Our first president, Sékou Touré, came from the union that made the country independent. He was also a deep Pan-Africanist.

AA: In the context of the “wave of independence”, what were the relations between the different liberation movements in West Africa?

MM: The company in which I worked, the SBK (Société de Bauxite de Kindia), was created especially to reimburse the Russians for the weapons that the Russians and other Soviet bloc countries sent to us for use in the various national liberation movements.

Our first contribution was to the FLN in Algeria. The weapons that arrived in Guinea passed through Bamako and then through the desert to finally deliver them to Boumédienne.

Then there was the liberation movement of the Portuguese-speaking countries, with Guinea Bissau very close to us. It was our own troops who fought there.

AA: What kind of cooperation was there?

MM: It was Guinea that provided the aid to Guinea Bissau. The weapons were bought from the Soviet bloc, landed in the port of Conakry, and then transported by road. The PAIGC, which had been formed by Amilcar Cabral, was based in Guinea. PAIGC combatants were trained in Guinea by the Guinean army and Cuban teachers, because in the 1960s there was military and health cooperation between Guinea and Cuba. The first combined intervention of both was in the Congo, where Guinean and Cuban troops were found. Che Guevara had gone to the Congo to help the Lumumbista movement in April 1965. But it was too late. That failure still explains today the current destabilization of the Congo.

PAIGC fighters were not only trained in Conakry, they were also given accommodation. Amilcar Cabral, Nino Vieira and the entire staff were there. And our troops also disguised themselves as PAIGC fighters to fight alongside them.

AA: In that unequal balance of power with the colonial powers, Pan-African unity was necessary...

MM: Yes, the Portuguese first attacked Guinea and then assassinated Cabral on January 20, 1973. On November 22, 1970, ships arrived in Guinea that landed mercenaries to carry out a coup d'état, but it failed. All the people participated in its defeat because everyone was obliged to have a militia formation. By the time we graduated from university, we had all completed a year of military training. We joined the company, but in case we were needed, if a war was declared we had to be prepared.

Fortunately, the war never happened. There were attacks, such as the incursion of mercenaries from Sierra Leone who came to attack us in 2000. But it only took us a month, we threw them out!

Then we had Angola. The first Angolan president was Agostinho Neto. He was very popular, he did his military training in Guinea. Weapons were also transported in the same way from Guinea to Angola.

AA: How do you explain this important welcome to Pan-African leaders in Guinea?

MM: Let us remember the coup d'état against the President of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah. When that coup took place, we welcomed Nkrumah to Guinea. He was even appointed co-president of Guinea! Since independence, Guinea has been a country that has really wanted this unity. First we started by bringing together Guinea, Mali and Ghana. But it didn't work in Mali, because of the coup against Modibo Keita. Then unity was also impeded by the dismissal of Nkrumah. In fact, Guinea is the only one of the three countries that was able to take on the Pan-African task.

The South African leader of the African National Congress (ANC) Thabo Mbeki, as well as President Nelson Mandela, completed their training in our country. Mandela's first passport was Guinean! It was thanks to his Guinean diplomatic passports that all these leaders mentioned were able to travel, whether from Angola, Zambia, Zimbabwe as Robert Mugabe or Mozambique as their first president Samora Machel from 1975 to 1986. Machel led his country to independence after a war of liberation against the Portuguese. After his death, his wife Graça Machel became the First Lady of South Africa at the second marriage to Nelson Mandela in 1998.

All these countries received aid from the Guinean Government through bauxite mining companies. We sent our bauxite via Russian ships to Ukraine. There was a factory that was built especially for our bauxite. The Nikolaev company was the base on which today's Russal group was founded. It is a large mining group, but during the period of the Soviet empire, Nikolaev belonged to the state. Nikolaev was built especially to transform bauxite into alumina and pay off the debt to the Soviet bloc: the weapons, the teachers, the doctors who sent us, as well as the infrastructure we were building.

AA: Those efforts of pan-African unity were subjected to containment by the colonial powers. It is hard to imagine that Guinea, the heart of the resistance, could be saved from the storm. How did they proceed?

MM: As I said, Guinea has made a significant contribution to the liberation of the other West African countries. That is why it has been the victim of many coups d'état. In some writings,

we can read that Sékou Touré was a dictator, a bloodthirsty man, who killed this and that... As always, it is very easy to distort reality by those who have the power of communication.

Let's see how Françafrique was under De Gaulle, with the businesses of the Foccart network. They themselves have recognized all the coups d'état they organized in Guinea. They admitted to being behind so many coup attempts... but they did not succeed. Never. Until the natural death of President Sékou Touré, no coup d'état succeeded... because his people were with him!

AA: How did you get involved in the union?

MM: At that time everyone was organized. When a young man finished his studies, he didn't have to look for three feet for the cat, but simply started to work. Automatically and whatever his level was. You could choose between three companies. When I graduated from college, I chose SBK. I said to myself, "Well, if this company is paying our debt, I'd rather work there than at CBG, which serves the American imperialists of Alcan (Alcoa and Rio Tinto). I made my own decision.

The union played a very important role, at least for me, in raising awareness among the black African population. It was the first to begin to explain the injustices we were suffering. The West has never acknowledged the black genocide! One can hardly imagine what the triangular traffic between Africa and Europe is like. America alone, the "slave trade", represents more than 200 million deaths. In Nantes there is a memorial with all the names of the captains of the ships that took part in that "slave trade". Blacks used to be put on ships in Africa... And from then on, they were distributed and sold like wild animals. Women were separated...

Under that system alone, 200 million people died. Isn't that genocide, not to mention the blacks who died in America! Not to mention those who died in the raids! And how many Africans died just because of the rubber harvest, Michelin companies...? Isn't it colonization, isn't it genocide?

If Europe has developed, it is thanks to the richness of Africa. Today we are told that we are immigrants. The colonialists came and imposed their law on us. They have taken the wealth of our continent. They don't need a visa, they continue to loot us!

AA: You say that companies from imperialist countries were also present to exploit Guinea's resources. Can you go deeper into that?

MM: Yes, at the time of Sékou Touré there was the CBG, the Compagnie de Bauxite de Guinée, of which 45% belonged to the Guinean state and 55% to the Alcan group. There was Pechiney, a French group in Fria. It is the first alumina plant in Africa, built by the French. After the death of Sékou Touré at the time of Lassana Conté, it was sold to the Americans. Today, this factory belongs to the Russal group.

Let's compare the price of bauxite, for example, with the price of aluminum, which is the final element of bauxite...It's with aluminum that we make cans, flasks, etc. When you compare the price of a ton of aluminum and a ton of bauxite, it's the difference between a stream and an ocean! The maximum they'll give you is maybe \$28 or \$30 for a ton of bauxite. While aluminum reaches up to \$2,000 or \$3,000 per ton.

AA: In the 1960s, groups of countries in the South came together to defend their economic

rights, their sovereignty over the price of raw materials...

MM: Yes, the case of bauxite in Guinea is an example of this. At the time of the First Republic, it was a Guinean who held that position. But everything stopped after the death of the President. They wanted to follow the example of OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries), do the same to regulate the price of bauxite. But the mining multinationals are very powerful and it was not possible. Today, those multinationals are Alcan (Alcoa and Rio Tinto), Vale, Russal, the Chinese... They come and take control of the concessions. There is no difference between them, but they copy each other.

AA: How does concessions work?

MM: To attract multinationals to your country, a country is forced to make many concessions. For example, let's say that a country offers a concession of 20,000 dollars and the multinational answers "it's too much, I can't pay more than 10,000". Then the government says: "Do you want me to exempt you from port taxes for ten years? You will not pay income taxes. Your expatriates will not contribute to social security"... Well, that's a lot of taxes! In the meantime, the multinational uses the roads, the rivers, it pollutes with its various products! People and communities are deprived of the lands they occupied since their ancestors. And as compensation, they are not given any other working tool.

Let's say that two countries have the same mineral, for example. Well, one country considers that it should give all those facilities to attract a multinational, because the neighboring country would also like it to come. Everyone wants him to come. So the multinational decides according to who has the best ore and the best advantages they offer. So Africa is fighting itself!

AA: How can one escape this vicious circle?

MM: Former South African President Thabo Mbeki's report on illicit financial flows shows that the exemptions that countries granted multinational mining companies from various taxes were 10 times greater than the bilateral aid provided by Western countries.

Instead of providing us with this "aid", our different countries could agree on a single, identical mining code, imposing the same requirements on the multinationals. In that case, there would no longer be competition between African countries.

AA: Today countries like the United States or France are very present in Africa. For example, with cooperation programmes in the "fight against corruption". Are these their real objectives?

MM: Ridiculousness doesn't kill! Instead of sending NGOs... may they help us recover our funds through mining tax havens! New Jersey is a mining tax haven. Toronto, in Canada, is a hub! The stock exchanges in England and Singapore are also centres of operations!

In Europe they have brought out a whole arsenal to fight against these tax havens from the financial point of view. But they never talk about mining tax havens. What are mining companies doing? They are all recovering their money in the places I have just mentioned. Even Chinese companies are trading in New Jersey. Everything they steal, they take there to launder, to make it clean money. We don't even know how much real tonnage of ore is mined in our countries!

If you look at the map of Guinea, you can find Boké, next to the port and Guinea Bissau. The border near Boké was precisely where the main battlefields were located during the fight against the Portuguese army... The whole area of Boké is very rich in bauxite. Today, there are more than fifty multinationals of all nationalities in that small area of Boké-Boffa. Whether they are Chinese, Australian, Russian or American multinationals... Imagine the pressure that exists in my country! And if you look at the population, it's very poor! So when I hear about NGOs... Why don't they investigate where wealth goes?

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