

Analysis of “Saison Africa” in France: Background, Features and Impact

Rui Zhang¹

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, Hubei 430070, China

ABSTRACT

Since becoming President of France in 2017, Macron has been advocating a common future for France and Africa as well as developing Franco-African relations on an equal footing. The further improvement and reshaping of Franco-African relations remain a priority of Macron’s second presidential term. Furthermore, Macron’s administration attaches particular importance to Franco-African cultural relations, hoping to bring the two parties closer together with cultural diplomacy and paving the way for Franco-African relations by putting aside prejudice and restoring trust. It is in this context that *Saison Africa 2020* (Africa2020 Season), with France as the sponsor and Africa as the center, came into being to serve this vision. With large scale, long duration and high cost, the Season shows a full picture of Africa, highlighting African youth and women groups. It lays a particular emphasis on the role of education and redefines the way that Africa has been taught in France. The *Saison Africa 2020* reflects the pan-African and macro-cultural characteristics of Macron’s government’s cultural diplomacy with Africa. Furthermore, the “culture” connotation has been broadened with a bias towards cultural and creative industries, and in terms of target groups, special attention has been given to young Africans, who are expected to play a central role in strengthening Franco-African cooperation and achieving the common future.

Keywords: *Saison Africa 2020, Franco-African relations, cultural diplomacy, Ouagadougou speech, Emmanuel Macron.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since becoming President of France in 2017, Emmanuel Macron has visited African countries 19 times, covering the entire regions in Africa. In fact, the Macron’s government has always attached importance to Africa and given Africa priority in its foreign policy. Reshaping the relationship between France and Africa is his political ambition. In consideration of France’s profound influence on Africa’s language and culture during the colonial period, Macron attaches particular importance to Franco-African cultural relations, hoping to bring the two parties closer together with cultural diplomacy and paving the way for Franco-African relations by putting aside prejudice, restoring trust and building a “common future”. It is in this context that the grand cultural event *Saison Africa 2020* (Africa2020 Season) came into being to serve this vision. After more than three years of preparation, *Saison Africa 2020* officially opened in

December 2020, postponed due to COVID-19. The activities covered a wide range of domains and spanned a long period. On September 30, 2021, the ten-month *Saison Africa 2020* came to an end in France.

This cultural event concept, aimed at promoting French society’s understanding of contemporary Africa as part of his plan to reshape Franco-African relations, was first announced by Macron during his state visit to Burkina Faso in 2017. Macron hopes to use this multi-disciplinary and pan-African large-scale cultural project to eliminate French society’s stereotypes about Africa, which he regards as “chains of the past” (*chaînes du passé*)¹, which in turn cause the African continent to feel uncomfortable with French society. Renewing the Franco-African relationship requires first getting

1. Saison AFRICA2020 official information brochure, <https://www.pro.institutfrancais.com/sites/default/files/medias/documents/dossier-de-presse-africa2020.pdf>, p.6.

out of this “mutual ignorance that leads to all sorts of misunderstandings”², and France wanted to take the first step of change.

2. ORGANIZATIONAL FORM AND THEMES OF THE SAISON AFRICA 2020

The cultural event *Saison Africa 2020* was launched by France, inviting 54 countries on the African continent to come to France to make Africa's voice heard, to tell the story of Africa today in their own words and forms, and to show the vitality and richness of Africa. In fact, the idea of this cultural event was originally proposed by Macron's “African Think Tank” - Presidential Council for Africa (*Conseil présidentiel pour l'Afrique*)³. After this initiative was adopted, Macron announced his desire to hold a season of African cultures in France during his visit to Burkina Faso in November 2017. The *Saison Africa 2020* came into being while Macron expressed his sincerity in wanting to open a new chapter in Franco-African relations.

This “extraordinary” cultural season is jointly conducted by French Institute (*Institut Français*) and Ministry of National Education, Youth and Sports (*Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports*), under the direction of the French Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs. French Development Agency (*Agence Française de Développement, AFD*) with some French and African companies and foundations sponsors the *Saison Africa 2020* activities, among which French and African enterprises provide more than half of the financial support. French Institute is responsible for the operational implementation including the coordination and organization of all activities of *Saison Africa 2020*, and the cultural programs are jointly created by indigenous African professional in collaboration with French agencies.

In order to bring the event closer to the French people and facilitate the French people to get closer to Africa, the *Saison Africa 2020* has set up a total

of 15 Headquarters (HQ) across France. Each HQ is a small, temporary pan-African cultural center that can be used to host various types of activities, such as exhibitions, performances, concerts, film screenings, roundtables, creative workshops, etc, presenting a series of cultural activities in response to the theme of *Saison Africa 2020* within a few weeks.

President Macron invited Senegalese, cultural engineering expert N'Goné Fall, to serve as the Season's Commissioner-General so as to ensure the authentic African flavor of the event. N'Goné Fall then formed a core event planning team, which is a fully African team with diverse backgrounds. The themes of *Saison Africa 2020* are generated through the collective wisdom of the team.

The themes of *Saison Africa 2020* are built around the major challenges that Africa is facing in the 21st century, and ultimately divided into 5 core themes and 13 sub-themes: 1) Augmented orality: Dissemination of knowledge, social media, technological innovations; 2) Economy and Fabulation: Redistribution of resources, financial flows, economic emancipation; 3) Archiving of imaginary stories: History, memory, archives; 4) Fiction and (un)authorized movements: Circulation of people, ideas and goods, notion territory; 5) Systems of disobedience: Political consciousness and movements, citizenship.⁴ The themes of *Saison Africa 2020* cover a wide range of fields, and the Season focuses on innovation in the arts, sciences, technology, entrepreneurship and the economy. All the sectors of innovation are divided into 3 categories and 13 disciplinary fields by the commission: A) Culture & ideas (Visual arts, Performing arts, Film, Literature, Debates); B) Lifestyle (Gastronomy, Fashion, Design, Architecture, Urban sports); C) Research & economy (Science, Technology, Entrepreneurship and sustainable development).⁵

N'Goné Fall, the Commissioner-General, defined the *Saison Africa 2020* as an “invitation to (the French) to look at and understand the world from an African perspective”⁶. The event highlights the key word “innovation” in African art, science,

2. Original expression in French is “une méconnaissance mutuelle qui conduit à toutes les incompréhensions”, *Saison AFRICA2020*, p.6.

3. After Macron took office in 2017, he set up the Presidential Council for Africa, which is directly under the president and is responsible for providing advice to the president on African policies. The council is not a government department, and the team members are all young and middle-aged “Africa experts” selected from civil society.

4. *Saison AFRICA2020* official information brochure, pp.18-21. <https://www.saisonafrica2020.com/en/editorial>

5. *Saison AFRICA2020* official information brochure, p.22, <https://www.saisonafrica2020.com/en/disciplinary-fields>

6. Consulate General of France in New York, “*Saison Africa 2020* : une invitation à regarder et comprendre le monde d'un point de vue africain”, <https://newyork.consulfrance.org/saison-africa2020-une-invitation-a-regarder-et-comprendre-le-monde-d-un-point>

technology, entrepreneurship and economy, introducing a contemporary Africa and its creativity to French society.

3. MAIN FEATURES OF THE SAISON AFRICA 2020

The *Saison Africa 2020* lasted for 10 months, held more than 1,500 events in 210 cities in all 13 regions and 4 overseas French territories, and attracted more than 4 million spectators. A total of 200 African agencies and 183 French agencies participated in it, and the Season had 489 partner organizations in Africa and 422 event partners in France.⁷ It is an unprecedented and extraordinary African cultural Season.

For Macron, he hopes that the relationship between France and the African continent should no longer be based on past prejudices. Therefore, the *Saison Africa 2020* is an opportunity to deconstruct those outdated ways of looking at Africa by showing French audiences an artistic and creative continent. Based on this purpose, the content presented by this grand cultural event must involve the entire Africa and all aspects of African society. Therefore, since the beginning of the preparation of the *Saison Africa 2020*, “entire Africa” and “all aspects” have been the two most fundamental principles.

3.1 Revealing an All-round Africa

In fact, the design concept of the *Saison Africa 2020* is inspired by the spirit of Pan-Africanism based on the common African ideal⁸. Presenting the entirety of Africa (not just French-speaking Africa) is a highlight of this cultural season. The pan-African feature is well reflected from the diverse cultural background of five core members of planning team to the cultural diversity of the African art teams participating in the *Saison Africa 2020*. These five members come from five different countries - Senegal, Cameroon, South Africa, Nigeria, and Egypt - belonging to four different regions in Africa, and they are people of different ages groups. Furthermore, their different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives have laid a diverse foundation for the *Saison Africa 2020*.

7. The statistics is compiled by the article author from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and French Institute official websites, the *Saison Africa 2020* brochure, and its closing dinner speech.

8. N’Goné Fall, “Edito: L’esprit de la Saison Africa2020”, <https://www.saisonafrika2020.com/fr/edito>.

On the other hand, “headquarter” (HQ) is one of the prominent features of the *Saison Africa 2020*. Each HQ is jointly established by artist teams from Africa and France. There are 24 African artist teams in 15 HQ, from 18 different African countries, which span North Africa, West Africa, Central Africa, East Africa and South Africa, representing the entire African continent geographically. In addition, one-third of the 24 African teams are not former French colonies, and one-quarter are not French-speaking countries. These teams represent quite well the diversity of African society and culture.

The *Saison Africa 2020* builds content around the common problems faced by 1.2 billion Africans. The first theme - augmented orality - explores the emerging narrative media of the 21st century, such as the Internet, social media and smartphones, how they intervene in the dissemination of knowledge. The second theme - economy and fabulation - explores the issue of economic redistribution in Africa by focusing on the phenomenon of remittances and capital flows in Africa's informal economy. The third theme - archiving of imaginary stories - reflects on the credibility of historical records and the relationship between individuals and history. The fourth theme - fiction and (un)authorised movements - discusses population mobility and immigration issues on the African continent, and focuses on the way how Africans travel today (such as virtual travel). The fifth theme - systems of disobedience - probes into political movements in African history and today's non-violent resistance movements for civil rights to highlight Africa's awakening citizenship.⁹

Obviously, the themes explored in this *Saison Africa 2020* have long surpassed “culture” in a narrow sense, but involved all aspects of Africa's art, politics, economy, society, and technology. Art is its way of expression, thereby presenting a three-dimensional Africa. The event revolves around contemporary African society, highlighting its innovations in all aspects and showcasing an African continent that can prove its potential. In addition, “creating value for art” is also one of the concepts of this Season. In addition to the direct economic benefits brought by creative products, all areas of the cultural industry can be the carriers of Africa's economic transformation. The *Saison Africa 2020* brought together a large number of artists, economists, political scientists and

9. Saison AFRICA2020 official information brochure, pp.18-21.

sociologists, providing an opportunity to reflect on and suggest Africa's art economy¹⁰. At the closing ceremony, N'Goné Fall described the *Saison Africa 2020* as a “laboratory for the production and dissemination of thoughts, ideas and knowledge”¹¹ that was “liberated from the restricted framework of the cultural season.”¹²

3.2 Prioritizing Women and Youth Group in the Spotlight

This *Saison Africa 2020*, covering “entire Africa” and showing “all aspects” of Africa particularly place two groups of people - women and youth – in the spotlight. Women account for more than half of the population of the African continent. How African women view the major challenges of the 21st century and the role they play in African society are the focus of the *Saison Africa 2020*. The “Women Focus” (*Les Focus Femmes*), as one of the three main design axes of the Season, highlights the perspectives and voices of African women through a total of 22 projects¹³ in various forms, such as: film festivals, photography exhibitions, lectures, interviews, etc. All these “Women Focus” projects are designed by African female professionals alongside African female creators, intellectuals, scientists and entrepreneurs. This spontaneous wave of solidarity among African women has spawned such “Women Focus” projects in the fields of art, science, entrepreneurship, etc.

Furthermore, Africa is the continent with the youngest population structure. Youth and vitality are the outstanding characteristics and the biggest advantages of this continent. Undoubtedly, the *Saison Africa 2020* maximizes this feature. The chief planner, N'Goné Fall, believes that this cultural season is very meaningful because it becomes an opportunity for young people to speak

out¹⁴. In addition, the AFD has provided 1.5 million euros in financial support for the Season, including the African Youth Volunteer Program and 20 Franco-African cooperation cultural and/or scientific projects after being selected by the Africa2020 Season programming committee.¹⁵ These cooperation projects, conceived as a Franco-African duo in a co-production approach, took place in various French cultural and university structures (*Forum des images, Centre des monuments nationaux, Cité des sciences et de l'industrie*, etc.). Meanwhile, African Youth Volunteer Program, established by the AFD in cooperation with the French Volunteer Association (*France Volontaires*) recruited 11 young people aged 21-24 from African countries to join in the *Saison Africa 2020*. Young volunteers worked in the cultural structures for 6-12 months and assisted in the organization of the cultural season to learn the operation of the cultural industry in the process and promote communication between the French and African teams, which would lay the foundation for their future careers.¹⁶ The *Saison Africa 2020* not only prioritizes the presence of African youth, but also introduces the vitality and richness of contemporary Africa to young people in France through educational means.

3.3 Placing the Education in the Center

“Redefining the way how the Africa is taught in France and looking at Africa from the perspective of the African continent, to thus completely change people's perceptions” is the goal that the *Saison Africa 2020* has been pursuing since Macron's initiative.¹⁷ France clearly sees the role of education in changing this situation: it has the role of sharing, spreading knowledge and changing concepts. Education is a highlight of the Season, and it is positioned as the core of the cultural season. In the design of the *Saison Africa 2020*, the French Ministry of National Education, Youth and Sport

10. Malick Diawara, “N'Goné Fall: Africa2020, c'est l'Afrique qui parle d'elle-même”, https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/n-gone-fall-africa2020-c-est-l-afrique-qui-parle-d-elle-meme-15-01-2020-2357909_3826.php.

11. Original expression in French is “Un laboratoire de production et de diffusion de pensée, d'idée et de savoir”, c.f. the speech of N'Goné Fall at the closing ceremony of Saison Africa2020 <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2021/09/30/cloture-de-la-saison-africa2020>.

12. Original expression in French is “dégager du cadre restreint d'une saison Culturelle”, *ibid*.

13. French government website, “Season of African Cultures in France: Africa 2020”, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/afrika/cultural-exchanges/season-of-african-cultures-in-france-africa-2020/>

14. Malick Diawara, “N'Goné Fall: Africa2020, c'est l'Afrique qui parle d'elle-même”, https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/n-gone-fall-africa2020-c-est-l-afrique-qui-parle-d-elle-meme-15-01-2020-2357909_3826.php.

15. French Development Agency, <https://www.afd.fr/fr/carte-des-projets/saison-africa-2020-valoriser-diversite-initiatives-culturelles-scientifiques-continent-africain>

16. France Volontaires, <https://www.france-volontaires.org/actualites/de-jeunes-volontaires-africains-acteurs-de-la-saison-africa2020-en-france/>.

17. Speech of Emmanuel Macron at the closing ceremony of Saison Africa2020, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2021/09/30/cloture-de-la-saison-africa2020>.

also steps forward in front of the stage to promote African teaching in schools at all levels, covering all aspects of Africa such as art, culture, science, technology, and sustainable development.

Through the collection of projects, a total of 274 educational projects on understanding Africa in France (including overseas departments) and French schools in Africa have been labeled the *Saison Africa 2020* certification mark. Each project is linked to the school characteristics and paired with African partners. For example, some projects learn about Africa by reading the works of African writers, the pen pal project facilitates understanding each other's life, some environmental protection project explores how to reduce the use of plastics, and there are also projects on the sustainable development issues of global warming and the use of new energy.¹⁸

Besides, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport also provides teaching resources suitable for different stages of learning from kindergarten to high school to cooperate with the *Saison Africa 2020*, to promote the teaching of Africa in schools and to ensure the quality of teaching content. These resource packages are compiled and approved by experts. For example, in kindergartens, the works of seven contemporary African artists are used as exploration materials to guide children to understand the main elements of art; in primary schools, different subjects such as music, mathematics, plastic arts, and physical education have unified suggestions for introducing African elements to teaching; in middle schools, geography, history, art history, music, physical education, media & information and other subjects have added relevant African content that echoes the theme of *Saison Africa 2020* to enrich teaching.¹⁹

It is worth mentioning that the teaching content on African history is actually provided by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In 1964, UNESCO compiled a general history of Africa, examining the history of the entire continent from the emergence of mankind to the present from an African perspective. In 2009, at the request of the African Union, UNESCO produced a teaching material package based on this general history of Africa and

provided it to all the African countries to coordinate the teaching of African history across the African continent. During the *Saison Africa 2020*, UNESCO provided the French Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport with the same teaching material package as for the African Union²⁰.

French schools teach African history based on the content approved by African experts, and designs more teaching activities and content based on this. At the same time, educational projects in cooperation with African artists allow French young people to have a more realistic perspective on Africa and be closer to the views of Africans living in Africa.

4. CONCLUSION

Emmanuel Macron is the first French president born after the African independence movement. As a new generation president who has not experienced France's colonial history in Africa, Macron uses this feature to emphasize the new era he belongs to and wants to get rid of the burden of the colonial period. In his Ouagadougou speech, which reflects his main ideas on Africa policy, Macron used the parallel sentence "I belong to the generation..." (*Je suis d'une génération...*) 7 times to emphasize his and this generation of French people's new attitude towards Africa, expressing the determination to break with the past and strive to develop equal relations between France and Africa.²¹ Since becoming President of France in 2017, Macron has given Africa priority in French diplomatic actions. He attaches particular importance to Africa in terms of culture, hoping to use cultural diplomacy to narrow the distance between the two sides, abandon prejudices, rebuild trust, and thus lay a solid foundation for reshaping France-Africa relations.

With this desire, the *Saison Africa 2020* born out of necessity. Aiming to enhance France society's understanding of contemporary Africa and promote civil dialogue between France and Africa, the *Saison Africa 2020* that sets up under the traditional framework of the French Cultural Season (Year) is a pan-African and multi-

18. Information below is compiled from the *Saison Africa 2020* brochure.

19. Information below is compiled from the official website of Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, <https://eduscol.education.fr/2136/regarder-et-comprendre-le-monde-d-un-point-de-vue-africain>.

20. Malick Diawara, "N'Goné Fall: Africa2020, c'est l'Afrique qui parle d'elle-même", https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/n-gone-fall-africa2020-c-est-l-afrique-qui-parle-d-elle-meme-15-01-2020-2357909_3826.php.

21. Speech of Emmanuel Macron at Ouagadougou University in Burkina Faso on 28th November, 2017, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/11/28/discours-demmanuel-macron-a-luniversite-de-ouagadougou>

disciplinary cultural event that goes beyond traditional cultural activities, involving African art, technology, economy, innovation and entrepreneurship. Creating value for art is one of the main concepts of this cultural season and the Season projects are well designed around it. The *Saison Africa 2020* with France as the sponsor and Africa as the center, is also designed as a platform for participatory learning, so education is the core of this cultural season. In addition, showing the power of African youth and African women is the highlight of this Season. The *Saison Africa 2020* has put the Macron government's cultural policy on Africa into practice, enhanced the dialogue between France and Africa, and strengthened France's understanding of today's Africa. It is the cultural foundation for both sides to bid farewell to the unequal relationship in the past.

As a key action in the Macron government's cultural diplomacy towards Africa, the *Saison Africa 2020* is regarded as a wind vane of France's current cultural policy towards Africa. The Macron government's cultural diplomacy towards Africa reflects the pan-African and macro-cultural characteristics: France attaches importance to developing relations with the entire African continent and strengthening ties and cooperation with non-French-speaking countries in Africa; at the same time, the Macron government practices the concept of macro-culture in its cultural diplomacy towards Africa, broadening the connotation of "culture", and France is now increasingly leaning towards the cultural and creative industries. Moreover, French Institute and French Development Agency (AFD) are the two main participant institutions while France's cultural policy towards Africa emphasizes the joint development in cultural and economic ways. Thus, the cultural and creative industries have become the only choice for France to balance soft power influence and economic diplomacy.

Furthermore, Macron places especially his hopes on young Africans to strengthen Franco-African cooperation and build a common future. He believes that African youth are important participants and promoters of the current and future relations between France and Africa. From the nomination of Presidential Council for Africa, to the choice of his first strategic speech on Africa after taking office, to the special attention paid to the youth group in the *Saison Africa 2020*, to the inclination towards youth issues in Franco-African Summit and European-African Summit in recent years, Macron has shown concern for the African

youth and has high expectation for their central role in strengthening Franco-African cooperation and promoting the bilateral relations into a new chapter to achieve the common future.

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