

The WTO, or how patenting crushes Africans

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Today, Africa's voice is broken from crying out in front of the world's great and good about the disastrous situation of our oppressed continent. Here we suffer doubly: from the vast condescension of the capitalist European powers in the past, and from the systemic inequalities of the international economy - supported by Africa's postcolonial elites - in the present. What must we, Africa's anti-globalisers [0], do to convince the world of the justness of the great war which we are waging to recover a dignity that has been denied and ridiculed for four centuries?

However loud our cry, it will never be enough. For the ultra-liberal system with its strategy of dominating the planet has elaborated a mechanism whose consequences include the slow annihilation of certain peoples – with sub-Saharan Africans being the first. The stubborn facts prove it every day. It is time for Africa's youth to respond energetically, by force of argument through all the means of communication we possess, making global public opinion aware of the gross injustices – of colonisation, neo-colonialism and now globalisation – which ride roughshod over Africa's black people.

A continent's pain, a global injustice

The World Trade Organisation (WTO [1]), the supporting pillar of globalisation, offers a prime illustration of this mechanism in action. This is an international organisation charged with advancing free trade, created out of the last, Marrakech, conference of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and formally launched in January 1995 in Doha, Qatar. The WTO has concluded numerous treaties governing international trade, among the most important in terms of their influence on Africa being the Agriculture Agreement, the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (Trips [2]) and the General Agreement on Trade in Services.

The WTO, brought into existence under the leadership of Peter Sutherland [3], is the statutory place of negotiations and definitions of common commercial regulations. Every two years there is a ministerial conference which brings together all its member states like the one in Cancun [3] in Mexico from 10-14 September 2003.

How does Africa fare at the WTO? The rich countries, knowing our endemic poverty full well, prevent us from being present at all the meetings under its rubric. They orchestrate these WTO conferences by reaching a consensus in their favour. Although the WTO's decision-mode is formally "one member, one vote", proper voting has never taken place, and political pressures do the rest.

The French president Jacques Chirac is one who knows and approves of this. Africa's anti-globalisers are not deluded by the fact that at the closing conference of the G8 summit [4] in Evian in June 2003, he again assumed the role of indefatigable defender of the cause of African countries against the new leviathan given the deceptively mild name of "globalisation". If

European anti-globalisers do not believe at all in Chirac, the ardent propagator of the *francophonie* whose ideologue was the late Jacques Foccart [5], how much less do their African equivalents?

Another slow genocide in Africa

A new major trade agreement on intellectual property (Trips [6]) was drafted in the mid-1990s under the pressure of multinational pharmaceutical corporations, offering a legal body to protect the patents to ownership of goods in all technological sectors. Pharmaceutical corporations and the governments of the countries that believe in globalisation (including France) argue that patenting is indispensable to fund medical research whose progress will in the long term benefit all mankind. But at the heart of the Trips regime lies a discriminatory politics of patenting which allows corporations to license medicines for a minimum period of twenty years and to sell them at prices far too high to be affordable for most Africans [7].

Pharmaceutical corporations and the governments of the countries that believe in globalisation (including France) argue that patenting is indispensable to fund medical research whose progress will in the long term benefit all mankind. According to this system, the multinationals hold a monopoly on the sales of patented medicines and can therefore maintain a very lucrative price, which makes these medicines inaccessible to Africans.

Take as an example the poor farmer from Akométam described in Mongo Beti's book [8] *France against Africa* (Editions Découverte). Today his revenues amount only to 98,000 CFA (Cameroon) *francs* (or \$190) a year. Neither her, nor (say) the farmer from Kolofata who is constantly threatened by famine cycles, will benefit from such research or be able to buy its products.

Many of us in Africa will die from diseases for which there are medical cures sold on our doorstep, but which we cannot afford even when our plants and traditions lead the way to their creation. According to Arnaud Zacharie [9], spokesman for Attac Belgium, only 8% of medicines are used in poor countries. A third of the world's population has no access to them at all. The World Health Organisation reinforces this bleak picture: of 10 million children under five years old who die each year 80% could avert this fate if they had access to medicines.

The Trips agreement, one approved by African leaders, amounts to nothing less than the sanctioning of a "cold genocide" of Africans. The French geographer Georges Courade was therefore right when he declared in a 2000 lecture at Douala's French cultural centre, to the great stupefaction of the audience: "Millions of Chinese are being born while Africans are dying ; this gap...also represents Africans' failure to adapt to the new world order.

Poisoning the well of traditional medicine

Many products "invented" by the big pharmaceutical corporations today originate in traditional plant-based cures used by people living in rural communities in the southern hemisphere for generations. These medicines had been part of the local pharmacopoeia.

Many supposed researchers, aware that these traditional cures command only symbolical prices in less-developed countries, come to African villages, very frequently in the company of "trustworthy" persons (such as representatives of so-called Christian NGOs); together, they "discover" active molecules to heal diseases, which they then go on to patent in their own name, or sell to pharmaceutical companies. In all this, they benefit from the ignorance of local farmers in regard to international rules governing the collection and surveying of our plants and their healing qualities.

One example of these plants is yellow igname (white yam [10], *dioscorea dumetorum*), which is used in traditional medicine to treat diabetes. Another is pygeum (prunus africana [11]), a tree which grows in Cameroonian forests, and is traditionally used in sculpture and can be used for . Its chemical prescription has sales of around \$150 million per year – without any of this money flowing back to the farmers who cultivated it (see *Suspicious grains* by Robert Ali Brac de la Perrière & Franck Seurat, quoting Rachel Winberg).

Chirac's false friendship with Africa

At the end of the last G8 summit, Jacques Chirac presented himself as a stout defender of the African continent. This propaganda, faithfully relayed through Radio France Internationale [12] (the “world radio” which broadcasts in Paris but not elsewhere in France) stirred up hope only in those who already believed it.

At the WTO summit in Cancùn, the interests of millions of African cotton farmers and their dependents [13] proved less worthy of concern than the profits (guaranteed by huge subsidies) of their 25,000 American counterparts. Jacques Chirac once more kept an approving silence; he preferred to sacrifice some poor Africans to engaging in a dispute with Uncle Sam, the world master. The sufferings of the peoples of the south in general and Africans in particular do not mean much to the rulers of France.

France may be the friend of some of Africa's rulers, but after following and analysing these events we can safely conclude that she is not Africa's friend. After all, in the 2002 presidential election campaign not one candidate, not even the socialist Lionel Jospin evoked Africa's name, except perhaps inadvertently.

The French centre-right (such as Nicolas Sarkozy [14], the interior minister) pretends to be different, but in fact applies the doctrine of the extreme-right Jean-Marie Le Pen in Franco-African relations. (See the interview with Nicéphore Soglo, ex-president of Benin, in *Africa International* (370, November 2003 [15]).

But to protest against the pillaging of official French Africa must not lead us to put our hopes in the evolution of an alternative, francophone, Black Africa. Rather, we definitely must engage in liberating action for all Africans right here right now, or we will find ourselves caught in a new entrapment.

We should hold on to the spirit of this thought of Thabo Mbeki, the successor to Nelson Mandela as South Africa's president (it is quoted by Abel Eyinga in Hubert Kamgang's book *Cameroon in the 21st century: first quit the Central African Economic and Monetary Community, then work towards a joint currency within the framework of the United States of Africa* (Edition Renaissance Africaine, 2001):

“The appeal to renew Africa, for an African renaissance, is an appeal to rebel. We must rise against tyrants and dictators who seek to corrupt our societies, to steal our riches, which do not belong to anyone but to the people. We must rebel against these criminals who kill, abuse and kill every day with total impunity...

To be a true African, you must be a rebel.”

This article was translated from French by Julian Kramer

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