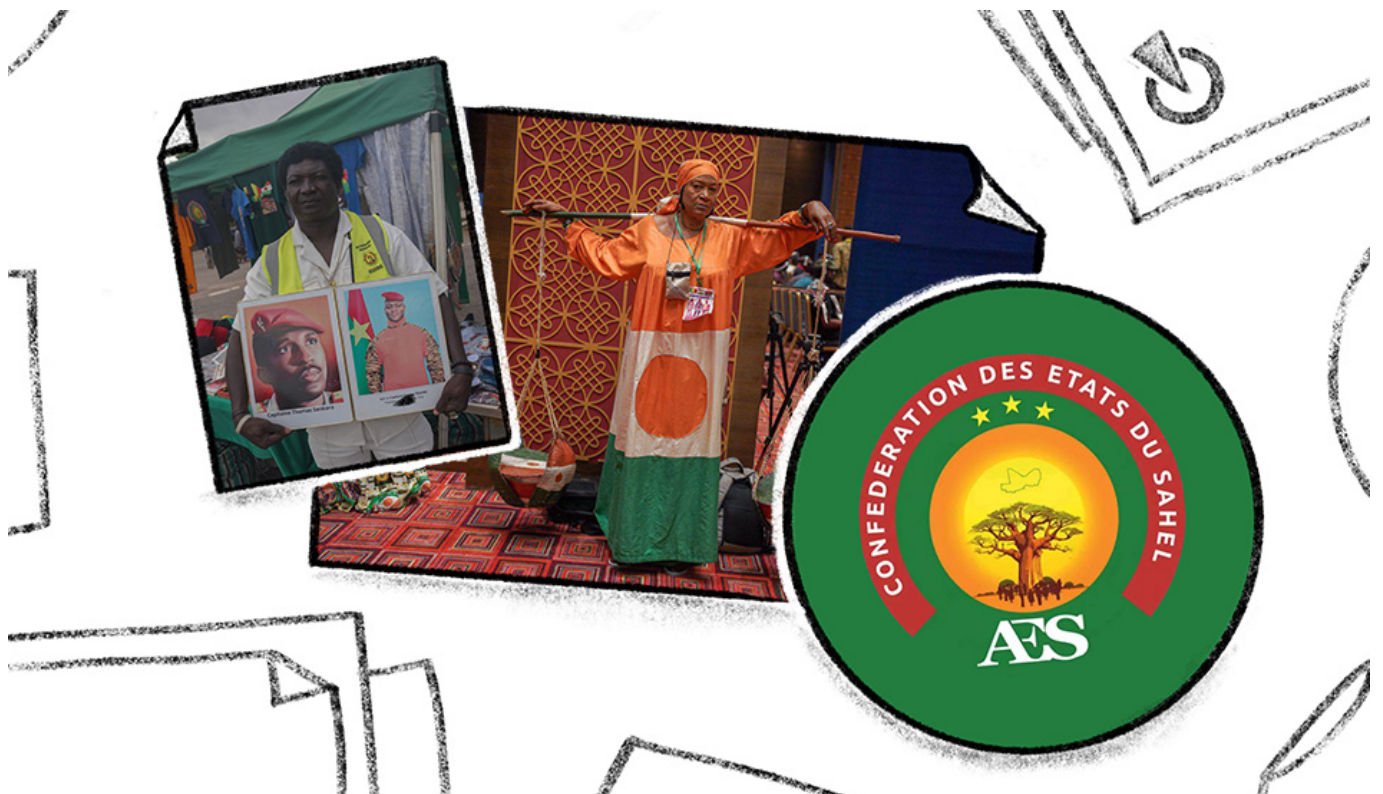


New Symbols for a New Sovereignty: Sahel Benkan

The Eighteenth Art Bulletin (August 2025)



☒ Listen to Sahel Benkan - L'hymne de l'AES

[For this month's musical choice, please listen to *Sahel Benkan*, the **anthem** of the Alliance of Sahel States.]

'Independence is not just a simple matter of expelling the [colonisers], of having a flag and a national anthem', **argued** Amílcar Cabral, a leader of the liberation movement in Guinea-Bissau and Cabo Verde. 'The people must be secure in the knowledge that no one is going to steal their labour, that the wealth of our country is not going into somebody else's pocket'. For Cabral, national liberation was necessarily an 'act of culture' – a profound process of reclaiming history, identity, and dignity as the essential foundation upon which true political and economic sovereignty could be built. This act, he believed, was the most potent weapon against foreign domination, which maintains its grip through the 'permanent, organised repression of the cultural life of the people concerned'.

Leading up to the second anniversary of the founding of the Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel, AES) on 16 September 2023, Cabral's words resonate with particular force. Born from a series of

popularly supported coups that ruptured with a neocolonial order policed by France and its regional proxies, the confederation of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger has embarked on a project of cultural decolonisation. By dismantling the symbols of colonial and neocolonial power and creating new, shared ones in their place, the peoples of the Sahel are raising a banner for the new phase of their struggle for sovereignty.

Beyond Flag Independence



Photo credit: Pedro Stropasolas (*Brasil de Fato*).

The power of the French colonial state was inscribed directly onto the physical and psychological landscape of the Sahel. In the administrative capitals of Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Niamey, French planners imposed a rigid spatial order that mirrored the hierarchy of the colonial system itself. Major avenues, squares, and public buildings were named after French generals, governors, and politicians. This deliberate imposition of a colonial nomenclature erased local histories and forced the colonised to navigate their own cities using the names of their oppressors – perpetuating the neocolonial system long after the flags of independence were raised.

In the last two years, a coordinated wave of symbolic reclamation has swept across the AES, a process detailed by Ibrahima Kébé, Coordinator of the Modibo Keita School (Popular and Citizens' University), in an interview with us. 'Renaming streets and boulevards is one of the most visible actions undertaken by the leaders of the AES', he explains. 'Plaques, statues, and street names honouring colonial figures are often replaced with references to Pan-Africanist heroes and local resisters who fought against the very system those figures represent'.

On 15 October 2023 – the 36th anniversary of the assassination of Burkinabe revolutionary Thomas Sankara – Boulevard Général Charles de Gaulle in the capital Ouagadougou was officially **renamed** Boulevard Thomas Sankara, and Sankara was proclaimed ‘Hero of the Nation’. In Niamey, Niger, Avenue Charles de Gaulle is **now** Avenue Djibo Bakary, honouring a key trade unionist and political figure in the country’s independence movement against France. The Place de la Francophonie, long a symbol of French cultural and linguistic hegemony, has been officially **renamed** Place de la Patrie (Homeland Square). In Mali, the Avenue CEDEAO – named for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a bloc the AES condemns as an instrument of Western interests – was renamed Avenue de l’AES.

These acts function as a form of public political education, replacing a pantheon of oppressors with one of liberators. ‘These changes aim to give future generations role models in tune with their struggles and aspirations, while acknowledging historical memory’, Kébé notes. However, he is quick to point out that this process is not without its own political complexities and internal contradictions, revealing that the struggle over historical memory is ongoing. ‘For example’, he observes, ‘Bamako saw the appearance of Avenue Général Moussa Traoré, who served French interests for decades after overthrowing the socialist Pan-Africanist president Modibo Keita in a 1968 coup’. For Kébé, this detail suggests that the path of decolonisation is not linear. It underscores the immense challenges ahead: to ensure that the popular anti-imperialist spirit that fuels this movement is not co-opted by a narrow nationalism that sanitises the past simply to legitimise the present.

New Symbols for a New Alliance



Beyond deconstructing the old, the AES has taken steps to construct new shared symbols. On 22 February 2025, the AES unveiled its **new flag**, a powerful emblem of this regional project. For Kébé, its elements are a ‘true concentration of cultural and political symbols’ designed to convey a multilayered message. The three stars represent the member states, not as separate entities, but as united in solidarity. The baobab tree, known for its longevity, symbolises cultural rootedness and resilience against adversity. The people standing together convey collective determination to defend their sovereignty. The use of the classic Pan-African colours of green, yellow, and red signifies hope for the future, the natural wealth of the region, and the blood of sacrifice shed by martyrs in the liberation struggle.

Perhaps the flag’s most potent political statement is the inclusion of a map of the three countries without their internal borders. This element visually dissolves the artificial boundaries drawn at the 1884 Berlin Conference, with regionalism serving as a direct challenge to the colonial logic of ‘divide and rule’.

This new identity is given voice by the AES anthem, *Sabel Benkan*, which translates from Bambara as ‘the understanding of the Sahel’. First performed simultaneously in the three capitals on 9 June 2025, the anthem has become a powerful tool of popular mobilisation. ‘The song quickly went beyond the ceremonial setting to become a symbol of resistance and pride for supporters of the confederation’, Kébé tells us. ‘It resonates during official ceremonies but also at the heart of popular demonstrations supporting the political transitions’. Circulated widely on state television and social media, the anthem’s lyrics explicitly root the current struggle in the legacy of Africa’s great pre-colonial civilisations, calling on the people to reclaim their destiny. For its supporters, Kébé says, it is ‘the living expression of a Sahel that stands tall, determined to break with the neocolonial order’.

‘Against the humiliating bondage of a thousand years’



Photo credit: Pedro Stropasolas (*Brasil de Fato*).

The current movement in the Sahel did not emerge from a vacuum. It is the legacy of a revolutionary tradition with deep roots in the region. As Kébé affirms, this history provides not only a vital source of inspiration and legitimacy but also crucial lessons for the difficult path ahead.

The first wave of this struggle was led by pioneers like Modibo Keïta, the first president of an independent Mali (1960–1968). A committed Pan-Africanist and advocate of African socialism, Keïta undertook profound reforms designed to achieve genuine economic sovereignty. He nationalised strategic resources and created a national currency to break from the French-controlled CFA franc (a neocolonial instrument of French monetary dominance). Crucially, Keïta understood that the sovereignty of small, newly independent states was fragile and that unity was the only viable path forward. Alongside Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah and Guinea’s Sékou Touré, Keïta was a driving force behind the Union of African States (or the Ghana-Guinea-Mali Union). This early attempt to overcome colonial borders provides a direct historical precedent for the AES’s confederal ambitions today. For more on Keïta’s legacy, watch this just-released **documentary** by African Stream.

Representing a later generation of revolutionaries, Sankara, who was president of Burkina Faso from 1983 until his assassination in 1987, made his first act a symbolic one: renaming the country from the colonial designation of Upper Volta to Burkina Faso – ‘the land of the upright people’. It is **said** that Sankara was an accomplished jazz guitarist and personally wrote the new national anthem, *Ditanyè* (‘The Anthem of Victory’). The anthem denounced colonialism’s ‘humiliating bondage of a thousand years’ and concluded with

the powerful slogan borrowed from the Cuban Revolution: *La Patrie ou la mort, nous vaincrons!* ('Motherland or death, we shall conquer') – a phrase that has been readopted by the country's current leader, Captain Ibrahim Traoré. For Sankara, this symbolic transformation was inseparable from the material struggle for self-sufficiency, encapsulated in his famous dictum, 'He who feeds you, controls you'.

One Space, One People, One Destiny




Photo credit: Pedro Stropasolas (*Brasil de Fato*).

The cultural decolonisation across the Sahel is a profound and historically necessary act of liberation. Tearing down colonial monuments, renaming streets, and creating new flags and anthems are powerful acts of cultural emancipation. They reclaim the historical narrative, foster a new collective identity, and mobilise popular energy for a new multi-dimensional vision of sovereignty that encompasses politics, the economy, the military, and culture.

However, as Cabral insisted, a flag and an anthem are not enough. The symbolic acts have been matched by substantive moves towards sovereignty on multiple fronts. On the military front, the AES has expelled French troops and established a joint 5,000-strong military force to coordinate the fight against terrorism. On the economic front, they have announced plans to create a common currency to finally exit the CFA franc system. They have begun to establish a Confederal Bank for Investment and Development to finance their own infrastructure and industrialisation, freeing them from the dictates and conditionalities of the IMF and World Bank. For more, please read Tricontinental's latest **dossier** (August 2025), *The Sahel Seeks Sovereignty*.

The new symbols of the Sahel are a declaration of intent, a rallying cry for the peoples of the region to unite in the long and unfinished struggle for liberation. The future of the AES and the peoples of the Sahel will also depend on international solidarity. For this, we ask you to join the Pan Africanism Today Secretariat, composed of over seventy people's movements and organisations across Africa, in their **call** to action. Please also take time to check out this month's homage to revolutionaries around the world in our portrait **gallery** .



Soldiers, we are all
Determined, resilient, and united
So that the AES remains
One space, one people, one destiny.

– Anthem of the AES

Warmly,

Tings Chak
Art Director, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research