

Unrest in France: Understanding culture can heal wounds

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It's calm in France's suburbs again after the recent riots. But cultural activists say the uprising's causes run deep and are calling for fundamental reforms.



Frances treats its colonial past like "a family secret," says director Abdelwaheb Sefsaf

Image: C. Raynaud de Lage

It was only the spark that caused the powder keg to explode. After [a police officer fatally shot 17-year-old Nahel M](#) during a traffic stop in the Paris suburb of Nanterre at the end of June, violent riots broke out between young people and the police all over the country.

For nights on end, [cars, garbage cans and town halls](#) burned. The fires have since been put out and [the country wants to quickly rebuild](#) what was destroyed. But the wounds run deep among those who [expressed their anger](#).

In order for them to heal, the state must carry out fundamental reforms, say culture workers, who also believe cultural offerings could at least provide some relief.

Abdelwaheb Sefsaf also feels these wounds. The 53-year-old has been director of the theater in Sartrouville and [the department of] Yvelines, 10 kilometers north of Nanterre, since the beginning of the year. He is the son of an Algerian couple who moved to a socially deprived neighborhood near Saint-Etienne in southeastern France in 1948, when Algeria was still seeking independence after over 100 years of French occupation.

Sefsaf speaks of a "deep-seated, innate malaise" felt by people with roots in former French colonies. "We all have to live with this black hole in our history that weighs on us like a family secret," he tells DW. "In France, many dark episodes of colonial history are simply not taught. As a result, even young people in the suburbs can't accurately define their own history and identity."

In addition, Sefsaf believes long-held grievances stem from high unemployment, discrimination and poor access to education.

Uprisings due to unresolved colonialism

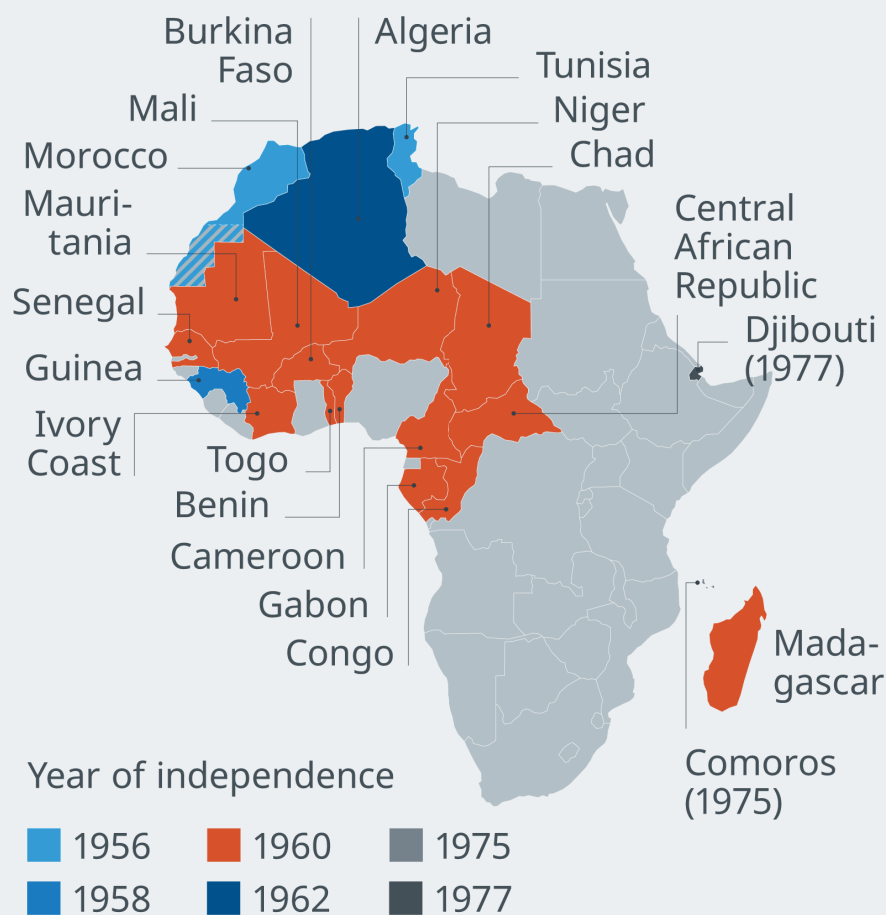
This was also the case in 2005, for example, after two young people were killed while fleeing from police in a Paris suburb. "Because even if young people are not aware of it, they are struggling daily with the trauma of colonization," Sefsaf explains.

The director has found his own form of rebellion. He stages plays that incorporate **French colonial history**, such as the deportation of more than 200 Algerians to the French overseas territory in the Pacific New Caledonia in 1871, after they rebelled against French colonial rule. "This is my way of easing the pain," he says. "Plays like this can also help others deal with trauma. We artists can definitely do our part." That's what Sefsaf does, organizing theater workshops in suburban schools, with actors in his plays coming from the affected neighborhoods, among other places.

And yet, only politics can fundamentally change things, Sefsaf says. "The state must teach colonial history holistically — only that could reconcile the colonized and the colonial masters, without the oppressors having to go the way of repentance forever," Sefsaf says. At the same time, he says, more money needs to be put into education so that there is true equality of opportunity. "If a young person has a diploma or an education, they know they have a chance at a good life in France — it's a remedy for the despair that many feel," he says.

Former French colonies in Africa

by year of independence

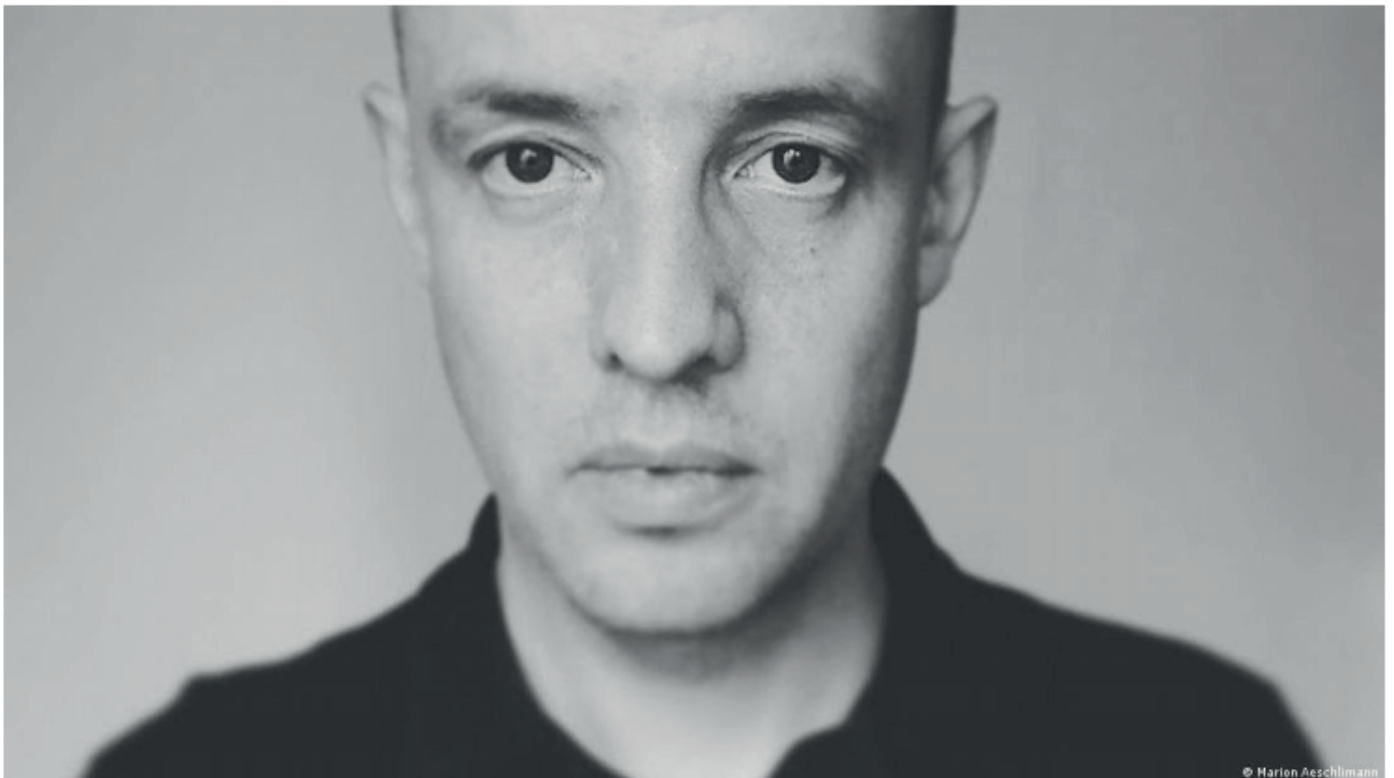


State to blame

Benjamin Villemagne also thinks the state bears most of the blame for the unease felt by many suburbanites.

He is the director of the Quincaillerie Moderne theater company in Paris and, like Sefsaf, grew up in Saint-Etienne. The son of a working-class family, he tells DW that he himself has the "right" skin color. "But many of my friends from Arab or African families were constantly controlled by the police and thus suppressed," says Villemagne, who even speaks of state racism.

He adds that the state must not only renew the education system. "We also need profound reforms of the judiciary and the police to finally fight this rift in society." Theater could also play a role but it would have to undergo a fundamental overhaul. "You still see mostly classical plays like Moliere's on stages," he says. "You should also address modern day problems like those in the suburbs and bring them to the center of attention."



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Benjamin Villemagne believes racism has played its part

Image: Marlon Aeschlimann

Constant identity checks

Musician Kristo Numpuby has first hand experience of being subjected to constant police checks.

Born in France, the Black man spent his first 22 years in the West African country of Cameroon. He then moved to central Paris, to the wealthy 7th arrondissement. "Once I was late for a meeting with my sister and ran down the street in broad daylight. That's when a police car turned around and chased me with its siren blaring. The officers brusquely ordered me to put my hands on the hood and searched me. I hadn't done anything," he recalls in an interview with DW.

Today, the 59-year-old gives music lessons at a music school in Saint-Denis, in mainland France's poorest department near Paris. And he leads music groups in schools, including in socially deprived areas. "My students learn to listen to music from all over the world and feel it," he says. "Some of them don't do well in school, but in these workshops, just because of their culture, you see they have a certain sense of music. That makes them feel like they're particularly good at something, too."

'Not listening to each other'

Numpuby is not surprised by the recent unrest. "The two sides are not listening to each other," he explains. "On the one hand, the police automatically assume that the youth are always up to something. But on the other hand, in today's fast-paced world, young people no longer have the patience to listen and react immediately to provocations."

Music can help with the latter point in particular, he says. "Through it, you get distance from things. It helps us express and channel feelings better, because it gives us pleasure, which acts like a painkiller. Also, to become a good musician, you have to practice for a long time. That effort, which requires perseverance, is also rewarding, gives you a firm structure and a kind of security."

Music as a lifeline

In any case, music was a lifeline for Salome Bossoku, the French-born daughter of Congolese immigrants. Now 19, she grew up with four of her siblings and her mother in Troyes, about 150 kilometers southeast of Paris. As the only Black girl, she felt isolated at school early on. "From the time I was four years old, no one wanted to play with me because I didn't look like them," she tells DW. "I was always alone at recess, so I would sit on a bench and sing."



A sign calling for 'Justice for Nahel'

Image: picture alliance/dpa/MAXPPP

Although her mother kept her head above water with odd jobs, she still managed — partly through government subsidies — to get Bossoku music lessons at the city's conservatory. "Music was and is my ray of hope, the source of my strength. All the sadness, anger and the impression of not being understood I could never put into words — I express these feelings when I sing or play the piano," she says. Bossoku thinks more young people should be given the opportunity for regular music lessons: "It would show them another way to express their anger." She is now studying design at a Paris university. But music will probably accompany her for the rest of her life.

This article was originally written in German.