

A balance sheet analysis of the Banque de l'Afrique Occidentale

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Abstract. The Banque de l'Afrique Occidentale was a Paris-based bank that operated in French colonies in West Africa and Equatorial Africa. From 1901 to 1955 it was a monopoly note issuer and so had one characteristic of a central bank alongside its commercial banking functions. This paper briefly reviews its history during that period, which apparently has not previously been done in English; collects the main legal enactments related to the bank, never done before for the whole period of its existence as a note issuer; and analyzes its balance sheet, which has never been digitized before and is available in an accompanying spreadsheet workbook. Through the balance sheet, the paper examines the composition of the bank's assets and liabilities and how they evolved over time. It concludes with some observations about the bank's role in French colonial Africa.

Keywords. Banking; Colonialism; French Equatorial Africa; French West Africa.

JEL. E59; N17; N27..

1. Introduction

By the early years of the twentieth century, the French gained control of what became eight West African territories: Mauritania, Senegal, French Sudan (now Mali), French Guinea (now Guinea), Côte d'Ivoire, Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), Dahomey (now Benin) and Niger. French administration in the territories was highly centralized and operated through a governor-general based in Senegal (an older colony), who reported to the Minister of Colonies in Paris ([University of Pennsylvania African Studies Center, 2016](#)).

The first banking institution established in French West Africa was the Banque du Sénégal, in 1855. It was established primarily to solve the problem of compensation for some former slaveholding colonists after the abolition of slavery and to provide short-term financing to local businesses ([Albert, 1983, 17](#)). The initial shareholders were mainly Bordeaux merchants involved in African trade. The bank was small, never spreading beyond Senegal. However, by locating its headquarters in Saint-Louis, at the mouth of the Senegal River, it obtained a role in financing trade with the basin—more than half the size of France—through which the river flowed. The bank had a monopoly of note issue in Senegal, although it was not a central bank as we now understand the term. No other commercial banks were established in Senegal during its life, apparently because the field was so small.

Aiming to establish a banking institution that could conduct a wider range of activities and utilize less limited monetary instruments, the French government replaced the Banque du Sénégal with the Banque de l'Afrique

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Occidentale (BAO) ([Albert, 1983](#), 57).² On the night of 30 July 1901, BAO took over the assets and liabilities of Banque du Sénégal. The balance sheet had 900,000 francs in net assets. The 1200 shares of the Banque du Sénégal were changed into 1800 shares of BAO stock. The headquarters of the bank moved from Senegal to Paris.

The bank was a “banque d’émission, de prêt et d’escompte” (bank of issuance, lending and discount). It was empowered to conduct banking operations in Senegal, French Guinea, Côte d’Ivoire, Dahomey, Congo (Congo-Brazzaville) and all French colonies on the west side of Africa. The French Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Foreign Affairs also authorized BAO to issue banknotes in the colonies. The bank was intended to adopt a liberal spirit and to play an international role in Africa. It also would operate according to a vision that would prevent the French government from apparent interventions in the management of the bank. A French decree of July 4, 1904 bestowed on BAO the further power of participating in creating and constituting financial, industrial and commercial enterprises ([Albert, 1983](#), 59).³

BAO combined features of central, commercial, and investment banking. Its central bank-type functions were limited, though. It was a monopoly note issuer but did not have power to alter the exchange rate. There was for many years no sharp distinction between the local franc in French West Africa and the French franc. Neither the Banque du Sénégal nor BAO issued coins. French coins circulated, and there was no distinctive local coinage until World War II.⁴

According to the bank’s first constitution (charter), the bank’s corporate life was set at 20 years. The shareholders were represented by the bank’s general assembly. The general assembly consisted of shareholders owning at least ten shares. However, non-French shareholders who had not resided in France or in a French colony could not be part of the general assembly. The bank was authorized to perform the following specific operations ([BCEAO, 2000](#), 309-310):

- 1) Issue notes at sight to bearers under conditions determined by its constitution.
- 2) Discount promissory notes the maturity of which did not exceed six months.
- 3) Create, trade, discount or buy bank drafts, money orders, directly payable checks or checks payable to third parties in the colonies, metropolitan France, and foreign countries.
- 4) Discount marketable bonds and non-marketable collateral.
- 5) Purchase or sell gold, silver, or copper.
- 6) Extend advances on ingots, coins, gold, silver, and copper.

² The Banque du Sénégal was also encumbered with a large bad loan to Gaspard Devès and his son François, who were prominent merchants in Saint-Louis, Senegal. See Penant ([1902](#), 184-188).

³ See the Appendix for a list of many of the legislative enactments affecting BAO during the period of this study.

⁴ During World War I there was a shortage of coins because of difficulties shipping them from France, and in response the government of Senegal issued one-franc notes as substitutes.

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- 7) Receive voluntary deposits in any amount, with or without interest, of any form, in new currencies or gold, silver, or copper.
- 8) Act as a trustee for handling securities.
- 9) Receive, with the authorization of a French minister or colonial governments, profits from bank operations and open public sales.
- 10) Issue promissory note, bank drafts or money orders.
- 11) Deliver letters of credit against warranties.
- 12) Lend against bills of exchange.

For this paper, the original balance sheet data of BAO were obtained from paper copies of the annual reports. We were able to collect all semiannual balance sheets from 1901 to 1955, and they are presented in an accompanying spreadsheet workbook. The source for balance sheets through June 1919 was the *Journal officiel de la République française*. The source for later balance sheets was BAO's annual reports, collected from the library of Princeton University, the Library of Congress, the Bibliothèque nationale de France, and the library of the United Nations Office at Geneva. We gained a significant amount of information from the book *De la vie coloniale au défi international: Banque du Sénégal, BAO, BIAO; 130 ans de banque en Afrique* by a former officer of the bank, Jacques Alibert (1983). The book presents the opening balance sheet of BAO on the night of July 1, 1901, which is listed below. The majority of BAO's initial assets and liabilities came from Banque du Sénégal and its branch in Saint-Louis.

Table 1. *Opening Balance Sheet of BAO, July 1, 1901 (francs)*

Assets		Liabilities	
1800 shares from Banque du Sénégal	900,000.00	Capital: 3000 shares of 500 francs	1,500,000.00
Annuity registration	1,358,748.00	Shareholders	835,500.00
Comptoir National d'Escompte	1,336,028.65	Banque du Sénégal in liquidation	
Account of Saint-Louis branch		Profits and losses	115,986.52
Cash	1,090,585.46	Net Surplus assets on June 30	1,491.59
Receivables	200,804.60	Provisions due	1,516,876.78
Advances	126,670.00	Account of Saint-Louis branch	
Stock-linked bonds	21,290.00	Notes in circulation	1,032,930.00
Loans in Saint-Louis	79,172.68	Current accounts	82,505.81
Loans in Rufisque	15,000.00	Remainder of sold deposit notes	4,523.50
Furniture	14,171.54	Dividends payable	712.50
Buildings	50,000.00	Bearer share	27.85
Expenses to be adjusted	94.05	Non-classified revenues	14,526.37
		Various correspondents	87,484.06
Total Assets	5,192,564.98	Total Liabilities	5,192,564.98

2. Asset and liability composition

To better understand the balance sheet, we consolidated the original balance sheets into a standardized balance sheet of the following format. There are numerous alterations in the original balance sheet categories throughout the years. The original balance sheet categories that appeared in each asset and liability category of the standardized balance sheet are shown in the bullet point list below.

Table 2. *Standardized balance sheet for BAO*

Assets	Liabilities
Foreign assets (gold, silver, assets outside of France and colonies)	Foreign liabilities (including Bank of France gold coin deposit)
French assets: French government securities and deposits	Liabilities in France (other than rediscounts of loans)
French assets: other (including "cash")	Notes in circulation
African assets: credit to governments	Deposits other than of government
African assets: credit to financial sector	Government deposits (French African governments)
African assets: credit to nonfinancial private sector	Dividends and other payments owed to shareholders
African assets: credit to public nonfinancial enterprises	Capital
Buildings and furniture	Statutory and other reserves
Uncalled capital	Other or unclassified liabilities
Other or unclassified assets	

Mapping of standardized asset categories to original asset categories

- Foreign assets: foreign correspondents, sight deposits abroad, foreign currency, gold coin (deposits at Bank of France)
- French assets (French government securities and deposits): Treasury bonds, war bonds, treasury deposits, French rentes, public treasury deposits, compensation by the Treasury caused by the new exchange rate parity of franc
- French assets (other, including "cash"): cash in Paris, Libreville and other branches, cash in Comptoir Nationale d'Escompte, cash in Bank of France
- African assets (credit to governments): special advances to colonies and territories, advances without interests to the colonies, contractual advances to colonies, advances to colonies for reimbursements of Banque Français de l'Afrique debt
- African assets (credit to financial sector): null
- African assets (credit to nonfinancial private sector): loans, loans covered by 12 April 1932 decree, equity holdings, payments overdue, current accounts of advances, current accounts and sundry debtors, accounts receivable
- African assets (credit to public nonfinancial enterprises): null
- Buildings and furniture: buildings and furniture in Paris and in the branches
- Uncalled capital: shareholders, uncalled payments
- Other or unclassified assets: suspense accounts, float

Mapping of standardized liability categories to original liability categories

- Foreign liabilities: Bank of France gold coin deposit
- Liabilities in France (other than rediscounts of loans): null
- Notes in circulation: bearer notes in circulation
- Deposits other than of government: current accounts and sundry creditors
- Government deposits (French African governments): current accounts of colonial treasurer-cashiers, colonies and territories without mandates (cash of reserve)
- Dividends and other payments owed to shareholders: divisible surplus, dividends payable
- Capital: statutory and other reserves, statutorily required contingency funds, statutory reserve, supplemental reserve, special reserves, property reserve, reserve for war risk, provisions for repayment of notes overdue, provision for redemption of missing banknotes

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- Other: provisions for the creation of branches, provisions for renewal and replacement of commercial notes (bills of exchange) payable, notes receivable, clients and correspondents (collection accounts), claims on collateral, suspense accounts, rediscount of loans, profits and losses, retained earnings

The two charts below demonstrate the change in nominal magnitude of BAO's assets and liabilities. From 1901-1955, the whole life span of BAO, BAO's balance total assets rose from roughly 4 million francs to 107 billion francs. Its total assets amounted to over 1 billion francs for the first time in 1936. From 1901 to 1940, total assets rose from roughly 4 million francs to 2 billion francs. The nominal value of BAO's assets grew 2,451,100 percent during the time it existed. For comparison, over the same period nominal bank deposits in France grew 2,218 percent ([Villa, n.d.](#); [Series DEPBQ](#)).



Figure 1. BAO assets/liabilities, 1901-1910 (mn French francs)

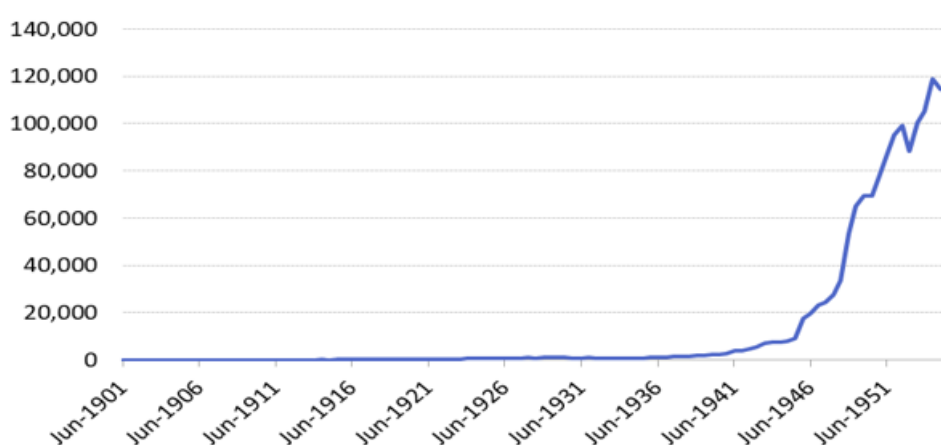


Figure 2. BAO assets/liabilities, 1901-1955 (mn French francs)

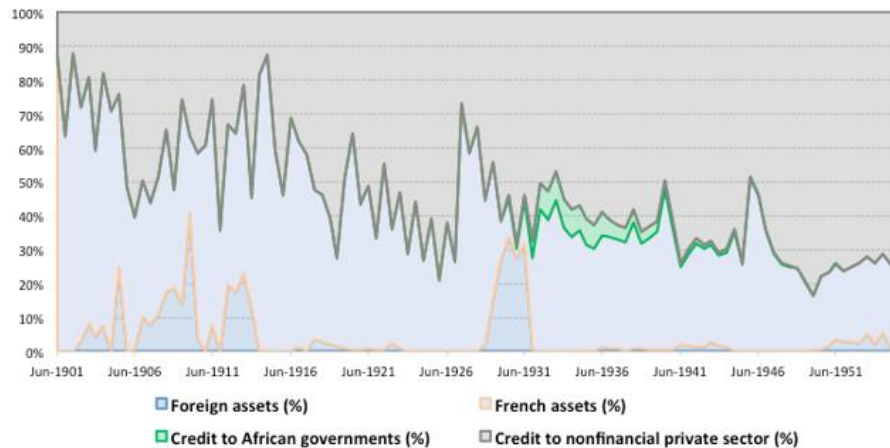


Figure 3. BAO, composition of major assets 1901-1955 (mn French francs)

3. BOA's asset composition

The dominant asset categories of BAO were French assets and credits to African nonfinancial private sectors. They demonstrated an inverse relationship throughout the time with credits to the African nonfinancial private sector, surpassing French assets most of the time. After 1945, the end of World War II, the amounts of these two assets categories started diverging and eventually went through a stable phase from 1950 to 1955. It is noticeable that foreign assets (those outside of France and French Africa) surged in 1929, around the time of the start of the worldwide depression, and quickly returned to negligible levels in 1931. There was also a surge in credits to African governments from 1931 to 1936.

As a French colonial central bank, the majority of BAO's reserve assets were French assets, composed of French government securities as well as cash deposited in the Banque de France (central bank) and the Comptoir National d'Escompte de Paris (CNEP, a leading French commercial bank and a BAO shareholder). BAO holdings of foreign assets, which consisted mainly of a Bank of France gold deposit, were less than 5 percent of total assets throughout its existence except in 1929 and 1930, while French assets accounted for the majority of its assets (over 50 percent) before December 1928 and continued to be a major asset category after.

No lending to the financial sector or public nonfinancial enterprises was observed from the balance sheet. BAO's lending to the African colonial governments stayed minimal throughout its existence (near 0 percent of total assets most of the time and only 8 percent at the peak). From these facts, we conclude that BAO was not in the habit of being a banker of banks or a lender of last resort. Rather, its lending to the private sector was the dominant asset category.

Colonial banks sometimes are accused of reducing the supply of funds available for lending in the economies they operate in by holding substantial foreign assets. This criticism does not apply to BAO. As shown in the above analysis, it held few foreign assets, whereas its lending to the private sector grew at both greatest speed and greatest magnitude.

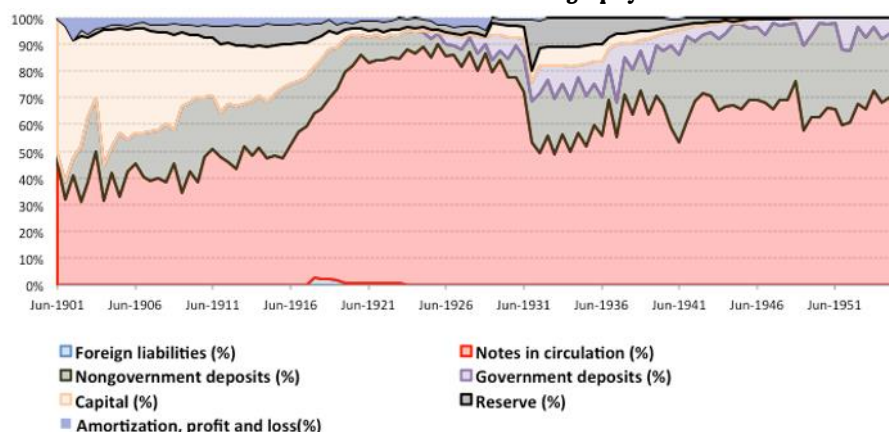


Figure 4. BOA, Composition of major liabilities, 1901-1955

4. BAO's liability composition

According to the liability composition chart above, notes in circulation and nongovernment deposits were the two dominant liability categories. The two also demonstrated an inverse relationship. During the second decade of the bank's establishment, notes issuance accounted for more than 80 percent of its total liabilities. We can conclude that BAO was practicing its privilege as a note issuer to a large extent, establishing its role as a colonial central bank. Notes in circulation went through a sharp downturn in 1929. At the same time, private deposits increased. The convergence of these two liability categories seems to implicate a decrease in economic activities during the crisis. The same pattern appeared again during World War II but to a smaller extent.

BAO lent little to colonial governments but held significant amount of French government securities. It rarely lent to other financial institutions. It held minimal foreign assets (they are so tiny as to be invisible in the chart) and hardly controlled foreign exchange. However, it did play a significant role in issuing banking notes and providing credits for the private sectors.

Except during the 1930s and early 1940s, BAO operated with what seem to be quite low levels of capital and reserve, making for high leverage ratios. The sources we have consulted have not discussed the reasons. Possibly the bank's status as a monopoly note issuer, and the increasing tendency in French Africa to use notes and deposits in preference to barter and coins, made the bank's managers and shareholders confident that high leverage ratios were appropriate.

5. The economy in French West Africa

The economy of French West Africa was heavily dependent on exports of agricultural products such as groundnuts, palm oil, rubber, bananas and cocoa. The French government built railway networks to connect the interior territories to the seaports to facilitate exportation ([British Museum, n.d.](#)). The economic situation of French West Africa was tightly correlated with the fluctuating prices of the agricultural products as well as with the amount of production, which was vulnerable to bad weather during harvesting seasons.

Because of the seasonal pattern of production, BAO assets and liabilities often were lower in June than in December. The rainy season typically starts in July in West Africa, lasting three months in the drier areas and longer in the wetter areas. Harvesting typically starts in October. The harvest season often

saw a surge in demand for credit to pay agricultural workers, drivers, warehouses, shipping lines, and other parties involved with moving crops from the countryside to local or foreign consumers.

5.1. 1901-1914

Because no summary of BAO's history exists in English, we will briefly discuss its history period by period along with an analysis of its balance sheet. The appendix lists many of the legal enactments related to the bank. Because it operated across many colonies, actions which would have been purely a matter of internal business decision-making for an ordinary bank operating in one jurisdiction only, required government approval for BAO. The charter was repeatedly extended for periods of six months while the French government decided on new regulations for colonial banking generally or the government and BAO engaged in negotiations about the terms of its charter.

During the initial years, the administrators of BAO observed that the actual amount of notes in circulation was far below what the bank was authorized to issue, given that the Comptoir National d'Escompte provided sufficient funds for drawing. The administrators aimed to improve the cash flows.

In an extraordinary assembly on October 9, 1902 called to increase the bank's capital, the administrators decided to conduct a stock split, with a share of 500 francs split into four shares of 125 francs. The lower price made shares affordable for more small investors. The bank also brought in more capital by issuing 6 million francs of new shares in the following years.

In addition, the bank started expanding its reach in the territories, establishing branches in Conakry, Guinea; Porto-Novo, Dahomey (now Benin); Grand-Bassam and Grand-Lahou, Côte d'Ivoire; and Monrovia, Liberia (the only territory that was not a French colony).

Alibert remarks that from 1901-1911, BAO brought 107 million francs of notes to Africa (Alibert, 1983, 63). Despite the administration's efforts to boost note circulation, the circulation stayed well below the level of notes BAO imported from France. The circulation was merely 14 million francs on July 30, 1911.

From 1911-1914, the bank's operations were disrupted by an abnormally short harvesting season of groundnuts and a 50 percent price decrease in cocoa. As a result, colonial governments started efforts to diversify agricultural production.

5.2. World War I

In response to World War I, BAO subscribed to 25 million francs of national war bonds at Bank of France, which is registered on the balance sheet from the second half of 1919 to the first half of 1922. At the end of 1919, the face value of Bank of France-sponsored war bonds subscribed by BAO accounted for 13 percent of its total assets.

Aside from the subscription of national war bonds, the most significant influence brought by World War I was the massive issuance of five-franc notes. The five-franc silver piece was approximately equal at the time to the silver U.S. dollar and was widely used in Africa. During the war, exports became difficult because of German submarine operations against French ships. People started hoarding cash since it was also hard for them to procure imported goods. In response, BAO started ordering large amounts of five-franc

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notes from its printer, the Banque de France. On July 30, 1919, 5- and 25-franc notes comprised 37.4 percent of total notes in circulation.

In general, World War I did not hurt BAO much. During the war, dividends were paid to shareholders on a regular basis.

5.3. 1919-1929

The 1919-1920 financial year was much better for BAO and the colonies it served than the previous years due to substantial price increases for agricultural products. Groundnuts reached 1,200 francs per metric ton compared to 250 francs before the war; palm oil sold at 3,300 francs per ton, compared to 450 francs before; and palm nuts were 2,000 francs per ton, compared to 250 francs. The demand for currency surged as a result. As we can see in the balance sheet, notes in circulation from 1919-1920 grew 37 percent. At first only small-denomination notes were available. Eventually the Bank of France provided BAO with 25 million francs of 100-franc notes, over stamped with BAO's name, to satisfy demand for a larger denomination (Alibert, 1983, 67).

The balance sheet shows that notes in circulation surpassed 200 million for the first time in December 1920, which was disproportionate to the cash and reserve held by BAO. Foreseeing this in 1919, BAO felt the need to reach an agreement with the Minister of Finance of France to solve the problem. A French government decree of March 4, 1920 authorized BAO to make a deposit with the French Treasury equal to the difference between the amount of reserves it held in the colonies and the amount of notes in circulation.

Assets under the headings of buildings and furniture kept growing during this period as more branches were opened in the French African territories. As a result of World War I, Cameroon and Togo, which had been German colonies, became French mandates under the League of Nations. BAO expanded its operations to them as well as opening additional branches in the prewar colonies.

This period also features unusual changes in foreign assets. Foreign assets decreased to zero in December 1923 and remained zero until December 1927. They then surged to an unprecedented level in 1928.

From June 1928 to December 1929, foreign assets jumped from around 1.27 million francs to 253.41 million – more than 19,800 percent. The foreign assets during that period were mainly composed of sight deposits abroad. Further analysis on the balance sheet data during these two years reveals that the bank was moving large amount of cash and cash equivalents it held in its own account and in metropolitan France to accounts abroad.

In the December balance sheet in 1923, foreign assets and foreign liabilities disappeared were wiped to zero. In the same period, BAO started receiving deposits from African governments. Dividends also went down sharply.

The first rival commercial bank to BAO, the Banque Commerciale Africaine, was established in 1924. It was not a success and the French government rescued it in 1931 with BAO's help.⁵

In January 1929, a new law governing BAO was passed. The law renewed BAO's note-issuing privilege and stipulated that in return, BAO had to subject itself to a series of new obligations. The new obligations affirm the French state's control over the bank by limiting the magnitude of money transfer

⁵ Les entreprises coloniales (Web site), "Banque commerciale africaine (1924-1963)."

between colonies and the French state, allowing the state to claim profits from the bank's liquidation activities, and bestowing the state the right to nominate the president and three administrators of the executive board. The new regulations also aimed for BAO to play a bigger role in the economic development of the colonies. The law permitted the participation of more shareholders from the colonies and required the bank to provide interest-free cash advances for medical and agricultural assistance and for the development of agricultural credit.⁶

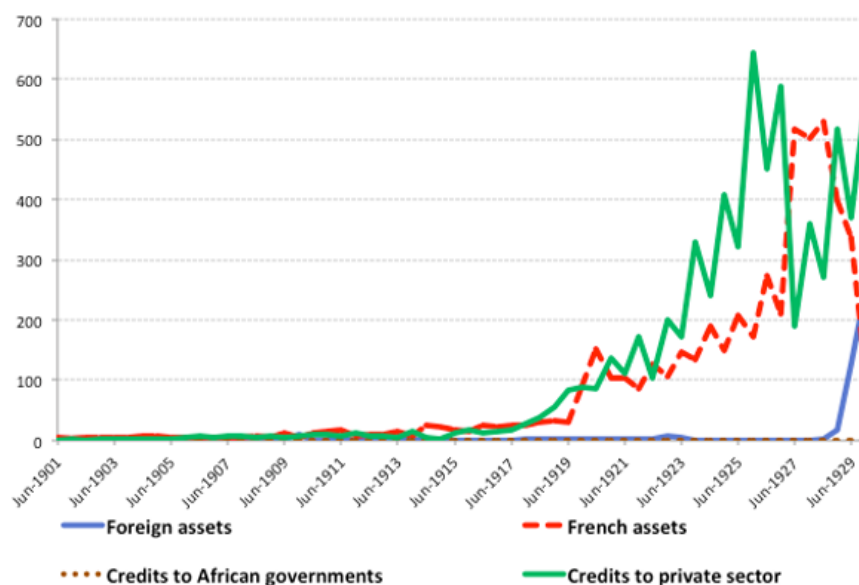


Figure 5. BAO major assets, 1901-1929 (mn French francs)

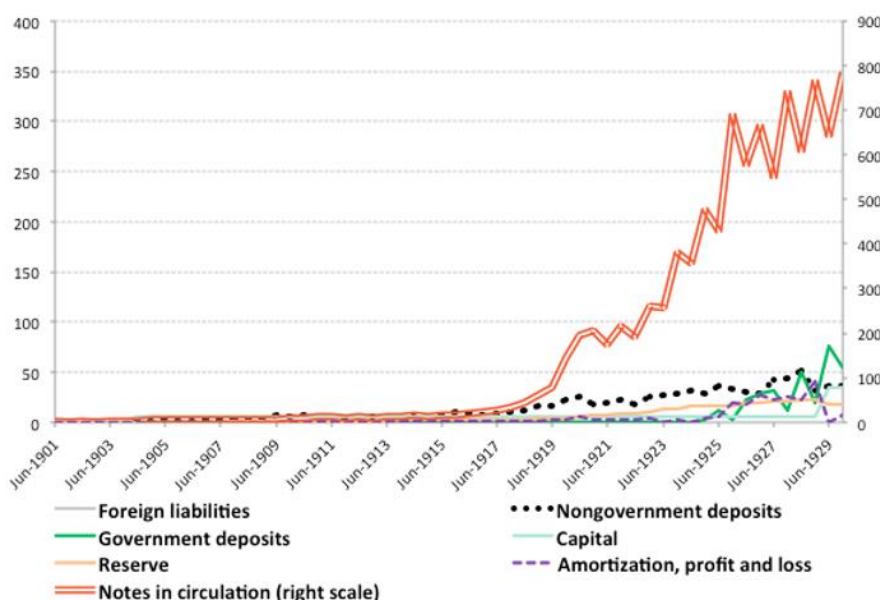


Figure 6. BAO major liabilities, 1901-1929 (mn French francs; all items except notes in circulation use left scale)

5.4. 1929-1939

The early years of this period were those of the Great Depression. Note circulation fell by half, bumped along a low plateau, then rose substantially in

⁶ France, law of January 29, 1929.

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the second half of the decade, accelerating after France ended deflationary pressure on the franc by reducing its gold content by approximately 25 percent on October 1, 1936. During the late 1930s the increase of the note circulation was mainly caused by the development of discounting transactions. The rediscounting of loans translated into the development of the bank's operations and the extension of its activities in the commercial life of West Africa, which went beyond the old standard terms. The distribution of dividends was increased. It also largely increased its expense on printing bank notes and expanding its staff to face the increasing volume of operations.

In the first half of 1929, BAO's lending to African governments increased from zero to 10 million francs. In the second half of 1929 and the first half of 1930, French government securities and deposits fell all the way to zero. In contrast, foreign assets decreased drastically to near zero after the first half of 1930. They remained low for the rest of BAO's existence as a note issuer, generally below 3 percent of total assets and only for one semiannual statement rising a little above 5 percent.

During the 1930s, France was one of the last countries to devalue against gold. The devaluation of the franc on September 26, 1936 had the unexpected result in West Africa that the growth of imported goods was more rapid than that of exported goods. Inventories were piled up and the balance of trade had a 145 million franc deficit in 1937, as against a 45 million franc deficit in calendar year 1936 ([Alibert, 1983](#), 105).

Commodity prices rose exponentially in 1937. Nominal prices of coffee, palms and cotton almost doubled in a year.

At the start of 1938, exports decreased in volume but increased in value. The financial year 1938-1939 fell under the looming shadow of World War II. France's National Defense Department started denying issuance of loans for private capital equipment in the colonies, to channel more financial support into France's defense preparations. Trade volume fell in 1938-1939 under the influence of political events in central Europe.

The asset and liability composition graphs for 1929-1939 show that credits to the private sector and notes in circulation, as the dominant asset and liability, fluctuated roughly together, while other asset and liability categories remained relatively flat. With information drawn from the background reading we can conclude that private credits and notes in circulation increased in times when prices of products increased.

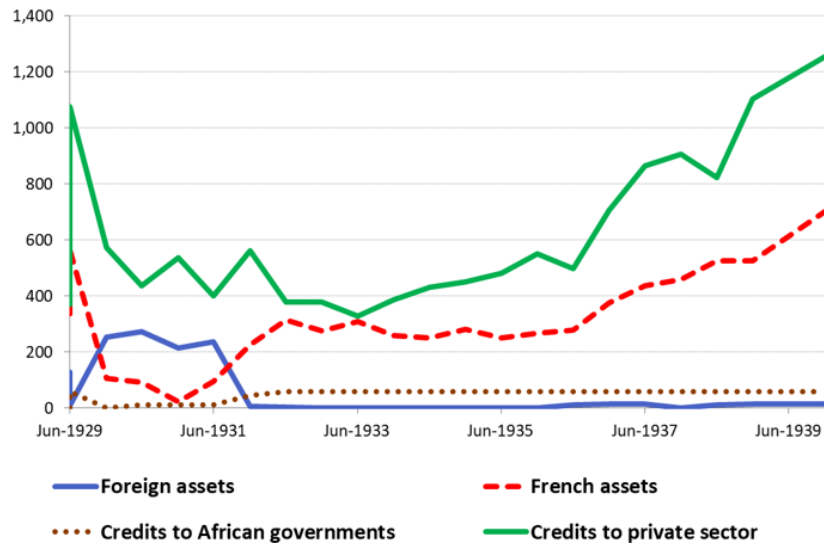


Figure 7. BAO major assets, 1901-1929 (mn French francs)

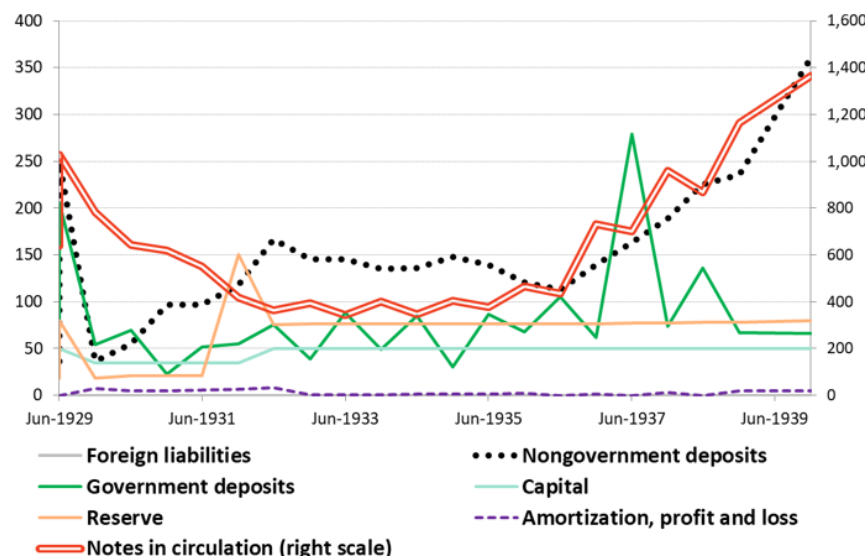


Figure 8. BAO major liabilities, 1901-1929 (mn French francs; all items except notes in circulation use left scale)

5.5. 1939-1945

World War II had a great impact on the bank. The colonial economy was affected by the disruption to transportation on land and sea. The system of importation collapsed and the inventory of agricultural products diminished. The bank struggled to maintain its relationship with all its branches and clients. At the shareholders meeting on April 10, 1941, the bank could not give information about its agencies in Cameroon or French Equatorial Africa (Chad, Ubangi-Shari [now the Central African Republic], Gabon, and French Congo [Congo-Brazzaville]) (Alibert, 1983, 109-110).

Recall that the bank's headquarters was in Paris. German forces occupied Paris on June 14, 1940. Germany occupied northern and western France, leaving southern France to be governed by the Vichy regime, which officially retained control of France's colonies. A number of colonies, however, decided to side with the exile Free French government headed by Charles de Gaulle. The colonies of French Equatorial Africa were among them. In August 1940,

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Cameroon, Chad, French Congo, and Ubangi-Shari sided with Free France, joined by Gabon in November. The governor-general of Free French Africa, as he was styled, authorized government notes called *bons de caisse* or *bons Larminat*. This was a step towards establishing a note issue separate from that of French West Africa, which remained attached to Vichy. Notes of BAO continued to circulate because it was impractical to replace them all immediately.⁷

The Free French government stripped BAO of the power to issue notes in French Equatorial Africa and Cameroon by an order of July 24, 1942. Previously, an order of December 2, 1941 had created the Caisse centrale de la France libre (CCFL) as the financial arm of the Free French government. It was given note-issuing privileges by the 1942 order. BAO notes ceased to be legal tender in French Equatorial Africa and Cameroon on October 1, 1942. A Free French order of February 2, 1944 created the Cassie centrale de la France d'outre-mer (CCFOM) as the successor to the Caisse centrale de la France libre.

By an Anglo-Free French agreement of February 2, 1943, in many of the areas under its control, Free France devalued local francs from the prewar rate of 176.625 francs = £1 (43.80 francs = US\$1) to 200 francs = £1 or 50 francs = US\$1. Following the liberation of most of France by the Allies in late 1944, the metropolitan French franc was devalued to the level of the overseas francs under Free French control, restoring the parity of the metropolitan franc with the francs in BAO's area of operation.

French West Africa joined French Equatorial Africa in switching its allegiance from Vichy to Free France on November 23, 1943. For almost a year, then, BAO headquarters in Paris was cut off from all the branches in Africa.

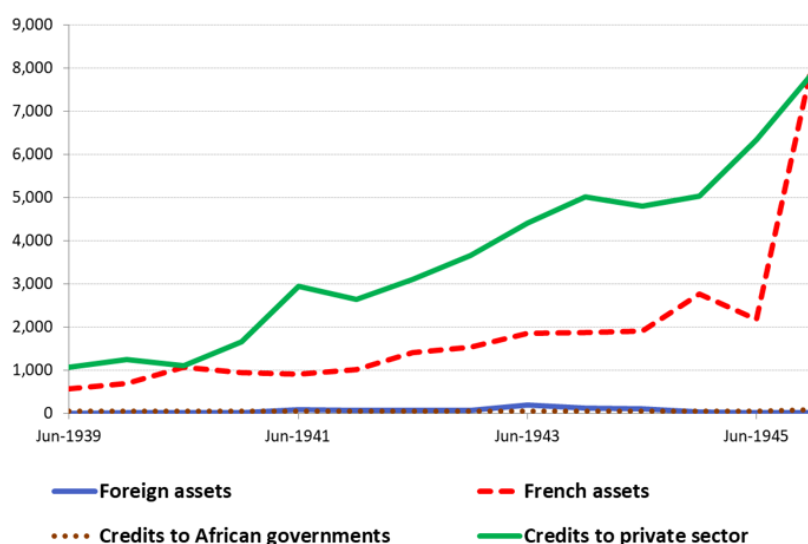


Figure 9. BAO major assets, 1939-1945 (mn French francs)

⁷ The notes were technically illegal, but were legalized after the fact by a Free French order of 24 July 1942 (Mazard 1953: 107 n. 4). (In the French legal system, orders [*ordonnances*] are regulations issued by the cabinet that have the force of law. They are typically intended to be of short duration.)

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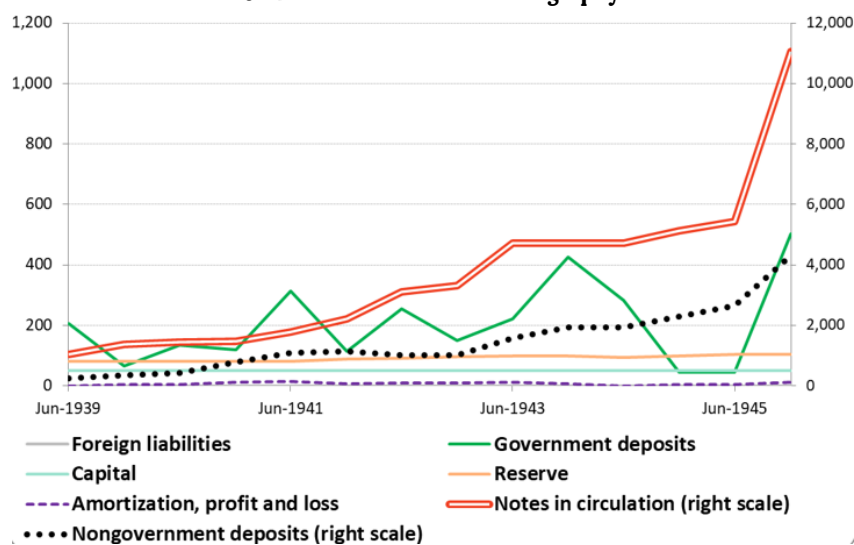


Figure 10. BAO major liabilities, 1939-1945 (mn French francs)

As the above graphs show, both credit to the private sector and notes in circulation maintained steady growth till the early 1940s and then started growing at a faster speed after going through a short period of fluctuations.

It is interesting to notice that unlike the 1929-1939 period, when the spread between credits to the private sector and French government deposits and securities was constant, during 1938-1945 the spread first expanded as the war progressed and then diminished to the end of the war.

Private deposits surpassed government deposits for the first time and became the second-largest liability category after notes in circulation. They demonstrate a growth pattern very similar to that of notes in circulation. BAO resembled an ordinary commercial bank to a larger degree as time passed.

5.6. 1945-1955

Three noteworthy events happened during this period. First, a ruling of August 15, 1945 established the solidarity tax in France. This increased the tax duties local residents paid on their import and export activities. Second, a decree of December 25, 1945 created the CFA franc as a distinct currency because of the weakness of the French franc after World War II. The decree established the exchange rate between CFA franc and French franc at 1: 1.7, a premium from the former 1-to-1 rate of local francs with the French franc. The premium offset much of the French franc's devaluation from 50 to 119.10699 French francs = US\$1 on December 25, 1945. The revaluation reflected lower wartime economic destruction in the colonies than in France. The new cross rate with the pound sterling was 300 CFA francs = £1.

The creation of CFA francs brought many problems to BAO. The bank had to think of a way of dealing with the change in the value of francs created before December 26, 1945 and held by residents in the colonies.

Changes in the balance sheet occurred in response to the creation of CFA francs. New asset items started appearing since December 1945: a debt obligation by the Treasury resulting from the new parity of CFA franc, an indemnity payable by the Treasury following the new parity of CFA franc, and losses resulting from the new parity of CFA franc.

A further exchange rate adjustment followed on October 17, 1948. The French franc was devalued from 214.392 to 264 per U.S. dollar. The CFA franc

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was revalued to 2 French francs to offset most of the devaluation against the dollar. In just a few years, the CFA franc had doubled in value against the French franc. The exchange rate established in 1948 would continue until January 12, 1994, when the CFA franc was devalued back to 1 French franc.

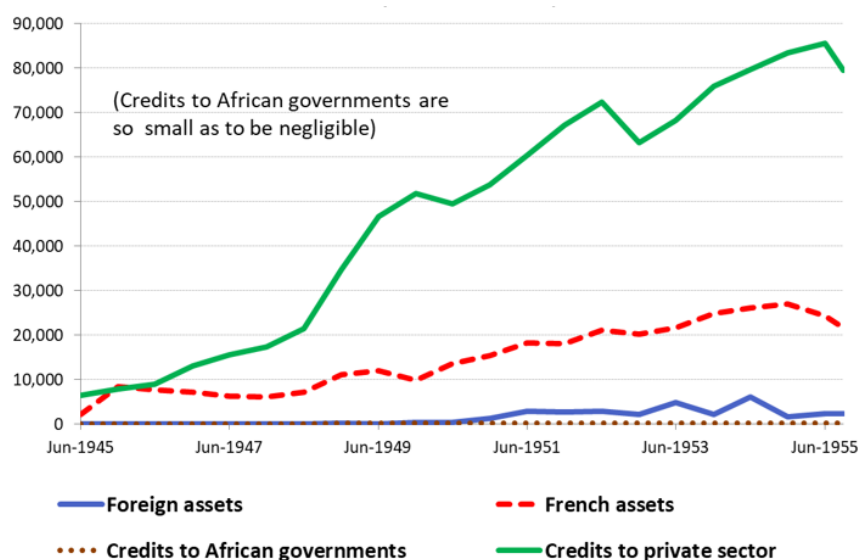


Figure 11. BAO major assets, 1945-1955

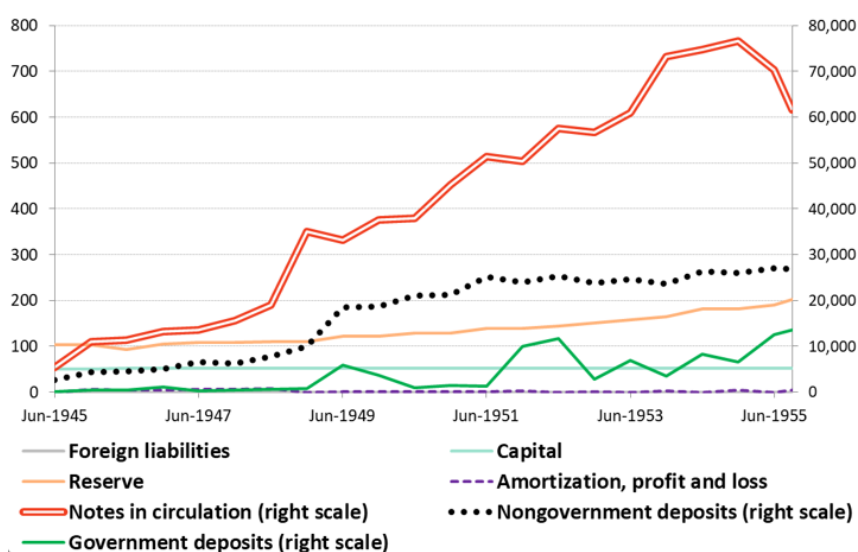


Figure 12. BAO major liabilities, 1929-1939 (mn French francs; items use left scale except as noted)

As has been mentioned, BAO had lost its note issue privileges in French Equatorial Africa during World War II. The final noteworthy event in the decade after the war was that effective October 1, 1955 BAO became an ordinary commercial bank and lost its privilege of note issuing in French West Africa as well. The successor note issuer in French West Africa was the Institut d'Émission de l'Afrique Occidentale Française et du Togo (IEAOFT). The change was part of a general post-World War II trend, in French colonies and elsewhere around the world, to end private involvement in note issue where it still existed. It also marks the end of the period this paper covers.

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The asset and liability composition graphs for 1945-1955 demonstrate patterns that are similar to those for the previous period. One difference is the spread between private credits to French government deposits and securities as well as the spread between notes in circulation and non-government deposits were consistently expanding.

Table 3. BAO's Closing Balance Sheet on September 30, 1955 (French francs)

Assets		Liabilities	
Cash, CNEP and French correspondents	1,080,624,334	Capital	52,629,500
Sight deposit abroad	2,252,845,403	Reserves	
Loans	34,820,184,427	– Statutorily required contingency funds	17,500,000
Equity holdings	78,338,528	– Statutory reserve	36,720,592
Current accounts and sundry debtors	27,229,490,526	– Supplemental reserve	73,441,184
Buildings		Settlements payable	579,929,948
Suspense accounts		Current accounts and sundry creditors	26,777,509,737
		Colonial treasurer-cashiers	13,628,289,312
		Dividends payable	65,275,791
		Clients and correspondents	1,579,494,129
		State	20,595,587,074
		Suspense accounts	4,888,896,284
		Rediscount of loans	205,333,202
Total Assets	68,500,606,853	Total Liabilities	68,500,606,753

Note: At this time the CFA franc was worth 2 French francs. Notes and their corresponding assets had apparently already been transferred to BAO's successor as a note issuer by this time.

6. Conclusion

The Banque de l'Afrique Occidentale served in the French colonial territories as a hybrid of central bank, commercial bank and investment bank. Although it was not a lender of last resort for other financial institutions in the territories, it did bail out the Banque Commerciale Africaine during the 1930 crisis and it was the main note issuer in French colonial Africa. It performed all functions of a commercial bank including taking private and public deposits as well as issuing and discounting credits. As an investment bank, it was also granted to acquire shares in commercial companies. Throughout its existence, BAO's operations were mainly influenced by the agricultural production in the African territories and the macroeconomic environment in France and the rest of Europe. It facilitated the export of local agricultural products by providing lending for seed purchases and transportation infrastructure construction. As a result, the colonial economy transformed from one that relied on subsistence crops to cash crops. Whether the existence of BAO benefited local African colonial residents remains a question. Non-French citizens were not allowed to be shareholders of the bank and although the bank built a channel for capital inflows into the colonial territories, colonial residents had to pay tax duties on their imports and exports to the French state.

Appendix

Appendix: BAO legislation

This list is not exhaustive, but it gives an idea how detailed government involvement in the BAO's affairs was. Often there were implementing decrees in the French colonies corresponding to metropolitan legislation, plus local decrees on a multitude of minor matters connected with BAO. Important legislation is in **bold**.

In the French legal system, a law is a statute issued by the Parliament; an ordinance (*ordonnance*) is a statutory instrument issued by the cabinet to help implement a law; a decree (*décret*) is an executive order issued by the cabinet; and an *arrêté* is a decision by a cabinet minister, usually in this case the Minister for the Colonies. A decree-law (*décret-loi*), which no longer exists under the Fifth Republic (since 1958), was a statute issued by the cabinet in an area normally reserved for the Parliament. In French colonies, the governor-general of several colonies or the governor of a single colony had the role played by the cabinet and its members in France.

For some legislation, parentheses list the date and page on which it can be found in the *Journal officiel de la République française* (JORF).

* * * * *

France, law of 13 December 1901 – A general law on the organization of colonial banks.

France, decree of 29 June 1901 – Established the Banque de l'Afrique Occidentale (BAO). (See also JORF, 6 July 1901, page 4117, for corrections to the original text.)

France, *arrêté* of 5 July 1901 – Entrusted the regulatory oversight of the BAO branch in Senegal to a local official.

France, decree of 11 December 1902 – Created a branch in Porto-Novo, Dahomey (now Benin).

France, decree of 21 December 1901 – Made a minor change to BAO's statutes to make them like the corresponding provision of the statutes of another French colonial bank, the Banque de l'Indochine.

France, decree of 4 June 1904 – Modified BAO's statutes and raised its authorized capital from its original level of 1.5 million French francs to 5.895 million francs.

France, decree of 9 June 1904 (another decree) – Created an agency in Monrovia, Liberia (not a French colony).

France, decree of 13 January 1906 – Created a branch in Grand-Bassam, Côte d'Ivoire.

France, decree of 28 January 1906 – Raised BAO's authorized capital to 5.9865 million francs.

France, decree of 24 April 1906 – Closed the agency in Monrovia, Liberia.

France, decree of 7 July 1910 – Raised BAO's authorized capital to 6 million francs.

France, decree of 4 August 1914 – Allowed governors-general or local governors in French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa to relieve BAO of its obligation to redeem notes in specie if they judged it necessary, and to impose an upper limit to local note issue or a maximum ratio of notes to metallic reserves. This was a World War I emergency measure.

France, decree of 2 September 1914 – Transferred the headquarters of BAO from Paris to Bordeaux (to move it farther from the front lines during the early days of World War I).

France, decree of 1 January 1915 – Returned BAO's headquarters to Paris.

French West Africa, governor-general's decree of 16 December 1916 – Increased BAO's note issue limit from the old ratio of three times its metallic reserves to four times. There was also a later decree by the governor-general, by 1918, increasing the limit to seven times the metallic reserves.

France, *arrêté* of 1 November 1917 — Personnel change to the government regulator (commissioner) for BAO.

France, decree of 19 December 1917 – Transferred the Senegal branch of BAO from Saint-Louis to Dakar; transferred the Senegal agency of BAO from Dakar to Saint-Louis.

France, decree of 31 January 1919 – Suspended for the duration of the war the application of Article 9 of the decree of 29 June 1901 (under which the combined amount of notes in circulation, current accounts, and the bank's other debts was not to exceed three times the amount of authorized capital plus reserves). (Although hostilities had ceased in November 1918, technically World War I was not over until a peace treaty had been signed, which had not yet happened.)

France, decree of 19 November 1919 – Extended the effects of the decree of 31 January 1919 until further notice.

France, decree of 17 December 1919 – Made changes to the Commission de surveillance des banques coloniales, which supervised BAO.

France, decree of 17 December 1919 (another decree) – Created an agency in Douala, Cameroon. The decree became effective in May 1921.

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- France, decree of 4 March 1920** – Repealed the decree of 4 August 1914.
- France, decree of 31 December 1920 – Created an agency in Lomé, Togo.
- France, decree of 20 May 1921 – Made BAO notes legal tender in Cameroon and Togo, which before World War I had been German colonies.
- France, decrees of 18 June 1921, 22 June 1922, 24 May 1923, 25 June 1924, 19 June 1925, 9 December 1925, 26 June 1926, 17 July 1926, 16 December 1926, 18 January 1927, 19 February 1927, 19 March 1927, 20 May 1927, 24 July 1927, 14 December 1927, 9 February 1928, 28 March 1928, 14 June 1928, 23 August 1928, and 26 December 1928 – Extended the charter of the bank. (The bank's initial 20-year charter had expired. The extensions ranged from months to a year. The French government would finally approve a new long-term charter in 1929.)
- France, decree of 6 May 1922 – Concerned relations between BAO and colonial treasuries in French West Africa.
- France, decree of 6 May 1922 – Authorized the French commissioner (chief official) in Togo to relieve BAO of the obligation to redeem its notes in specie.
- France, decree of 21 May 1924 – Created an agency in Bamako, French Sudan (now Mali).
- France, decree of 22 June 1925 – Created a branch in Brazzaville, French Equatorial Africa (now Republic of the Congo).
- France, decree of 9 December 1925 – Extended the charter of the bank for six months and created agencies in Port-Gentil, Gabon; Pointe-Noire, French Equatorial Africa (now Congo-Brazzaville); and Libreville, Gabon.
- France, decree of 10 February 1927 – Concerned relations between BAO and colonial treasuries in French Equatorial Africa.
- France and Banque de l'Afrique Occidentale, agreement (*convention*) of 24 February 1927 – Among other things, this agreement required BAO to make exchanges between France and West Africa without transaction fees other than the actual post office or telegraph costs.
- French Equatorial Africa, arrêtés of 20 October 1926 (two) and 19 March 1927 – Modified the tax on BAO note circulation in French Equatorial Africa (*Journal officiel de l'Afrique équatoriale française*, 1 September 1927).
- France, decree of 29 June 1927 – Confirmed the arrêtés of French Equatorial Africa listed just above on taxing BAO note circulation.
- France, decree of 30 December 1927 – Created an agency in Kaolack, Senegal.
- France, decree of 10 January 1929 – Created an agency in Cotonou, Dahomey (now Benin).
- France, law of 29 January 1929** – Extended BAO's charter for 20 years and introduced minority government ownership. (See also JORF, 16 février 1929, page 1938, for minor corrections to the original text.)
- France and BAO, agreement of 26 June 1931** – Concerned BAO's rescue of the Banque Commerciale Africaine and the Banque Française de l'Afrique, which had failed as a result of the depression of 1929. The French government agreed to a 15 million franc guarantee for their financial resolution.
- France, decree of 24 November 1931 – Personnel change to BAO administrator.
- France, law of 12 April 1932 – Approved the agreement of 26 June 1931.
- France, decree of 10 June 1933 – Closed the agency in Rufisque, Senegal.
- France and BAO, agreement of 26 July 1934 – Allowed BAO to set a tax on transfers between France and Africa (as a means of influencing capital movements).
- France, decree of 1 May 1935 – Created an agency in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.
- France, decree of 8 August 1935 – Approved the agreement of 26 July 1934.
- France, arrêté of 3 September 1935 – Set the tax on transfers of funds from France at 0.35 percent for French West Africa and Togo and 0.25 percent for French Equatorial Africa and Cameroon. (Apparently the tax applied only to movements of funds from France, not to France.)
- France, decree of 14 December 1935 – Approved French West Africa, governor-general's Arrêté No. 2460 of 29 October 1935, imposing a tax on BAO notes in French West Africa.
- France, arrêté of 2 May 1936 – Reduced the tax on transfers of funds from France to 0.10 percent for all the African territories BAO served.
- France, arrêté of 23 May 1936 – Personnel change to the government regulator for BAO.
- France, decree of 29 May 1936 – Personnel change to BAO administrator.
- France, decree of 4 June 1936 – Closed agency in Saint-Louis, Senegal.
- France, decree of 18 September 1936 – Personnel change to BAO administrator.
- France, law of 1 October 1936 – Allowed colonial banks to include French francs (meaning franc notes and coins) as part of their reserves (article 7).
- France, arrêté of 7 October 1936 – Raised the tax on transfers of funds from France to 0.35 percent for all the African territories BAO served.
- France, decree of 4 October 1936 – Personnel change to BAO administrator.

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- France, decree of 15 December 1936 — Personnel change to BAO administrator.
- France, decree of 22 December 1936 — Closed the agency in Pointe-Noire, French Equatorial Africa (now Congo-Brazzaville).
- France, arrêté of 17 June 1937 — Reduced the tax on transfers of funds from France to 0.10 percent for all the African territories BAO served.
- France, decree of 3 September 1937 — Created an agency in Bobo-Dioulasso, Côte d'Ivoire.
- France, decree of 8 December 1937 — Set maximum note issue at 1.2 billion francs.
- France, decree-law of 24 May 1938 — Authorized colonial banks of issue to make loans for public supplies and public works.
- France, decree of 19 June 1938 — Established a retirement fund for BAO employees.
- France, decree of 18 January 1939 — Set maximum note issue at 1.4 billion francs.
- France, decree of 4 February 1940 — Set maximum note issue at 1.6 billion francs.
- French Equatorial Africa, governor-general's decree-law of 9 October 1940** — Following French Equatorial Africa's decision to side with the Free French government during World War II, the governor-general authorized government notes called *bons de caisse* or *bons Larminat*. This was a step towards establishing a note issue separate from that of French West Africa, which sided with the Vichy French government. Notes of the Banque de l'Afrique Occidentale continued to circulate because it was impractical to replace them all immediately. The notes were technically illegal, but were legalized after the fact by the Free French ordinance of 24 July 1942 cited below.
- France (Vichy), decree of 19 October 1940 — Set maximum note issue at 2 billion francs.
- France (Vichy), law of 9 November 1940 — Concerned the administration of BAO.
- France (Vichy), arrêté of 20 November 1940 — Personnel change to the government regulator for BAO.
- France (Vichy), law of 9 December 1940 — Changed various provisions for BAO and other large colonial note-issuing banks about government appointees on their boards of directors (JORF, 12 décembre 1940, page 6075).
- France, arrêté of 13 January 1941 — Raised the tax on transfers of funds from France to 0.25 percent for all the African territories BAO served.
- Anglo-Free French financial agreement of 19 March 1941** — This agreement preserved the prewar exchange rate of the French franc with the pound sterling (and later with the U.S. dollar, when the United States entered World War II). French West Africa remained aligned with the Vichy regime.
- France (Vichy), decree of 4 July 1941 — Set maximum note issue at 2.2 billion francs.
- Free France, ordinances of 2 December 1941 and 24 July 1942** — The Free French government stripped BAO of the power to issue notes in French Equatorial Africa and Cameroon (ordinance of 24 July 1942). The ordinance of 2 December 1941 created the Caisse centrale de la France libre (CCFL) as the financial arm of Free French government. It was given note-issuing privileges by the ordinance of 24 July 1942.
- France (Vichy), decree of 9 February 1942 — Set maximum note issue at 2.4 billion francs.
- France (Vichy), decree of 5 March 1942 — Set maximum note issue at 2.6 billion francs.
- France (Vichy), decree of 15 March 1942 — Set maximum note issue at 2.8 billion francs.
- France (Vichy), arrêté of 17 April 1942 — Eliminated the tax on transfers of funds from France for all the African territories BAO served.
- France (Vichy), law of 12 May 1942 — BAO's maximum note issue could be increased by a decree of the Minister Secretary of State for Finance and the Secretary of State for the Colonies.
- France (Vichy), Law No. 521, 23 May 1942 — Allowed BAO's note issue to increase through decrees signed by the minister of finance plus the minister for the colonies, rather than only by the head of the government (JORF, 29 mai 1942, page 1902).
- France (Vichy), decree of 27 May 1942 — Set maximum note issue at 3 billion francs.
- Free France, Decree No. 297, 1 June 1942 — Stripped certain functions from BAO in Cameroon and gave them to the Crédit agricole mutual du Cameroun Français.
- France (Vichy), decree of 20 July 1942 — Set maximum note issue at 3.5 billion francs.
- Notes of the Banque de l'Afrique Occidentale ceased to be legal tender in French Equatorial Africa and Cameroon on 1 October 1942.** The first local coins there were issued in 1943, being a Free French issue for French Equatorial Africa.
- France (Vichy), arrêté of 24 December 1942 — Set the salary of BAO's president at 200,000 francs a year, plus 25,000 francs of allowance (JORF, 1 janvier 1943, page 16).
- Anglo-Free French agreement of 2 February 1943** — By this agreement, in many of the areas under its control, the Free French government devalued local francs from pre-World War II rates based on 176.625 French francs = UK£1, or 43.80 French francs = US\$1, to new rates of 200 local francs = UK£1, or 50 local francs = US\$1.

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French West Africa switched allegiance from the Vichy French government to the Free French government on 23 November 1943.

France (Vichy), arrêté of 19 April 1943 — Personnel change to the government commissioner for BAO (JORF, 12 juin 1943, page 1607).

France (Vichy), ordinance of 2 May 1943 – Set maximum note issue at 7 billion francs.

France (Vichy), arrêtés of 5 June 1943 and 10 June 1943 — Personnel changes to the government commissioner for BAO (JORF, 12 juin 1943, page 1607; JORF, 2 juillet 1943, page 1792).

Free France, ordinance of 2 February 1944 and France, Ordinance No. 45-1356, 20 June 1945 – Created the Caisse centrale de la France d'outre-mer (CCFOM) as the successor to the Caisse centrale de la France libre.

Anglo-Free French agreement of 8 February 1944 — Following the liberation of most of France by the Allies during the Second World War, the metropolitan French franc was devalued to the level of the overseas francs under Free French control (200 local francs = UK£1, or 50 local francs = US\$1). Doing so in effect restored the French franc as the anchor currency.

France, arrêté of 20 January 1945 — Personnel change to the government regulator (commissioner) for BAO.

France, decree of 3 March 1945 — Personnel change to BAO administrator.

France, arrêté of 4 April 1945 — Personnel change to the government administrator for BAO. (JORF, 16-17 avril 1945, page 2140).

France, decree of 23 August 1945 — Personnel change to BAO administrator.

France, decree of 23 August 1945 (another decree) — Created an agency at Bangui, Ubangi-Shari (now Central African Republic).

France, arrêté of 19 November 1945 — Personnel change to the government administrator for BAO (JORF, 30 novembre 1945, page 7948).

France, Decree No. 45-0136, 25 December 1945 — France created the CFA franc at a premium from the former 1-to-1 rate of local francs with the French franc. The rate was 1 CFA franc = 1.70 French francs. The premium offset most of the French franc's devaluation from 50 to 119.10699 French francs = US\$1 on 25 December 1945. The revaluation reflected lower wartime economic destruction in the colonies than in France. The new cross rate with the pound sterling was 300 CFA francs = UK£1.

France, arrêté of 10 January 1946 — Set salaries for auditors (*censeurs*) at various BAO offices.

France, decree of 30 March 1946 – Set maximum note issue at 9 billion francs.

France, law of 21 March 1947 — Concerned denominations of notes (article 81).

France, Decree No. 48-107, 7 January 1948 – Set maximum note issue at 11 billion francs (JORF, 18 janvier 1948, page 581).

France, Decree No. 48-848, 18 May 1948 – Set maximum note issue at 12 billion francs (JORF, 21 mai 1948, page 4858).

France, Decree No. 48-1326, 25 August 1948 – Set maximum note issue at 16 billion francs (JORF, 27 août 1948, page 8455).

France, Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, Avis No. 352 de l'Office des Changes, 17 October 1948 — The CFA franc had followed the French franc's devaluation on 26 January 1948, but this time it was in effect revalued against French franc to offset almost all of the French franc's devaluation from 214.392 to 264 French francs = US\$1 on 17 October 1948. The new exchange rate was 1 CFA franc = 2 French francs.

After BAO's charter expired in 1949 it was temporarily extended a number of times by the French government while awaiting a more comprehensive reform (Comité monétaire de la zone franc 1953: 77).

France, Decree No. 49-206, 3 February 1949 – Set maximum note issue at 20 billion CFA francs (JORF, 16 février 1949, page 1736).

France, arrêté of 22 March 1950 – Named an administrator for BAO (JORF, 30 mars 1950, page 3459).

France, decree of 27 March 1950 – Set maximum note issue at 23 billion CFA francs (JORF, 6 avril 1950, page 3739).

France, decree of 12 February 1951 – Set maximum note issue at 29 billion CFA francs (JORF, 2 mars 1951, page 2178).

France, decree of 22 September 1952 and arrêté of 1 June 1954 – Personnel changes to the government regulator for BAO (JORF, 26 septembre 1952, page 9310; JORF, 13 juin 1954, page 5541).

France, Decree No. 55-103, 20 January 1955 – Established the capital of the Institut d'Émission de l'Afrique Occidentale Française et du Togo (IEAOFT), which was to succeed BAO as the note issuer in French West Africa and Togo (JORF, 25 janvier 1955, pages 910-911).

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France, Decree No. 55-104, 20 January 1955 – Created the Institut d'Émission de l'Afrique Équatoriale Française et du Cameroun (IEAEFC) to succeed the Caisse Centrale de la France d'Outre-Mer as the note issuer in French Equatorial Africa and Cameroon (JORF, 25 janvier 1955, pages 911-912).

France, Decree No. 55-938, 15 July 1955 – Approved the statutes of the IEAOFT (JORF, 16 juillet 1955, pages 7094-7096).

France, Decree No. 55-939, 15 July 1955 – Established the capital of the IEAOFT at 1 billion French francs (JORF, 16 juillet 1955, page 7096).

France, Decree No. 55-940, 15 July 1955 – Approved the statutes of the IEAEFC (JORF, 16 juillet 1955, pages 7097-7098).

France, Decree No. 55-941, 15 July 1955 – Established the capital of the IEAEFC at 1 billion French francs (JORF, 16 juillet 1955, page 7099).

France, interministerial arrêté of 29 September 1955 – Set the date for transfer of BAO's note issue to IEAOFT as 30 September 1955 (JORF, 1 octobre 1955, page 9655).

France, two decrees of 4 October 1955 – Approved the agreements of 26 September 1955 between the French minister of finance and economy and the minister of overseas affairs on the one hand and the Institut d'Émission de l'Afrique Occidentale Française et du Togo and the Institut d'Émission de l'Afrique Équatoriale Française et du Cameroun on the other hand concerning the transfer of BAO's note issue (JORF, 6 octobre 1955, page 9815).

Sources: Alibert (1983); BCEAO (2000, v. 1, especially pages 219-233, 301-303, 378-383; 2012); France, Commission de surveillance des banques coloniales; France (1950: 4, 61); *Journal officiel de la France libre*; *Journal officiel de la République française* (including its annual *Tables du Journal officiel de la République française*); Mazard (1953); France (Vichy), Ministère de l'intérieur, *Informations générales*. Almost all of the legislation cited is available through Gallica or Legifrance.

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