

FEATURED REVIEWS

Segu and its Wake: Authority, Legitimacy, and Narratives of Power in Mali's History

Moussa Sow, *L'État de Ségou et ses chefferies aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles. Côté cour, côté jardin*

Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2021. Pp 300. €28, hardcover (ISBN: 9791030005769)

Richard L. Roberts, *Conflicts of Colonialism: The Rule of Law, French Soudan, and Faama Mademba Sèye*

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. 288. \$44.99, hardcover (9781009098045); \$39.99, ebook (ISBN: 9781009106849)

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(Received 17 December 2023; accepted 17 January 2025)

Keywords: West Africa; Mali; Middle Niger; indirect rule; colonialism; statecraft; colonial intermediaries

In a town on the Niger River, under the cover of night, a boy wandered into the royal palace. He was never to be seen again. Soon, rumors started swirling around, claiming the king himself had the boy kidnapped and killed, used as sacrifice for a ritual meant to fortify his power. Overcome with anguish, the boy's mother appealed to the authorities, her son's disappearance fueling a host of existing accusations against the king's despotism and cruelty. The king, in turn, dismissed the allegations as baseless, and claimed jealous rivals who coveted his throne had fomented the crisis. The boy never turned up, but his remains were also never recovered. Suspicion abounded, but in the absence of evidence, the matter ultimately died down.

This story may well have been found among the pages of Maryse Condé's *Segu*, the eponymous novel set in the Bamanan polity that flourished on the Niger in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The novel's opening lines, "Segu is a garden where cunning grows. Segu is built on treachery," allude to common themes in the state's historical sources and historiography: intrigue, jealousy, and violence permeate Segu's oral and written archive.¹ Yet, the disappearance of little Babo Diakité, which also fed the rumor mill and sowed mistrust and fears in and around a king's palace, is no fictional tale. It occurred in 1899 in Sinsani (Sansanding in French sources), a town previously located under Segu's sphere of influence, which became a French colonial protectorate in the late nineteenth century.

¹ Maryse Condé, *Segu: A Novel*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Penguin Random House, 1984), 3.

In recent publications covering consecutive periods in the Middle Niger River Valley's history, Moussa Sow and Richard Roberts, two seasoned scholars of the region, revisit Segou and Sansanding's pasts. The Middle Niger was a nodal area of West Africa throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, connected by riverways and land routes to the Voltaic region, the Atlantic ocean, and the Saharan world. A robust scholarship, which both authors' have contributed to, has explored the intertwined histories of slavery, power, and trade in the region as it underwent major social, political, and economic change in the modern era.² The two books under review come late in their authors' careers, and build upon their prior work. Sadly, Moussa Sow's was published posthumously, as he passed away just a few weeks before its release.³ In his monograph, Sow mines oral traditions to shed new light on the modes of statecraft, governmentality, and territorial domination Segou exercised in the region from the eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth century. Set in the 1850s onwards, the decades of French encroachment and early colonial rule in hinterland West Africa, Richard Roberts's book investigates shifts in the structure of early colonialism in the French Soudan through the trajectory of Mademba Sy, the colonial-era *faama* (king) of Sansanding. Where Sow adopts regional and hyper-local scales of analysis, Roberts weaves together imperial and biographical approaches.

Writing about precolonial African political formations as shared but contested spheres, Amy Niang has argued that "both the colonial project of modernization and the postcolonial imperative of decolonization amounted to interventions with dislocating effects for African societies, disempowered and effectively unable to mobilize, in their rapport with the state, a whole register of ideas, values and beliefs."⁴ In a way, Sow and Roberts's monographs provide a window into the specific systems that were dislocated, and how this dislocation process played out, in one region of West Africa. Indeed, early architects of the French Soudan, seeking to build and exploit states that would yield revenue, either corrupted, co-opted, or erased elements of indigenous statecraft and governmentality. Mademba's Sansanding was a colonial creation, but incorporated symbols and rituals meant to reflect local understandings of state power. It never worked. As Roberts notes, "Archinard's model of the reconstituted African kingdom" proved counterproductive and burdensome, "because the lack of legitimacy often fueled rebellions" (121). What, then, had previously been the nature of political structures in the Middle Niger, and what social worlds and ecologies were they built around? To better understand precolonial Segou, Sow looks beyond the "regime of historicity" circulated today in the Segou region, which "privileges a soothing reading of the past" (22). Instead, he tracks down forgotten, silenced, or marginalized historical narratives about Segou. This approach reveals the many ways communities in the Middle Niger forged their own ideas and beliefs around sovereignty, territoriality, authority, and legitimacy, whether they lived under Segou, at its margins, outside its purview, or challenged its power. Read together, Sow and Roberts's monographs therefore show the evolution of key components of statecraft and governmentality, from the era of Segou's hegemony through early colonial experiments in indirect rule and African protectorates.

²Richard Roberts, "Long Distance Trade and Production: Sinsani in the Nineteenth Century," *The Journal of African History* 21, no. 2 (1980): 169–88; Richard Roberts, *Warriors, Merchants, and Slaves: The State and the Economy in the Middle Niger Valley, 1700–1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); Richard Roberts, *Two Worlds of Cotton: Colonialism and the Regional Economy in the French Soudan, 1800–1946* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Moussa Sow, "Entre mythe et histoire, l'évolution du culte de Tyanaba à Samafoulala, au Mali," *Cargo: Revue internationale d'anthropologie culturelle et sociale* 8 (2018): 195–213; Moussa Sow, "Les traditions orales du centre de l'État de Ségou Revisitées à la lumière de celles de sa périphérie en rive gauche," *Studia Africana* 23 (2012): 87–99; Moussa Sow, "The Daily Life of Slaves in the Last Years of the Bamana States of Kaarta and Ségou," in *Slavery in Africa. Archeology and Memory*, eds. Paul Lane and Kevin Macdonald (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 26–47.

³For an obituary and bio-bibliography, see Anne Doquet and Jean-Paul Colleyn, "Un auteur précis et discret: Moussa Sow (1953–2021)," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 244 (2021): 745–52.

⁴Amy Niang, *The Postcolonial African State in Transition: Stateness and Modes of Sovereignty* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 30.

Moussa Sow's *L'État de Ségou et ses chefferies aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles: côté cour, côté jardin* ("State and Chiefdoms in Segou in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: Tilt and Shift") revisits the history of "one of West Africa's best documented historical states," and offers two main contributions.⁵ First, it is a work of political anthropology that examines how Segou deployed power, diplomacy, and warfare in the Middle Niger, and provides insights on the social, gender, and environmental histories of Segou. Second, Sow interrogates how power shaped the production of Segou's oral archive, and in doing so, provides a rich contribution to the literature on the critical use of oral traditions as historical sources.

From the eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth century, the Segou State — which called itself the *Fanga* (Bamanan: the Might) — dominated the Middle Niger. Spatially, the central state, the *todaa* (pot of millet porridge, Segou's staple food) was surrounded by smaller, satellite chiefdoms. Previous scholarship has largely described the periphery as an amorphous terrain that Segou "used and abused" through plunders and slave raids (19). Departing from such depictions, Sow shows that the peripheral chiefdoms held a complex array of functions in Segou's carefully designed statecraft apparatus. It is also precisely because of the role they played in Segou's statecraft that the chiefdoms would periodically become the targets of Segou's warfare, as some would grow rebellious, or strong enough to be deemed threats. In Sow's view, the center-periphery relationship was thus characterized by a "cyclical process" that put Segou in a constant state of anxiety over the contradictory imperatives to first consolidate, then placate, and subsequently rebuild, its periphery (11).

Epics produced from the central state form a robust corpus, which scholars have tapped into to reconstruct Segou's political history.⁶ For his investigation, Sow widens the lens and shifts the perspective — hence the book's subtitle — by moving away from the central state, and locating his research terrain in the periphery. What might we learn about statecraft in Segou, Sow asks, when collecting oral traditions from its variegated peripheries, rather than its core? What fresh insights would this new peripheral angle yield? Sow hypothesizes that a view from the fringes reveals logics and narratives of power that the central state's well-studied "diplomatic archives" — oral traditions internally produced for self-representation to the outside world — otherwise obscure (35). In the peripheral counter-archives Sow mines, the *Fanga*'s statecraft strategies appear more clearly.

The book is divided into three parts. Part One, "Revisiting an Old Problem: What is a Chiefdom?" which comprises three chapters, is a case-study of Ndotan, a chiefdom located in the Beledugu province of Segou. Sow collected and probed oral traditions from numerous villages and interlocutors across the Ndotan area. As he shows, this particular chiefdom was likely short-lived: Segou annihilated it when it grew too strong. Sow extrapolates several conclusions from his investigation into Ndotan and other similar political formations. As he demonstrates, chiefdoms did not merely exist as tributary entities. Rather, they were part of a complex scaffolding Segou designed, forming a protective military and spiritual belt around the core. They each held specific functions, including garrison towns, intelligence-gathering and espionage centers, sacred sites, or commercial outposts. As was the case with Ndotan, their status was at times consolidated by their leaders' matrimonial alliances with Segou princesses and female crown slaves. Sow describes these women and their entourage as "institutions," or "embassies," that is, micro-extensions of the central state in the periphery (259–60).

The two chapters in Part Two, "The Periphery's Periphery: Independent Territorial Outgrowths of Chiefdoms in the Empire's Borderlands," largely focus on the Caka. These little-known, elusive communities, orbited around the outskirts of peripheral chiefdoms, and managed to maintain strategic independence vis-à-vis the state. Sow came across their traces "serendipitously," when conducting

⁵ Kevin MacDonald and Seydou Camara, "Segu, Slavery and Sifinso," in *Power and Landscape in Atlantic West Africa*, eds. J. Cameron Monroe and Akinwumi Ogundiran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 171.

⁶ David C. Conrad, ed., *A State of Intrigue: The Epic of Bamana Segou According to Tayiru Banbera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

oral and archeological research for another project (131).⁷ Where Ndotan exemplified a more conventional and better-memorialized chiefdom, the Caka have been “relegated to the lower confines of historical memory” (172). Sow describes them as independent “political micro-formations” that “no longer paid tribute” to Segu (183). They were marauding and outcast communities, circulating and surviving on the margins of Segu’s peripheral chiefdoms and near commercial routes, raiding villages and caravans. In turn, the chiefdoms maintained an ambiguous relationship with the clandestine Caka, as part of their own strategies of expanding their political sphere. While they frequently fought and chased out the Caka “mercenaries,” they also occasionally collaborated with them through interactions “mediated by hunters” (188–89).

The last two chapters, which make up Part Three, “Local Memories and State Power: Transversal Re-readings of Institutions and Practices of Power,” revisit familiar themes of Segu’s historiography: slavery, war, and the sacred and gendered expressions of power. Sow refines previous studies through new data collected in Segu’s northwestern reaches. Sow first investigates the daily lives of slaves in this region, stressing that slavery “irrigated the entire society, including the economy, kinship, and social organization,” and that annual large-scale slave raiding operations remained a key element of Segu’s “governmentality” (211, 196). Still, he sheds light on the “extreme diversity... of social practices linked to slavery” (197). Next, Sow shifts to a lengthy discussion of the *masa*, local peace-keeping chiefs endowed with spiritual and political power, whom Segu used as relays of governmentality. Considerably expanding previous studies on these figures, Sow traces changes in the gendered expression of the *masa*’s authority and legitimacy, from the wake of the Mali and Songhay empires, to the expansion of Segu.⁸ He uncovers a gradual shift overtime from a predominant and “authentic” *masamuso* (woman-king) figure — a *masa* who underwent castration upon taking office — to the palimpsest figure of the *masacè* (man-king), on whom a genital mutilation was performed posthumously (249).

L’État de Ségou et ses chefferies is an important contribution to the literature on critical approaches to oral historical sources. Sow’s constant reflections on method, and evaluation of oral sources, is a line running throughout the book. The monograph is the result of intense, sustained fieldwork carried out over the years. From 2008 onwards, Sow visited 150 villages, 20 of which became the focus of a more intensive study. Eventually, he narrowed his investigation to five chiefdoms, which he examined “under a microscope” (9). Sow is clear that he privileged oral testimonies and histories from elders, over the well-rehearsed performances of professional wordsmiths (*griots*). The former, whom he deems better local historians, were, in his view, more open to the exegesis of oral traditions, and attuned to the nuances and contradictions embedded in oral archives.

A capacious scholar, Sow wove together approaches from socio-linguistics (his home discipline), anthropology, history, and sociology. The result is a densely argued, analytical rather than narrative text, where considerable space is dedicated to Sow evaluating and probing oral sources, and explicitly engaging scholarly discussions and debates. The work of Jean Bazin, in particular, looms large, with Sow mobilizing and expanding upon two key concepts: that of Segu as a contested “political sphere” shared among a variety of actors, and that of oral traditions as “epic or anecdotal residue of political discourse” (31). Based on these two notions, Sow is particularly attentive to slight local variations among oral traditions, tracing a cartography of dissonances across the oral archive to reconstruct the contours of Segu’s political organization and the nature of Segu’s power.

Perhaps the most compelling contribution of Sow’s monograph is his treatment of environmental history and material culture. In doing so, Sow refreshingly departs from the bulk of the scholarship on Segu that has emphasized the state’s violence, an emphasis best captured in Claude Meillassoux’s

⁷For more on the original project and investigation, see Moussa Sow, “Sosso village et Sosso royaume: quels rapports?,” *Études maliennes* 66 (2007).

⁸See: Jean Bazin, “Princes désarmés, corps dangereux. Les ‘rois-femmes’ de la région de Segu,” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 28, nos. 111–12 (1988): 375–441; and Sadia Traoré, “Notes sur le Dadougou,” *Notes Africaines* 126 (1970): 33–42.

assertion that “Segu’s function was war and the capture of men.”⁹ Against this backdrop, and without downplaying Segu’s militarism and enslaving power, Sow examines another aspect of its statecraft: its management of landscapes, animals, and food. For instance, reflecting upon the Caka’s “close relationship with minerals,” he interprets the community’s use of millstones and grinders, as opposed to mortar and pestle, as evidence of their highly mobile, clandestine lifestyle, and constant concern with a threat of displacement (173). He takes the reader along as he tracks hills, caves, freshwater sources, and stone mounds, in search of Caka settlements. Lastly, under Sow’s pen, honey becomes lifeblood, culminating in his compelling rewriting of Segu as a “melliferous state” (30). Sow sheds light on the way the state “rejuvenated ecosystems through its countless pollinating beehives, nourishing fruit trees, and discovery and use of water sources” (31). Segovians trained and mobilized bees in combat, and engaged in sophisticated and large-scale apiculture. They bottled honey for distribution, or distilled it into mead. Segu even named its most widespread state tax, which “each village paid to the crown annually,” the *disŋgo* (the honey cost) (260). All in all, Sow’s monograph yields fresh insights on the eighteenth and nineteenth century political, social, gender, and environmental histories of Segu.

About fifty kilometers down the Niger’s stream from Segu sits Sansanding. This peripheral town “never had nor sought political sovereignty.” Rather, as Richard Roberts lays out, its people “had been content to leave the political kingdom to the ruling dynasties of nearby Segu and devote themselves to their commercial, clerical, agricultural, and fishing endeavors” (85). Yet, in the early decades of colonization, Sansanding turned into a state-recognized kingdom, an oddity Roberts sets out to explore. His monograph *Conflicts of Colonialism: The Rule of Law, French Soudan, and Faama Mademba Sèye*, is a microhistory of the shifting structure of colonialism in the early decades of French conquest and rule in West Africa, largely set in Sansanding. Roberts shows how the conflicting doctrines, interests, and pursuits of various actors involved in the colonial administration, led to mutations of colonialism in the French Soudan. He does so by reconstructing the trajectory of Mademba Sèye (1852–1918), a Senegal-born post and telegraph employee turned French-made king of Sansanding in the Soudan.¹⁰ As Roberts shows, Mademba was a shrewd reader of colonial transformations, who continuously adapted his strategies to acquire and maintain power.

In doing so, Roberts demonstrates the many uncertainties and post-conquest possibilities that shaped the early decades of colonization. Indeed, to understand Mademba’s rise, it is necessary to contextualize the years during which his career unfolded, between 1869–1918. At the time, the colonial system was in the process of defining itself, rendering Mademba one of the actors at the forefront of French colonialism in West Africa. To put things in perspective: by the time the 1884–85 Berlin Conference occurred, Mademba had already been a colonial employee for fifteen years. The creation of the Sansanding state, and his nomination as king, predated the creation of French West Africa by four years. During these key decades of early colonization, France waged wars, signed treaties, and sought to determine — through debates and experimentation — the manner in which it would govern the colonies. It is therefore in this transitional era between African sovereignty and European colonization, that Mademba fashioned his career.

Through eight chronological chapters, Roberts proceeds on two intersecting tracks. On the one hand, he traces the divergent ideologies and transforming practices of colonialism. The first four chapters explore conflicts between partisans of military and civilian rule. As the latter prevailed in 1898–99, the remaining four chapters examine how colonial officials came up with various doctrines, which sometimes complemented each other and sometimes clashed. On the other hand, Roberts reconstructs Mademba’s continued self-fashioning — a “complex bricolage” — to adapt to these

⁹Claude Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold*, trans. Alide Dasnois (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 59.

¹⁰Mademba likely switched his surname from Sèye to Sy. In contemporary Mali and Senegal, he is known by the latter. To avoid confusion, I refer to him by his first name throughout this essay.

transformations (127). Mademba had first demonstrated his loyalty and dependability to military leaders during the conquest, gaining their trust and reaping retribution — what Roberts calls the “bargains of collaboration” — including the throne of Sansanding (12). He maintained his power, despite significant threats, by continuously reinventing himself, from trusted auxiliary to frontline soldier to agricultural innovator. Depending on the chapter and its source base, Mademba himself slips in and out of the narrative’s forefront. Often taking center stage instead are the plurality of perspectives on colonialism within the administration, and the system’s inner workings, which Roberts brings out in painstaking detail.

Chapter One, set between 1852–88, traces Mademba’s birth in 1852 in Saint-Louis, Senegal, his French school education, and his rise as colonial telegraph employee. Mademba’s family roots are murky. His change of last name from Sèye, as indicated in early colonial records, to Sy, as he called himself by the time he ruled in Sansanding, hint to likely low — possibly servile — social origins, and desire to claim a more prestigious Muslim clerical lineage. The telegraph line, where he gained employment, was a key communication tool in a context of overlapping and arduous military campaigns. Mademba played an instrumental role pushing the line westward, from Kayes to Bamako. Chapter Two turns to the conquest of the hinterland between 1886–91 under military commander Louis Archinard. An early proponent of indirect rule, Archinard sought to reward loyal African collaborators, leading to his decision to carve Sansanding out of what had been Segu’s sphere of power, turn it into a protectorate, and make Mademba its king. The tight personal relationship between Mademba and Archinard would carry on for decades.

Chapter Three covers Mademba’s early rule between 1891–95, shaken by multipronged rebellions that broke out in the region. The rebellions laid bare the fragile foundations of indirect rule, and the violence that would be required to maintain it. Chapter Four examines the transition from military to civilian rule in 1895–99, in a context of anti-militarism in the French Republic. Stepping inside Mademba’s palace alongside French journalists, the reader gets a direct look into Mademba’s self-fashioning strategies, from his elaborate sartorial choices to the lavish banquet he set up for his guests. This self-staging stands in sharp contrast with emerging allegations against him of despotic rule and violent abuse, particularly towards women.

The core chapters of the book are arguably the fifth and sixth, set in 1898–1900, when the people of Sansanding lodged formal complaints against Mademba to the colonial administration. Roberts works through the lengthy investigations these accusations triggered. The allegations included abuse of authority, sexual violence, murder, forced labor, requisitions in a time of famine, and the disappearance of Babo Diakitè. The accusations were substantiated enough that the administration placed Mademba under house arrest in Kayes, the colonial capital. The considerable paper trail the investigations and arrest generated, cemented Mademba’s large presence in the archive. In these chapters, the conflicts of colonialism are most apparent. Ideals of indirect rule based on local customs clashed with the imperative to retribute loyal African collaborators. Rhetorical promotion of the rule of law and transparency clashed with the upholding of colonial order through violence and the imperative to extract revenue from the colonies. In the end, the bargains Mademba had struck early on with the military proved enduring, and he was reinstated.

The seventh and eighth chapters cover Mademba’s, final, redemptive self-bricolage in 1900–31. In a context of French dependence on United States cotton, Mademba remade himself into an agricultural innovator poised to boost French economic development through the optimal exploitation of its colonies’ natural resources. Mademba took a two-month trip to France in the fall of 1906, visiting textile factories, attending conferences, and discussing his cotton plans with journalists across multiple cities. Roberts traces the final rewriting of Mademba’s personal history, through newspaper interviews he gave, and, after his death in 1918, through the revisionist biography his son wrote — to reuse Sow’s expression, Sansanding’s own diplomatic archives.

Conflicts of Colonialism is an insightful addition to French imperial history, and Malian political and social history, contributing to the literature on indirect rule, colonial intermediaries, and the

rule of law. The book also sheds light on the social and economic histories of cotton cultivation in the Soudan, and examines slavery, power, and migrations in the Middle Niger. Since Roberts's first encounter with the king of Sansanding in the archives over four decades ago, and despite his pull towards Mademba, he had remained reluctant to write the story of a despotic ruler, due to his "strong belief that history is made by ordinary people struggling to achieve justice and equity" (309). Roberts eventually freed himself from this discomfort by recognizing that Mademba's trajectory could help illuminate the shifts and conflicts that shaped emerging structures of power in early colonial West Africa. On that, the book delivers, as Roberts carefully and systematically brings out dissonances among various voices and sources in the colonial archive. The long road to writing the monograph was worth it, as readers will identify the array of sources, sets of methodologies, and expertise Roberts developed through his other studies over the decades. These include using civil and domestic disputes brought before colonial courts, and oral interviews conducted between 1978–1992. Mademba's photographic archive is also astutely put to use, showing that his self-fashioning and bricolage were no mere acts of political strategy. They found a concrete, material expression in the way he crafted his physical appearance, blending French military insignia and West African Muslim attire.

What are the stakes of tracing the histories of past political formations in West Africa? In contemporary Mali, as in Mademba's Sansanding, political elites routinely mobilize symbols of tradition and customary rule within states and institutions born out of colonial structures. In his recent *Les familles fondatrices de Bamako: une histoire de l'État au Mali* ("Bamako's Founding Families: A History of the State in Mali"), Bokar Sangaré analyzes the political influence of three contemporary families that trace their roots back to Bamako's alleged historic founders.¹¹ Since the 1990s, an array of political actors — ranging from local politicians to, most recently, UN officials — have sought these families out for informal support. As Sangaré shows, the so-called founding families helped legitimize authorities in power in times of protests and social contestation. Yet, for all their political weight, the narratives that entrenched these families' status as customary authorities, remain questionable. Can precolonial systems of power serve as reference points today? In 2012, in a searing indictment of military rule as a viable path for Mali, and against discourses rejecting democracy as a Western imposition, Moussa Sow noted the plurality of modes of governing that historically existed in West Africa. Authoritarian rule by a strongman, Sow argued, was but one of many models past societies imagined and enacted: "the idea (and practice) of the *fanga*, a power structured around violence or the threat of state violence, did not erase that of the *ton*—the free association of men for personal or public purposes—or that of the *mansaya*, sacred state power with decentralized dimensions."¹² Using past state formations as frames of reference for truly emancipatory and decolonial political projects, will require excavating and interrogating their histories — including the narratives they crafted, and those they sought to hide.

¹¹Bokar Sangaré, *Les Familles fondatrices. Une histoire de l'État au Mali* (Bamako: La Sahélienne, 2023).

¹²Moussa Sow, "Du coq à l'âne. Variations sur le thème de la démocratie par temps de crise politique," in *Le Mali entre doutes et espoirs. Réflexions sur la Nation à l'épreuve de la crise du Nord*, eds. Doulaye Konaté et al. (Bamako: Éditions Tombouctou, 2013), 119.