

# The Sahel : In What State ?

*By Emile Chabal*

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**Gregory Mann considers the history of the Sahel as a state, between precolonial imaginary, colonial structures and postcolonial conflicts. His conclusions reveal that the states in that particular region have a tendency to give up their state power and authority by sub-contracting state responsibilities to international organisations and NGOs.**

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Reviewed : Gregory Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel : The Road to Nongovernmentality*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, 281 p.

For historians of postcolonial African politics, there is one question that remains hard to answer: how is it that, in different ways and at different times, almost every part of the continent has experienced total state collapse? In some cases – such as Angola or Algeria – a violent colonial legacy loomed large in the immediate aftermath of decolonisation; in other cases – such as Côte d’Ivoire or the DRC – neo-liberal democratisation and structural adjustment programmes in the 1990s gutted the few state structures that existed. More recently, the rise of political Islam and radical jihadism has destabilised states as different as Algeria, Egypt, Kenya and Mali, while countries like Guinea Bissau have become part of a transnational, supra-state drug economy. To the untrained observer, Africa looks like a continent that is pre-programmed to endure the very worst that the world can throw at it.

Yet, while contemporary Africa has clearly been the site of brutal wars, rapacious resource extraction and shameless capitalist exploitation in the twentieth century, this cannot by itself explain the startling weakness of African states. Why is it that, time and again, they have been incapable (or unwilling) to protect their citizens? And what systemic consequences has this had for ‘governance’ on this diverse continent? Even if Gregory Mann’s multi-faceted book does

not offer any definitive answers, it does provide some important – and empirically-sophisticated – insights. Taking the Sahel as his case study, Mann tells the story of a region that went from the violence of French colonial rule in the 1940s to a strange mix of neo-traditional politics and NGO intervention in the 1990s.

The book's key conceptual contribution is that of “nongovernmentality” – a term that Mann uses to describe the way in which states have sub-contracted state responsibility to NGOs and other actors since decolonisation. This is not simply a conceptual point; it is a historical one too. As he puts it in the opening pages of the book:

...it was not in the period of neoliberal reform during the late Cold War and after, but rather precisely in the wake of independence, when African sovereignty was most highly-prized, that some of those who had worked to establish that sovereignty began to mortgage it (6)

By refocusing our attention on the way sovereignty was defined in the 1950s and 60s, he gives us a much more complete picture of how the states of the Sahel have become so obviously weak and fragmented. The wave of neo-liberal reforms and the subsequent jihadi threat have grafted themselves onto existing processes. They have not, by themselves, destroyed the state. This process began long before, in the redefinition of sovereignty in the 1970s.

## From colony to postcolony

Mann treats the Sahel as a broad space, but his main focus is on the part of French West Africa that was called Soudan and which subsequently became Mali. He develops his argument in three parts. The first is about the meaning of sovereignty in late colonial and early postcolonial Mali. Mann traces the stories of individuals like Madeira Keita, who were instrumental in defining the shape of the postcolonial state, and tracks the abolition of key colonial-era governance systems such as the *code de l'indigénat* and local chiefs. In the second part, Mann turns his attention to migration – both the east-west migration of hajj pilgrims between West Africa and Mecca, and north-south migration flows between Mali and France. The aim here is to explore how postcolonial states have attempted to monitor, record and control their populations, often even more stringently than colonial authorities before independence. Finally, the third part of the book focuses on the various ways in which American, French and local NGOs penetrated Malian politics from the 1970s onwards. On the back of an emerging human rights discourse, NGOs took over functions that the postcolonial state could not (or would not) provide and prised upon governmental systems in order to strengthen their legitimacy. In so doing, they helped unravel the fragile postcolonial order and paved the way for a new wave of foreign intervention, which culminated in the humiliation of the Malian government “inviting” the French to intervene on their behalf in 2013 in the war against jihadi fighters in the north of the country.

One of the great benefits of this long time span is that it allows Mann to emphasise the continuities between pre- and post-independence Mali. This shifts our chronology of decolonisation. As Mann shows, contested ideas of sovereignty formed the basis for the struggle to liberate the region from French rule and the postcolonial Malian state's vigorous attempts to reduce the power of local chiefs. These processes straddled the years of independence. In the 1970s, however, a discourse of human rights started to alter the boundaries of sovereignty. After a period when foreign involvement in domestic politics was viewed with hostility, the Malian government began to use – and be used by – international NGOs in the 1980s. The result of this analysis is that the late 1970s becomes the watershed decade in African politics. This is the point at which postcolonial ideas of sovereignty began to falter and alternative models emerged to take their place.

There is much to be said for Mann's argument. There is a good deal of recent literature about Africa and other parts of the world that has begun to see the 1970s as a crucial turning point in world politics.<sup>1</sup> Mann's claim that, from the 1970s, "humanitarian relief, which bled into longer-term development aid, and human rights activism would become increasingly powerful forces within the Sahel, steadily contributing to a redefinition of what government was and could be" (169) rings entirely true. The story Mann tells is not simply a local issue of drought, famine and state repression; it is a global story of how the moral parameters of politics shifted. In this story, the Sahel was a major actor and an important site of experimentation. As Mann reminds us repeatedly, sovereignty in these areas has not usually been defined by the grand ideals of jurists, but by the grubby everyday confrontations between citizens and "migrants, rebels, policemen, and bare-knuckled diplomats" (5). The development of what Mann calls "nongovernmentality" could just as easily be known as "everyday sovereignty" – one that is fragile and prone to instrumentalisation.

## Regulating citizens

Nowhere is this more clearly visible than in the two chapters Mann devotes to the movement of people. These provide a fascinating glimpse into the gap between the theory of state control over citizens and the messy reality. The chapter on hajj migrations from West Africa to Mecca reveals that European empires had no real desire to control the movement of people across the Sahara. Throughout the interwar period, they were content to operate a de facto joint system of weak surveillance over hajj pilgrims moving across French West Africa or the British Sudan. As the empire began to come apart in the late 1940s and 50s – and as ever

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<sup>1</sup> For another recent attempt to straddle the colonial-postcolonial boundary in Africa, see Emma Hunter, *Political Thought and the Public Sphere in Tanzania: Freedom, Democracy and Citizenship in the Era of Decolonization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). For different perspectives on the importance of the 1970s, see Emile Chabal, *A Divided Republic: nation, state and citizenship in contemporary France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (London: Harvard University Press, 2012) and David Priestland, *Merchant, Soldier, Sage: A New History of Power* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

greater numbers of Muslims made the pilgrimage to Mecca – the British and the French were forced to create internal travel documents that would identify pilgrims. Postcolonial nation-states like Mali then extended this system so that they could monitor, track and quantify the number of their own citizens moving across the continent. Far from becoming more flexible and open, mobility was in fact greatly restricted after independence, as postcolonial states struggled to hold their mobile populations within strict territorial boundaries.

The same was true for north-south migration between Mali and France. Here, too, it was the Malian government rather than the French government that sought restrictions. After independence in 1960, they pressed their French counterparts to send them names and details of Malian citizens living and working in France so that they could identify people unwilling to return to serve the newly-independent state. The French, who had never implemented a robust monitoring system for West Africans, could not respond. In the end, the Malian government was compelled to act alone by blocking migrant routes and revoking the visas of students studying in France while they were in Mali during the holidays. This picture of ineptitude on the part of the French authorities contrasts sharply with the growing literature about the surveillance of, in particular, Algerians in postwar metropolitan France.<sup>2</sup> It is a salutary reminder that, although a strand of Foucauldian-inspired historiography has made much of the capacity for the modern state to “monitor” its citizens, there are still vast areas that fall outside of its control.

Paradoxically, then, it was the postcolonial state not the postcolonial metropole that cast immigration as a “problem”. Only as they struggled to gain adequate housing and rights in France over the course of the 1970s did the French state begin to take note of Malian migrants. This is important for Mann because it shows how the political transformation of the 1970s played as much in Paris as in Bamako. As he makes clear, by this time the international political game had changed. Anti-racism rather than class solidarity motivated left-wing activists in France to defend Malian migrants, while in Mali itself the ideals, structures and dreams of the decolonising generation withered away after 1968 with the arrest of Modibo Keita. By the 1980s,

a new political dawn was opening in the Sahel, one which was more fragmented and governed by competing governmental and non-governmental actors.

This tale of unravelling is one that Mann develops in the final two chapters of the book on the involvement of American NGOs in famine relief in the 1970s and the role of international charities (such as Amnesty International) in the campaigns against political repression in Mali. Across both these chapters, he adds additional dimensions to his argument about the emergence of nongovernmentality that make it a rich and suggestive concept for future research. But, if there is one criticism that can be levelled at his multi-layered account, it is that he is better at explaining the various ways in which power was lost rather than how it was exercised. The direction of Mann’s analysis is downwards. We see how the power of the Malian

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance the work of Sylvie Thénault, Raphaëlle Branche, Amelia Lyons, Neil Macmaster and Jim House.

state is chipped away, devolved, decentralised and undermined, but we do not get a sense of how power actually works in the Sahel. How have the inhabitants of the Sahel themselves reacted to the process of nongovernmentality that has been playing out since the 1970s? Does the language of human mean anything to Malians today? Mann's quasi-ethnographic conclusion suggests clues but they are not developed. Perhaps it would have been too much to expect a broader theory of power to emerge from what is, ultimately, a fine-grained empirical account of a particular context. Still, the question that Mann poses at the end of his book – “what is government?” – is one that deserves an answer, if only because the lives of so many hinge upon it.

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