

Luca Pes

BUILDING POLITICAL RELATIONS

*Cooperation, segmentation
and government in Bancoumana (Mali)*

“Orizzonti”

37



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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

SHINING DEMOCRACY OR FAILED STATE?

Compared to other countries of the West African region, Mali is a peaceful place. Unlike in bordering Côte d'Ivoire or nearby Liberia, there is neither civil war nor widespread political violence. Its social and political landscape is commonly seen as one of the most stable and reliable in West Africa, in contrast to neighbours such as Guinea, Mauritania and Burkina Faso. Processes of accumulation of wealth and social stratification accompanying the exploitation of natural and economic resources (minerals, land and agricultural produce) did not result in violent conflicts or in the criminalization of the state, as happened in Nigeria and Sierra Leone (Bayart et al. 1999:1, 92; Reno 1995, 1998).

The only important security concern in the recent past – the Tuareg 'rebellion' in the mid-1990s – was successfully turned by the Malian political class into an opportunity to reinforce the structures and presence of the state on its territory. Separatist proposals in the north of the country have provided the initial ground for 'decentralization reform', channelling to Mali considerable amounts of international aid (Seely 2001:506). In more recent times, the alarm concerning the mysterious terrorist group 'Al-Quaida of the Islamic Maghreb' (AQIM) has been similarly exploited by the military and political establishment supported by the United States rather than it releasing violent insecurity (Keenan 2009).

On the eve of the fifth consecutive round of 'free and fair' elections and of a major constitutional reform, the Malian institutional environment is certainly among those in Africa most trusted by the international

community.¹ Without any embarrassment about the tone of patent paternalism, official publications of USAID (the American development agency) refer to Mali as ‘a poster-child for democracy’ (USAID 2002, quoted in Soares 2006); or, to put it in the words of the representatives of the two largest donor countries: ‘an extremely good pupil’ and ‘a shining example of democracy’.²

Similar statements pointing to Mali as a ‘success story’ of institutional development and state-building sound at best ironic, considering Mali’s discouraging poverty record and its general state of economic dependency. Mali is the ninth poorest country on earth, followed only by Niger and Burkina Faso in the region (UNDP 2010). It has the fourth greatest net migration rate in Africa (-5.23 migrants/1,000 population) and one tenth the citizens living abroad (CIA World Factbook 2011).³ It is one of the most prominent recipients of international aid, accounting for more than one half of the government expenditure and one tenth of the gross domestic product (WB 2011). Moreover, pointing at Mali as a model democracy is also limited to an appreciation of an ‘apparent’ institutional environment, hiding less praise-worthy aspects such as corruption, lack of ‘good governance’ and the like, that officials are generally ready to acknowledge in more private assessments of how state and power work in the country.

In short, one might discard such views on the grounds that they do not reflect empirical reality. And yet Mali’s social and political environment

¹The constitutional reform foresees the creation of a second Parliament chamber whose members will be elected by local authorities (*collectivités territoriales*, i.e. municipalities, districts and regions). Rumours that this reform was a disguised tentative by the President of the Republic Amadou Toumani Toure to amend the two-mandates constitutional limit to its office (as it happened in Burkina Faso in 2010) proved wrong.

²The first statement is by EU chief of delegation Irene Jorges and the second by USAID director Alex Newton. They have been collected in a filmed interview by the researcher and published in the documentary movie *The Good Pupil: Mali and US*, Paris: Blackout, 2006.

³The ‘net migration rate’ is the difference between the number of inbound and outbound migrants of an area in a period of time. A negative value means more people leaving than entering.

is peaceful compared to the rest of the region. Over the last two decades, perhaps only Ghana, Senegal and Benin have enjoyed a similar reputation. This hardly resembles the context of what development studies and political scientists call 'failed states' (Reno 1998; Rotberg 2004).

What explains such a peaceful condition? Is it the outcome of institutional reform backed by development agencies, as claimed by the political establishment? Is it explained by the power of enduring 'traditions' and the subtle processes of their adaptation to changing conditions in society, as has been maintained by some intellectuals? Broadly speaking, this book offers an answer to these questions from the perspective of a rural locality of Mande, the region south-west of the capital Bamako. While providing evidence to support an interpretation of Mali as a peaceful and relatively stable political environment, my study of political relations in Bancoumana offers critical insights on the country's reputation as a 'good pupil' of development institutions and a 'model democracy' in West Africa. Political relations and practices, I shall argue, reflect the intensely mediated character of government in the locality, filling the 'grey area' between the state (among other agencies) and society. In supporting this argument, my analysis combines the anthropology of the state – and of more specific regulatory domains such as land development and taxation – with an awareness, traditionally central in the political and legal anthropology of West Africa, of a 'segmentary style' social organization.

EXTRACTION AND DEPENDENCE: A FIRST IMPRESSION OF STATE AND SOCIETY IN POST-COLONIAL MALI

Depending on one's point of view, Mali's peaceful condition can be either acknowledged or dismissed as a mystification. While on the one hand an appreciation of the politico-economical outlook of the country reveals that it does not escape processes of extraction and economic dependence affecting the whole region, on the other, similar circumstances have not prevented neighbouring countries from being plunged into far greater levels of social

and political violence. Perhaps such things are disguised in Mali, hiding below the surface of a seemingly peaceful state of affairs. Perhaps, this country is an exception to the more generalized perception that most states in West Africa have failed in terms of the basic conditions and responsibilities of a sovereign government. And yet, how do relations between power, law and society in Mali compare to those of its more evidently troubled neighbours and, more generally, to other 'postcolonial' contexts?

To describe Mali as a postcolonial context is to employ a characterisation in general use by anthropologists working in Africa and elsewhere. In fact, many of the circumstances briefly reviewed below have led authors such as Mbembe (2001) and Comaroff and Comaroff (2006) to talk about 'the postcolony' in a fashion clearly transcending geographical and political boundaries. However, the Malian socio-political landscape fits that paradigm only uneasily, if at all. The image of 'the postcolony' is a generalization, inadequate for making sense of Malian society.

While richness in natural resources is a common variable explaining the political instability of places like Nigeria (oil), Niger (minerals and recently oil), and Sierra Leone (diamonds), Mali does not represent a clear contrast in this regard. It would be misleading to think of Mali as poor of similar resources. Gold-mining – accounting for an astonishing 33 percent of the gross domestic product and 70 percent of exports – is clear evidence that the Malian economy is heavily dependent on the exploitation of its natural resources (EIU 2011:7). Mali is indeed one of the largest gold producers in the world, second only to Ghana in the region. Operated by foreign multinational companies in the south of the country, mining ventures in Mali are not intrinsically 'better' than in many other African countries, nor do they generate greater revenues for the local population.⁴ With the exclusion of a tiny elite of wealthy businessmen and politicians – dubbed *le Pouvoir* in the capital Bamako

⁴For a case study of two Malian gold mines (Morila and Kalana), see Keita et al. (2008). See also Panella (2010), on the local economies of artisanal gold mining in Mali and elsewhere, and the documentary movie by Robert Nugent, *End of the Rainbow*, Trans Europe Film, 2007.

– ordinary citizens are blatantly denied the returns of such forms of wealth. They are instead excluded and dispossessed, brutally expelled from their land and forbidden local economic activities, including artisanal, small-scale extraction of gold: a practice dating back to medieval times, and once the main economic base of the Mali Empire. Comparable situations, including deportation of the populations of entire villages, occurred with the infamous dams sponsored by the World-Bank on the upper Niger basin (Bonavita 2000; Pottinger 1998).

Further evidence of Mali's similarity to its neighbours, and its connectedness to regional and global economies, is provided by the agricultural sector, overwhelmingly the most important aspect of the economy.⁵ The main cash crop is cotton, second only to gold for the total revenue generated by exports (EIU 2011:6). Cultivated in many parts of the country, cotton generates important revenue for Malian households (unlike the countries on the coast, in Mali, there are virtually no plantations). The harvest is bought by a 'para-statal' agency, the *Compagnie Malienne pour le Développement des Textiles* (CMDT), at a subsidized price and with a monopoly. Far from developing a textile industry, the CMDT sells cotton in almost unrefined form on the international markets. Despite being the third largest producer in the world, Mali is forced to sell its cotton at a loss. Cotton prices are set by the United States – through subsidies paid to American growers. The CMDT is in the process of being privatized, leading to diminished production and lower returns to the farmers, with direct consequences on householders' poverty.⁶ Seen from the perspective of the production of a global commodity and its crucial role in the national economy, Mali is not very different to more 'troubled' countries like Côte d'Ivoire (cocoa and coffee), Niger (minerals and oil), and Burkina Faso (cotton).

⁵Despite this is evident to any analyst of Mali, agricultural output for self-consumption does not figure in official statistics based on the gross domestic product, where the rubric 'agriculture' accounts slightly less than 'services'.

⁶On the history and political economy of cotton production in Mali, originally developed to the benefit of the French textile industry, see Roberts (1996).

Prospects for the other part of the agricultural sector – food production – are even gloomier as a consequence of the global food crisis of 2008, among other factors. Mali does not produce enough to be self-sufficient: 12.5 percent of imported goods are foodstuffs, equalling nine percent of the gross domestic product (EIU 2011:6). Rice is the second cash crop after cotton. In contrast to cotton it is mostly sold on the domestic market, and is therefore crucial for covering Mali's food production deficit. The government, however, has recently adopted measures gearing rice production toward exports, while relying on imports of cheaper qualities of rice from East Asia. The launch of the government program *Opération riz* was accompanied by massive loans of productive land to foreign investors in the Niger inner delta, with no other commitment than expanding the area of irrigated agriculture of the *Office du Niger*, a French early-colonial project which was abandoned at less than one tenth of the envisaged surface (Van Beusekom 2000; Filipovich 2001).⁷ The deals so far concluded by the government left foreign investors free to take the entirety of the harvest out of the country. Rice, therefore, is following a similar fate to cotton, as a result of land-grabbing 'joint ventures' between the Malian state on the one side and, on the other, foreign banks and corporations based in Libya, China and the Gulf states.

What kind of relations between the state, power and society might one expect in Mali, given such exploitative conditions? The regional and global connectedness makes it certainly naive to think of it as an exceptional context. Despite praise for its institutional infrastructure, Mali as a state is no more 'sovereign' than the rest of its neighbours. As put by Bayart et al. (1999:20), a sovereign state in such conditions resembles to a 'legal edifice which is the partner of multilateral institutions and Western governments', and which is set apart from 'the real fabric of society'.

⁷ See also Chapter Two of this book. For an overview of land grabbing in Mali, see <http://farmlandgrab.org> (last retrieved October 11th 2011). As with gold exploitation, there are virtually no academic articles on this crucial and ongoing aspect of the Malian political economy.

In Mali, as elsewhere, the state can be understood as a façade, hiding a public-private network of power-holders who constitute the true ruling class (Bagayogo 1987). Their economic base lies in the extraction of agricultural produce and natural resources, now including crucial means of livelihood such as arable land. Through such lucrative practices, political relations have been reconfigured into a widely studied form of government known as neo-patrimonialism (Chabal and Daloz 1999; Englebort 2000). The configuration of power thus described by anthropologists and political scientists is one characterized by social stratification and increasing polarization of society into 'haves' and 'have nots', and by the exercise of power increasingly by private means (Bayart 2009:263).

Neopatrimonial models can certainly be of use in interpreting many issues in the Malian political economy. Yet, in contrast to many of its neighbours, this power configuration has not plunged Mali into social and political violence, massive social exclusion and instability. From the perspective of the rural locality addressed in this work, the vast majority of those excluded from power and from these niches is perhaps increasingly poor, but not destitute. Doubts thus arise about Mali's resemblance to many of its neighbours and with postcolonial contexts more generally.

In his collection of essays *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe (2001) problematizes the autonomy of the African state in the post-colonial period. He argues that the style of government in contemporary Africa is still best explained by its connections to the experience of colonial rule. As a political paradigm, the postcolony is characterized by the proliferation of forms of 'private indirect government', which share with the political condition of colonialism the violent dehumanization of the subject (Mbembe 2001:80-82). Mbembe's concept of private indirect government recalls the widely observed phenomena of atomization of power and of privatization of sovereignty and the state, resulting from the transformation of 'informal' economic and political relations into rather formalized niches of power (see also Hibou 2004; Bayart 2009). According to Mbembe, the distinctive way in which power is administered in contemporary Africa is captured by the notion of 'discharge', a process occurring when,