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Sahelian Intellectual Traditions: Old and New

In Lieu of an Abstract: this paper is a draft in the form of a "quarry" for a paper to be finalized after the conference. In this form, the paper presents and discusses the intellectual traditions that existed in the Sahel before colonialism, namely, those pertaining to the work of griots, and those which came out of the cultivation of Islam. The paper makes the case that colonialism led to the emergence of a new tradition, while also changing the context in which the old traditions continued to exist. The new traditions used European languages and cultural forms to explore the existential problems of the Sahel in the modern age. Those problems are here analyzed in terms of "synthesis" and "fracture." The ambition is to build an argument on the conditions of intellectual work in the Sahel based on an analysis of these diverse traditions. This draft paper is thus a work in progress in which the argument is only gestured at, not really formulated.

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Old regime intelligentsias.

Historically, the singularity of the Sahel lies in the fact that it was a meeting ground of the intellectual traditions of the Islamic east and of sub-Saharan Africa - or, to use easy and broadly accurate descriptors, the "maraboutic" and "griot traditions". In that respect, the Sahel compares only to the Swahili Coast, in East Africa ("Swahili" has the same roots as Sahel). But "meeting ground" is probably not a very accurate description, since the two traditions remained distinct in terms of function, content and ethos. If they expressed and reflected public consciousness in the region, it was in different and often divergent ways.

Griot traditions.

The griot traditions are native to the Sahel and to sub-Saharan Africa more generally. The plural is required by the fact that there were several griot traditions, depending on function and content, though not on ethos. This ethos - a term that I understand to mean the set of beliefs, ideas and concepts which determine social behavior and relations in a given society - rested, in the case of the griot traditions, on the fact that griots belonged to a status group within stratified societies in which rights and obligations derived from status heritage. Not all Sahelian societies were rigidly stratified on such bases. Hausa society, for instance, provides a relative exception. But everywhere, including among the Hausa, heritage was a central concept in defining one's place and role in the culture and in participating in society's

ethos. The heritage of all classes of griots included technical knowledge leading to the mastery of the spoken word. But griots were differentiated in accordance with their cultural knowledge, that is, the knowledge transmitted to them through their family's specialization either as praise singers, or as custodians of the community's memory. Praise singers sought reward by magnifying the deeds of the high and mighty, while custodians fulfilled obligations vested in an office that honored their family. The two functions might be blurred into one single type of performance because it might be difficult for griots of the custodian specie to always evade pressures from the powerful in their society to "tweak" history-telling in their favor, and become in some way praise givers. But they were generally distinct and reflected in very different ways values, feelings and ideas that prevailed in the society. Moreover, despite the rituals and formalities of function, griots had singular voices, sometimes with a personal touch of wisdom, or, as it may happen, with the idiosyncrasies of artistic genius. The trouble here is that we can only guess who they were. Griots were masters of the *spoken* word, and since voice-recording devices did not exist before the 20th century, the art and wisdom of Sahelian griots is *almost* as lost to us as if they had never existed.

We must say "almost" because in some form, those art and wisdom are available to us in the persistence of griot traditions through recent times. Examples of the survival of griot traditions into modern times include cases such as Wa Kamissoko, a Malinke griot of the custodian type who died in 1976 at the age of 51, and Yamba Tiendrebeogo, the Larghle Naba of the kingdom of Ouagadougou, who died in 1982, at 75. Kamissoko was the *diali* - "griot" in the Malinke language - of Krina, a town knows as the site of the founding battle of the Mali Empire, and Tiendrebeogo's office of Larghle Naba was (and remains) the third most important in the traditional kingdom of Ouagadougou, after those of the king and the Widi Naba. It combines the priestly role of organizing sacrifices to the ancestors and the duties of what we might term chief archivist of the kingdom's history, legislation and lore. Out of the friendship between Kamissoko and the Malian ethnologist Youssouf Tata Cissé came a written form of a vision of the history of the Mali Empire from the perspective of the communities that constituted that ancient state, while Tiendrebeogo collaborated with the French ethnologist Robert Pageard to publish histories of the kingdom of Ouagadougou and collections of Mossi tales and proverbs.

These collaborative works showed, in particular, that the knowledge of the griot as custodian - known as *griot traditionniste* in the French-speaking countries - is not a passive store of traditions received from forebears to be kept as intact as possible. While such a store is part of griot knowledge, the griot must also conduct research through communication with other griots, including those in foreign lands. Because of this, griots were (are) often polyglots in many Sahelian languages, and since research implies a personal intellectual investment (and idiosyncratic interests), the result of their efforts was more similar to the authorial products of written scholarship than one might think. In a review of one of Tiendrebeogo's books, Michel Izard notes that the book was not a quarry of "raw data" but "in many respects the thoroughly personal work of a historian steeped in the past and present of his own society". (Izard, 1965: 136).

This went with the sense of social and political responsibility attached to the concept of the intellectual. In the case of Tiendrebeogo, that sort of responsibility came with his office, but he fulfilled it with such passion and gift that his death, on 30 July 1982, cast a cloud of mourning over the entire Mossi country and is still regularly commemorated in

Ouagadougou. Kamissoko clearly saw himself as an intellectual militant, fighting, with the aid of a scholarship steeped in Mande traditions, for the preservation and renewal of Mande culture, which had come under assault from the Wahhabiyya, a Salafi doctrine that started to flower in Mali in the 1940s and targeted the local cultural ethos as "idolatry" to be eradicated in the name of Islam. This attitude of Kamissoko stemmed in part from a crepuscular sense of the decline of the ethos which had grounded for centuries the role of griots as masters of the spoken word and, in some instances, masters of wisdom in Sahelian societies. His reactive hostility to the aggression of reformist Islam could not have characterized griots in past centuries, when that ethos was preponderant and their role in society was safe and secure.

Yet, the attacks of reformist Islam on the Sahel's non-Islamic culture go back deep in the past and eventually developed into a consistent intellectual tradition.

Maraboutic traditions

Just as there were several griot traditions in the Sahel, there were also several clerical Islamic traditions - with the difference that Islam was not native to the region and was, by and large, a minority culture there until the 19th-20th centuries.

Islam was cultivated by clerical communities that existed either as new status groups in many of the Sahel stratified societies, or as a social class in the cosmopolitan context of some of the main trading cities and capitals of the region - Timbuktu, Jenne, Gao, or the Hausa city-states. Unlike the griot traditions, Islamic clericalism was largely a literate culture, but there were wide variations in terms of scholarly "capital" between clerics in the cosmopolitan cities and those who lived in the conditions of village society. The former had access to books and sophisticated systems of Islamic formal education dispensed in schools that grew in the shades of large mosques, while the latter - much the more numerous - generally relied on a meager diet of religious information, often sought through itinerancy and with an imperfect command of Arabic (if any!). Moreover, while there were attempts at keeping some distance with the non-Islamic culture that prevailed around them, village and community clerics did play roles that could be somewhat assimilated to that of custodian griots. They wrote in Arabic or *ajami* (local language using Arabic script) histories that reflected the non-Islamic ethos of their society. We still have much to learn about this, since the bulk of West Africa's Arabic and *ajami* manuscripts remains unstudied, but a good portion certainly corresponds to this description. An example of what this might look like is the Arabic manuscript of Mamadi Aïssa, translated and published by Maurice Delafosse in 1913 under the title "*Traditions historiques et légendaires du Soudan occidental*". This work starts with the habitual flourishes of Muslim clerics. Aïssa gives thanks to God, Muhammad and his family and descendants and hints that what he is preparing to relate came from divine inspiration. But the narratives that followed are evidently collected from Soninke griots and are replete with Soninke beliefs and myths. Even though, as a colonial civil servant in Nioro (Mali), Aïssa was clearly influenced by modern standards of historiography, his work also derived from a script tradition - the writing of *tarikh*, or histories of rulers and biographies of notable figures - that harks back to the 15th century and was shaped by a synthesis of clerical Islamic training and Sahelian culture.

One may distinguish two periods in this tradition. Islamic clericalism in the Sahel was initially a peripheral extension of developments in North Africa, with Berber Muslims playing a central role in the introduction and cultivation of religious doctrines in the region.

It came on its own in the late 15th century, in Songhay and Hausaland. This flowering may be termed "the century of Timbuktu", corresponding to the era of the Askia dynasty in the Songhay Empire (1493-1591). Askia Muhammad, the founder of the dynasty, came to power - through a coup d'état - as the man of Timbuktu's clerics (Kaba, 1984). During his 35-year reign, he protected, employed and consulted the clerics, while also promoting Islamic culture. By his deposition in 1528, this policy had fostered the brilliant literate culture of Timbuktu, around the mosque colleges of Sidi Yaya and Sankore. The former was run for over two decades by a Soninke luminary, Ibrahim Bakayoko, famous inter alia for having been the master of Ahmed Baba (see below).

Timbuktu was the intellectual capital of the Islamic Sahel also because of its cosmopolitanism. While the local population was in the main Songhay, the clerical establishment included many Sahelian ethnicities. At least two major history works (others have been lost or may still await discovery), the *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān* ("History of the Sudan", by Abd-ar-Rahman as-Sadi)) and the *Taʾrīkh al-fattāsh* ("History of the Enquirer", a 19th century reconstruction based on writings by Ibn Al-Mukhtar), came out of Timbuktu. Their authors may have been Soninke and Fulani. Timbuktu's intellectual influence radiated far out of Songhay. The mosque college of Gobarau, in the Hausa city-state of Katsina, was founded on its model and Timbuktu scholars travelled there as visiting professors to assist in the adoption of its curricula for higher education in Katsina. (Karkarhu, undated). In a very political sense, Timbuktu was also a site of intellectual power inside Songhay. For instance, the histories mentioned above were clerical works in a class-warrior or partisan sense. Extended tracts are devoted to hagiographies of notable clerics and the Askia Muhammad is lavished with praise and commendation while rulers who antagonized the clerical class are savaged, notably Sonni Ali. At the same time, the historical narrative abides by rules of reporting facts with an effort toward objectivity. The high standards reached in these works will not be seen again in the Sahel before the modern era - even including the renaissance of clerical scholarship under the Sokoto Empire, in the 19th century. This combination of clerical partisanship and intellectual competence was central to the prestige and influence of Timbuktu in its heyday.

Ahmad Baba (1556-1627) exemplifies this success of Timbuktu, the more so because he lived through its twilight. A college scholar with special competence in law, Baba was remarkable for the way in which he identified with his home region and made himself its advocate and propagandist in the wider Islamic world. One of his surviving treatises, the Miʿrāj as-Suʿūd, is perhaps the earliest known plea against racial, Black, slavery in Islam - although it was not the earliest ever made, since Baba said he was reprising arguments made by previous Sahelian scholars. The treatise is also an ethnologic geography of the Sahel and is notable, inter alia, for comprising the first known occurrence of the ethnonym "Hausa". Broadly speaking, Baba's work was the testament of Timbuktu. It was built on the hoard of scholarship that had been amassed there for over a century, capping it as it faded under the duress of Moroccan occupation, after 1591.

In the darker period that followed, the tradition of Islamic reformism made its first appearance. The Sahel was a problem for Muslim intellectuals. Although Islam was sometimes supported and promoted by rulers, the religion was a minority faith which, under the general conditions in the region, was "adulterated by" (i.e., mixed with) local Sahelian cultures. Baba's *Miʿrāj as-Suʿūd* was written around this problem, since its main objective was

to establish that, despite perceptions in the Maghreb, the Sahel was to some extent a land of Islam. But he recognized that this was to a limited extent. After the collapse of Songhay in 1591, the problem became very acute. The disappearance of Songhay hegemony meant that the rulers - especially those in Hausaland - who were under its influence became less interested in supporting and promoting Islam. The "century of Timbuktu" had provided a canon of religious orthodoxy for the Sahel, in which the grimly purist work of the Tlemceni Berber Al-Maghili was a classic reference - though not the dominant one at the time. In the 17th and 18th centuries, with the clerical class set adrift in a now inhospitable Sahel, this al-maghilian streak came to the fore. The insistence on separating the pure grain of Islam from the chaff of non-Islamic cultures, which strikes us in writings of the time, arose from the sense that the religion was being overwhelmed by "idolatry" and was falling in a state of *fasad* ("degeneration"), now that it had lost its temporal protectors. We have echoes of this in the teaching of Sidi Ahmad Al-Mukhtar Al-Kunti (1729-1811) in Azawad, or in the expository work of Abdullah dan Fodio (1766-1828), the brother of Jihad leader Usman dan Fodio - notably the biographical record *Īdāʿ al-nusūkh man akhadhtu ʿanhu min al-shuyūkh.*

A very significant fact is that much of this literature of the regeneration (*tajdid*) of Islam was the work of people from clerical groups that formed a social stratum of the semi-nomadic peoples of the region, the Fulani and the Berbers. This includes the two men mentioned above, in addition to Usman dan Fodio (1754-1817), his master Malam Jibril (whose written work appears not to have survived) and, in a younger generation, his son Muhammad Bello and his daughter Nana Asma'u. During the imperial eras of Mali and Songhay, clerical intellectualism was the preserve of cosmopolitan market cities, but in the post-imperial era, it came to be prevailingly cultivated by people who were, in some respects, marginal to Sahelian life and to its dominant ethos. Those people saw themselves as rightly guided clerics as opposed to the "evil" or "worldly" ones who submitted to the dominant ethos. Their self-righteous marginality imparted to their intellectualism the degree of radicalism necessary for the clerical insurrections and jihads that intermittently broke out across the Sahel from the 1670s until the dawn of colonialism.

The works produced in this connection were the first example of *littérature engagée* in the Sahel. The era does not boast of books comparable to those of the Timbuktu historians. Books of history were still written, and the early 18th century *Tadhkirāt an-Nisyān*, composed in a shrunken Timbuktu, has some of the shine and substance of its great predecessors. But the dominant mood had shifted toward a concentration on religious-legal studies grounding a yearning for an Islamic Sudan under a Muslim ruler. That was achieved in Hausaland, where Fulani jihadists founded in the early 19th century a state that was comparable in its hegemonic reach to the Songhay Empire. Its scholars - starting with the founder, Usman dan Fodio, and some of his family members - focused on sciences of government. Law, politics and administration became the dominant intellectual interest, prefacing issues that are still alive across northern Nigeria, the core of Sokoto territory.

Process of modernity: the new intelligentsias

Colonialism led to the emergence of a new intelligentsia in the Sahel. Until colonial occupation, the Sahelian intellectual traditions described in the two previous subsections were insulated from what went on in Europe. Despite its many relations with the Middle East,

the Sahel's Islamic clerisy remained impermeable to the *Nahda*, the name given to the intellectual effervescence that grew in the Middle East out of the contact with Europe's culture of modernity. In a study of the "crisis of consciousness" that led to the emergence of that culture, Paul Hazard insists on the effect of the Europeans' discovery travels of the early modern period, and stresses that "it is perfectly correct to say that all the fundamental concepts, such as Property, Freedom, Justice and so on, were brought under discussion again as a result of the conditions in which they were seen to operate in far-off countries." (Hazard, 2013: 56) Broadly speaking, the *Nahda* brought similar perspectives to the Middle East in the 19th century, using Europe as the "far-off countries" whose example stimulated a "crisis of consciousness" in the region. But as we have seen, in the same period, far from bringing fundamental concepts under discussion, the Sahel's Muslim intellectuals were committed to a stark reassertion of what, for them, was foundational, ancient and unalterable.

For the Sahel, the crisis of consciousness therefore broke out later, as a result of colonialism. The sudden irruption of European languages and education in the region changed and disrupted the old intellectual landscape. To the griots and the clerics were now added the European-educated who, in the French domain, soon took the generic and positive name *intellectuels* ("the intellectuals"), meaning those who had access to modern knowledge and embrace the social standing and political responsibilities that purportedly go with that. In northern Nigeria, where the introduction of European language and education was much more guarded, the name of this class of people is defined by contrast with religion: they are the *yan boko*, that is, those who invest themselves in secular knowledge. Moreover, the griots and the clerics also had to respond to the new culture, since they were both absorbed into it and marginalized by it. The new culture came also with new media: not just European languages, but also the printing press, film, voice recording and new genres of literate expression such as the novel, the essay, and theater.

Some of these developments were not unique to the Sahel. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, colonialism spurred the emergence of a new culture which implied an existential crisis for the older culture - just as had happened in Europe itself a few centuries before. At the same time, the ways and means of modernity expanded the sphere of artistic and intellectual expression to a revolutionary extent across the continent. In this general context, two things especially characterized the Sahel. First, the existence of griots and clerical traditions, which survived colonialism and led to a unique configuration of the region's intellectual sphere, with issues and questions that do not arise elsewhere; and second - and much harder to capture - a distinct sensibility which has its roots in the Sahelian experience and contrasts with the common requirements of intellectual expression in Sub-Saharan Africa. Here, I analyze that sensibility in terms of "synthesis" and "fracture." This Sahelian sensibility is particularly well expressed in a book by Nigerien author Boubou Hama (1906-1982), *Le Double d'hier rencontre demain* (1973). In the book, Hama poses a double problem: how is Africa to reach "Tomorrow" (its utopian futurity) by drawing sustenance from "Yesterday" (its traditional past); and how, based on its very "lagging-behind" (*retard*), Africa could assert itself as the future of humanity. Responses to the first problem start with the issue of fracture, and those to the second problem leads to the idea of synthesis.

Synthesis

Synthesis is the project of imagining a new culture out of a fusion of African, Eastern and European cultures. That new culture would transcend all three to achieve the fullness of human wisdom and potential. Hama and Ahmadou Hampâté Ba (1901-1991) Hampâté Ba were the key upholders of this project. The two men were close friends and consciously envisaged this ideal as the basis for a cultural mission or crusade. They thought that while Western culture had the advantage of material superiority and Eastern culture was endowed with greater spiritual wisdom, African culture was closer to the sense of humanity that imparted its living value to these two factors. Hama explained that it is in Africa that the balance between materialism and spiritualism will finally be found, in part - and paradoxically - because of the fact that Africa has historically lagged behind. Africa's backwardness allowed it to preserve the roots of our humanity, which have been desiccated by materialism in the West, and evaporated by spiritualism in the East. However, to thus operate as the savior of humanity's future, Africa has to come to a deep knowledge and awareness of itself. Hence the practical turn of much of Hama's and Hampâté Ba's writing and cultural activities. They both focused on the most vulnerable portion of Africa's cultural heritage, the one that existed in oral form. Thus, Hama founded in 1968 a regional center for the preservation of oral tradition and both men collected and published stories, myths and legends from various Sahelian peoples, sometimes weaving them into personal fabulist-philosophical works, such as Ba's *Kaidara* or Hama's *Kotia Nima*. It is notable that the output of the two men enormously dwarfs that of other Sahelian writers. Hampâté Ba is the author of about 20 books and Hama has published over 60 books - an aspect of their untiring aim of contributing to the emergence of "Tomorrow".

Writers of the next generations found synthesis impossible, and perhaps undesirable, because they focused less on a utopian "Tomorrow" and more on a miserable present. They tried to come to grips with a sense of the unsolvable fracture between "Yesterday" and "Now" which, to them, explained the miseries of modernity. This is, in different ways, the case of Senegal's Cheikh Hamidou Kane (born in 1928) and Mali's Yambo Ouologuem (1940-2017). Kane is the author of two important novels, *L'Aventure ambiguë* (1962 - English translation as *The Ambiguous Adventure*) and *Les Gardiens du temple* (1996). Although 34 years separates the two books, they are concerned with the same central issue: how to reconcile Africans with the defeat of their civilization without submitting to the victorious alien (Western) civilization. The first work dramatizes the Sahelian crisis of consciousness as a crisis in the mind of the main protagonist, Samba Diallo, who typifies the fateful meeting of traditional Sahelian upbringing - of the Islamic clerical cast - with French education. Although he initially seemed headed to the "synthesis" solution, Samba Diallo eventually does not survive the crisis and the sense of fracture. In the second work, the same crisis occurs on the wider stage of national politics and as an expression of large-scale cultural change. Kane does not point to any obvious solution but seems to proffer that "time" will eventually work something out, as Sahelians learn to become autonomous again. Unlike Samba Diallo, Sahelians could not disappear, and they will have to strive for a new autonomy - but there is no vision of what "Tomorrow" would look like. In that sense, the fracture which led to the demise of Samba Diallo remains open.

Ouologuem's most famous book, *Le Devoir de violence* (1968 - English translation as *Bound to Violence*) is a more pungent exploration of fracture. It is also a deeper one, in the sense that it reaches beyond the issue of the encounter between Africa and the West, which was the

explicit drama in the works of the older authors. Another drama characteristic of the Sahel was the earlier fracture between Islam and animism which had led - as we have seen in the previous section - to the development of two divergent intellectual traditions in the region. Especially as Islam gradually triumphed over animism during the colonial and independence eras, Sahelian authors have tended to gloss over that fracture. Boubou Hama was born an animist and became a Muslim as a middle-aged man. His work has an unmistakable animist ethos, and is diplomatically silent about Islam. Hampâté Ba was born a Muslim in a world still dominated by the animist ethos - but he was not brought up in the reactive reformist intellectual tradition described in the previous section. Instead, his master Tierno Bokar was a Sufi Muslim adept at reconciling diverse cultural traditions (see Hampâté Ba's tribute to him, *Vie et enseignement de Tierno Bokar, le Sage de Bandiagara* - English translation as *A Spirit of Tolerance. The Inspiring Life of Tierno Bokar*). In Futa Toro, a former theocracy, Kane received clerical Islamic education before going to the French school. This upbringing shows its touch in his description of the two communities that are confronted with Western power in *Les Gardiens du temple*, the Sessene (i.e., Senegal's Serer, who were a bulwark of animism) and the Diallobe (i.e., the Tukulor of Futa Toro). While the Sessene's reaction to French power and rationalism appears boorish and inscrutable, the Diallobe display fluent intelligence and a rational sense of self-worth, an implicit affirmation of the superiority of Islam over animism.

These implicit ambivalences, which make up the deeper tissues of Sahelian consciousness, are pithily, even harshly, exposed by Ouologuem. The jihadist empires that brutally rode roughshod over the *négraille* (an untranslatable pejorative for Black people, underlining their pathetic weakness and also denouncing the identification of jihadist conquerors with ideas of Arab, Berber and Fulani superior whiteness) in the past appear as alien and alienating as the French colonizers - and Ouologuem makes the case that colonization in the Sahel meant an alliance between the new rulers (the French) and the older ones (the Islamic elites). Here too there is an element of explanation in the author's biography. Ouologuem was a Dogon, a people wedded to animism, who had sought refuge in the cliffs of Bandiagara to escape the predatory cavalrymen of the steppe and savanna. The latter tended to become even more heavy-handed when Islam and its hatred of animism came into their fighting spirit. Ouologuem's hardcore satire in a magnificently ebullient writing style has earned him a belated and enduring admiration - Mali's main literary award is named after him - but the initial vicious backlash against the book, both from France and from the Sahel, scarred him into silence. He not only stopped writing - as far as we know - but he also sequestered himself from public life until his death.

The attitudes of synthesis and fracture that derived from that experience remain central to contemporary Sahelian intellectualism, but we must also be aware that for many Sahelian intellectuals in the Europhone category, the region is only a geographic locale within the African continent, and Africa appears as the object to analyze, understand, interpret and illustrate - not the Sahel. For instance, I have not discussed here two major Sahelian intellectuals of the colonial and independence era, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Cheikh Anta Diop. They were both Sahelians by birth - they were Senegalese of respectively Serer and Wolof ethnicity - but their work was developed around intellectual movements and scholarly traditions - Negritude and French bourgeois humanism, Egyptology and African nationalism - that do not have their sources in the Sahelian experience.

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