Democratization in Mali

Putting History to Work

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Summary

Since the 1991 uprising, which saw the ouster of the country's long-standing military dictator and ushered in a democratically elected government, Mali has achieved a record of democratization that is among the best in Africa. This process has been driven by multiple factors. External observers often point to broader Africa-wide change and a remarkable constellation of "founding fathers" who demonstrated vision and self-sacrifice following the change of government. But if you ask Malians why their country has successfully democratized, most of them will respond by stressing Mali's heritage of tolerance and decentralized government, dating back more than a millennium to the Ghana Empire and its two successor states. For Malians, democratization combined with decentralization is a homecoming rather than a venture into uncharted waters. But they recognize that the country's democratization process continues to be a difficult one, inevitably laced with controversy. Although satisfaction levels remain generally high, there is a near-universal desire for more rapid progress toward improved quality of life. This unease suggests the possibility that despite their legendary patience, Malians may eventually lose hope and faith in democracy unless economic growth accelerates.

The often critical views of educated, urban Malians about the current state of their democracy contrasts with the more positive attitudes that seem to prevail at the local level. The urban-educated group is particularly concerned about growing corruption and the slow pace of improvement in the education and judicial systems. City dwellers are understandably impatient with the country's newly forming political parties, which are weak and ineffective, but they are generally aware that strong political parties are a necessary component of a strong democracy.

While radical Islam has inhibited the creation of democratic institutions in other parts of the Muslim world, Malians do not widely perceive such radicalism as a threat to their democracy. Indeed, radical Islam seems to be growing slowly—if at all—in Mali. Further, Malians see the long-standing problem of unrest and near anarchy in the desert north not as a democratization problem but rather as a security problem—that is, as a threat to national unity. Most of the country's citizens would agree that strife in Ivory Coast is an even greater threat to the viability of their new democracy than the northern unrest.

Mali's rural communes are critical to the success of its new democracy, but these new local governments are highly varied. Some are thriving, while others are limping; some have capable leaders, while in others shady practices prevail. But almost everywhere commune members are enjoying the new experience of participatory democracy, and a kind of political springtime is in full flower. Commune-level concerns are focused on local-level resource needs rather than policy failings. There are nonetheless serious structural problems, such as looming land issues, that need to be addressed at the national level. Problems aside, virtually all Malians relish the political freedoms that now exist, best exemplified by the remarkable spread

of local radio stations. They would not surrender these freedoms easily, and they are well aware that any return to authoritarian rule would put their newfound liberties at risk.

This paper concludes with several recommendations for the Malian government and its foreign partners, including the United States:

- If, as seems clear, Malian democratization is being driven in large part by culture and history, more should be done to encourage the preservation and transmission of traditional values and institutions, perhaps through the education system, more use of cultural preservation grants, and local radio.

- Mali's rich corpus of traditional law, perhaps the most important operational aspect of its traditional culture, is currently the neglected stepchild of decentralization. It should be recognized as a great, if far from perfect, asset and not prejudged to be a liability. The government should sponsor the compilation of a nonbinding guide to customary law that would enable administrators, civil-society agents, and magistrates to understand its principles.

- The High Council of Local Government (HCC) should be encouraged to start playing its intended role as a policymaking body for the decentralization system. For example, it should examine the growing and interrelated problems of resource shortfalls and land policy.

- Corruption is a pervasive problem and will be so long as middle-class aspirations remain completely out of synch with salaries. Because it undermines faith in the new democracy and has led to widespread cynicism, the Malian government should take a tougher stand on high-profile cases of corruption. Foreign missions could help by announcing a policy of zero tolerance for corruption in their own operations.

- Mali's nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have become a fourth branch of government at the local (commune) level. Their role is so important that the time has come for more energetic self-regulation, if only to ensure that their services are equitably distributed.

- Malians have become expert at accommodating the ever-changing demands of numerous foreign aid donors, but the foreign assistance process distorts the economic policy framework. Mali will not have a healthy democracy until Malians are in charge of both their economic policy and their political system, and the donors should be prodding them in that direction—for example, by training them to do their own economic planning.

- Since 9/11, antiterrorism activities in the Saharan north have become a major element in U.S. policy toward Mali, eclipsing its traditional focus on humanitarian and developmental objectives. These activities are sometimes unduly influenced by shallow, worst-case analysis of Islamist potential. As things stand there is danger of conflict between the United States' support for democratization and its desire for tough action against suspected terrorists, and a need for greater diplomatic dialogue with Malians on the complex, historically difficult issues in the north.

- An examination of five of Mali's nearest neighbors—Senegal, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea—confirms that a combination of history, cultural attributes, and geographic coherence can lead to a sense of national self-esteem and may be the key ingredients of successful democratization, even in very low-income settings. But comparison also confirms that bad leadership and/or bad history can nullify these underlying advantages, at least in the short run.

Mali's democratic progress holds no silver bullet solutions for its neighbors, although it does suggest that many other democratizing countries could learn something from Mali's experience. Mali has proven that African villagers can find political expression at the national level, that poverty is not an inherent barrier to democratization, and that love of political liberty can flourish in the most seemingly unlikely circumstances. However, as Malians themselves warn, the long-term success of any such democratic experiment will ultimately depend on whether it can spur economic growth.

Preface

This study was made possible by grants from the United States Institute of Peace and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). I conducted four months of research in Mali in the summer of 2004 and in early 2005. Most of that time was devoted to interviews with a wide range of Malians in both urban and rural areas. The second trip included two weeks of travel to neighboring countries in order to gain a comparative perspective on Mali's democratization.

Interviewees in Mali included academics, officials, commune leaders, politicians, civil-society workers, farmers, mine employees, and students, as well as foreign diplomats, NGO employees, and representatives of the aid-donor community. My primary goal was to determine Malian opinions on the success of democratization to date and on its future prospects. I tested my results against the findings of the Afrobarometer public opinion survey reports on Mali, up to and including the analysis published in June 2004.[1] In general, I found no major divergences between my own findings regarding public opinion and those of the more comprehensive Afrobarometer polling. My research included travel to various regions of Mali, including Koulikoro, Sikasso, Segou, Mopti, and Timbuktu, where I focused on commune-level government and associated civil-society institutions.

I have used endnotes primarily to cite valuable written sources and, in a few cases, to acknowledge critical insights from individuals, in particular when an idea was derived primarily from one discussion. The endnotes are not intended to be comprehensive. In a few places I included material based on my own experience as U.S. ambassador to Mali (1987–90). In general, I have not identified interviewees; although Mali's current level of political freedom is admirable, some of the issues raised could still be sensitive, and my ground rules did not specify identification of interviewees.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to U.S. ambassador Vicki Huddleston, deputy chief of mission Steve Kraft, and USAID director Pamela White for making my USAID grant possible. Hannah Baldwin and her democracy and governance team at USAID-Bamako provided major support throughout, while Anna Diallo of USAID provided critical insights and guidance at the beginning of the project. U.S. embassy staff members, especially Malian and American employees from the public affairs, political, and economic sections, were extremely helpful in sharing analysis and arranging additional contacts for me in Mali. I received unstinting support from my research assistant, Assalim Yattara, who made my travels possible and was a loyal and resourceful companion throughout. The same goes for Martin, "taxi man" extraordinaire, whose dependability and navigational expertise allowed me to function in Bamako. I cannot emphasize enough that the study depended entirely on the enthusiastic assistance of Malians from all walks of life. No one ever failed to be keenly interested in my topic or more than willing to assist me, not even the senior Malian official into whose office I blundered by mistake while seeking another individual.

There is nothing more suspect than a former ambassador commenting on a country where he once served and where he naturally concludes that everything—especially U.S. policy—has fallen apart since the good old days. To the extent that I may have strayed into this kind of analysis I apologize.

Although this study was financed by the United States Institute of Peace and USAID–Bamako, the opinions expressed are my own, and any errors of fact are solely my responsibility.

Introduction

Mali is a poor, landlocked, largely Muslim country of twelve million people in the middle of the West African bulge. It ranks as one of the poorest, least formally educated states in the world and is at the geographic center of a conflict-prone region. Yet since a 1991 uprising against Moussa Traoré, the country's then long-standing military dictator, Mali has achieved a record of democratization—with administrative decentralization and the devolution of substantial powers to the village level as its hallmarks—that is among the very best in Africa.

The country has held three democratic national elections (1992, 1997, and 2002) in the past fifteen years, two of which produced genuine power alternations. In the process, the country has changed from an authoritarian state to one in which all civil liberties are respected. Malian Islam remains diverse and tolerant, and there is no significant pressure to eliminate the secular state. Mali's first elected president, Alpha Oumar Konaré, solved an ongoing rebellion in the desert north and ended endemic student unrest, while the government has successfully resisted being drawn into ongoing violence in neighboring southern West Africa, despite injury to Malian interests and émigrés.

Despite these considerable achievements, Mali's new democracy is no more perfect than any other. For example, Mali's decentralization, which most foreigners see as the crown jewel of its democracy, remains controversial at home. Further, democracy has thus far failed to deliver sufficient economic improvement to meet popular expectations, even though the country has benefited from generally good rainfall for more than twenty years. Indeed, Mali's economic policy has yet to be democratized; rather, it remains the sum total of what well-intentioned aid donors, led by the World Bank and the IMF, think is good for the country. Regional integration, long recognized as the ultimate key to West African economic progress, has been relegated to the "too-hard box," at least for the time being. Meanwhile, there has been distressingly little forward motion in developing Mali's considerable economic potential, which centers around gold, cotton, food crops, and tourism. Virtually all Malians agree that until democracy produces a better standard of living, the country's political achievements to date will remain at risk.

For a number of reasons, Mali deserves more attention in the West than it has received up to now. It illustrates with crystal clarity the mutual dependence between democratization and interethnic tolerance. It shows that poor, illiterate countries can indeed achieve democracy and that Islam, far from being inherently problematic, can play a constructive role in this process. Above all, it suggests the value of local experience and tradition in helping to achieve a sense of political ownership and self-confidence. Many of these positive aspects of Mali's experience have varying degrees of relevance for other democratizing states. But the news is certainly not all good: Mali also demonstrates how easy it is for a poor African country, even one with substantial material and political resources, to slip into a state of near-pathological dependence on foreign aid.

The paper will begin by outlining those aspects of Mali's geography, history, and culture that are most relevant to its democratization. After a summary and analysis of Malian democracy's formative period, it will describe, based on interviews, the reasons Malians cite for the success to date of their democracy as well as its weaknesses as seen both by Malian and foreign observers. This discussion includes two issues of particular interest to outside observers: the status of Malian Islam and its relevance to democratization, and the problem of unrest in the desert north.

The paper will look briefly at a number of important indicators of Malian democracy, including the status of women, the new role of the military, and the impact of democratization on the Niger Authority (Office du Niger), which was until recently an authoritarian state-within-a-state. It will then consider the critical issue of decentralization and the debate surrounding it. It will briefly examine the implications of Malian democratization for neighboring countries before concluding with some suggestions for policymakers, both Malian and foreign.

2 The Geographic and Historical Setting

A River Runs through It

Mali is traversed by the Niger River, which describes an enormous question mark across West Africa's midsection. This "strong brown god" rises in the highlands of Sierra Leone and Guinea. It flows northeastward across Mali into a vast, seasonally flooded inland delta that has been of critical importance at all stages of Malian history. The river skirts the southern fringe of the Sahara Desert, before plunging southeast and then south through Niger and Nigeria into the Gulf of Guinea. North of the river, a huge expanse of Malian Sahara borders Mauritania, Algeria, and Niger. Ancient trade routes across this desert linked Malian river towns to the Mediterranean, but after the seventeenth century, transdesert commerce was displaced by European-dominated coastal trade. As a result, Mali's international economy withered.

It is often noted that Mali is about the size of Texas and California combined. Extending the comparison, a roughly Texas-size portion of Mali is north of the Niger, while the area south of the river is comparable in area to California. But when demography is factored in, such a comparison loses all meaning. About 90 percent of Mali's twelve million inhabitants live south of the Niger, in "California," while only about 10 percent reside in "Texas." Moreover, most of the population of "Texas" lives within a few kilometers of the river, leaving a relatively small number of mostly nomadic people—probably no more than 1 or 2 percent of the national population—inhabiting the vast expanses that stretch northward. Much of western Mali is drained by the Senegal River and is relatively well watered; most of this region would, for the purposes of this comparison, belong in "California."

Moving northward from the coast of West Africa, rainfall diminishes rapidly. Sikasso, in southern Mali, gets 1,200mm of rain per year. Bamako, the capital, gets 1,000mm per year, about the same amount as Washington, D.C. In Bamako, however, it all comes down during a ten-week rainy season. At the latitude of Timbuktu, just north of the Niger, rainfall drops to just 75mm per year. The vast area north of the Niger's big bend (the "buckle," as the French call it) is almost entirely beyond the limit of nonirrigated cultivation.

Extreme heat and dryness explain why, since the days of the Roman Empire, the Sahara Desert has posed an obstacle to communication and travel more daunting than the Mediterranean Sea. Although oil exploration is once again under way in Mali's Gao Basin, the Malian Sahara

has historically lacked significant mineral and energy resources—indeed, any asset that might bolster modern Mali's economy. Further, the special characteristics of the Sahara have led to problems of national integration between its largely nomadic inhabitants and the governments of several of the postcolonial states around its perimeter, including Mali.

Poor, and Only Slowly Getting Richer

Modern Mali is economically very poor. In fact, the country is so poor that statistical comparison between Mali and other poor countries in Africa—that is, comparing largely nonmonetized subsistence economies—is difficult. With literacy rates just below 40 percent, the country's per capita income growth averaged just 3.4 percent from 1993 to 2003. In addition, the country's total debt is larger than its GDP, one-quarter of which comes from foreign aid.[2] Economic growth is hampered in part by high population growth rates, especially in rural areas. Due to high infant mortality and the labor-intensive nature of Malian seasonal agriculture, large families remain a rational choice for most Malians. HIV/AIDS prevalence is low by African standards, less than 2 percent.

Mali's two leading exports are cotton and gold. Cotton, the most important, is threatened by chronic market uncertainties and subsidies for domestic cotton farmers in the United States and elsewhere, which seriously depress world market prices. The gold industry, reborn in modern dress only twenty years ago, has been doing well lately, but its long-term future, depending on the results of exploration, is unknown. Mali has traditionally been an exporter of beef—and even fish from the Niger Delta—to coastal countries, where cattle breeding is inhibited by tsetse-fly infestation. These exports have repeatedly been hammered by subsidized imports from Europe and further reduced by growing Malian demand. Additionally, severe political unrest in the south—Liberia, Sierra Leone, and now Ivory Coast—has been doing further damage to the country's economy. Tourism remains potentially important, but its development over the last fifteen years has been disappointing, although there have been recent encouraging signs that this may be changing. Faced with these challenges, neither the foreign aid donor community nor the Malian government has thus far been able to offer a credible vision of how Mali might move more rapidly toward offering an adequate standard of living to its people.

Ethnicity, Language, and Religion

Modern Mali's multiethnic composition is, at first glance, comparable to that of its neighbors. Depending on how you draw the cultural boundaries, Mali has about a half-dozen major ethnic groups speaking mutually unintelligible local languages. These include the Bambara and related peoples, the Senufo, the Dogon, the Peuhl (or Fulani), the Songhay, the Tuareg (a Berber-speaking nomadic people), and a small population of Arabs or Maurs. The Malian constitution recognizes French as the official language, while Bambara functions unofficially as a lingua franca.

More than 90 percent of the population is Muslim; Christians and practitioners of traditional animist religions comprise the remaining 10 percent. The present composition of Malian Islam is discussed at greater length below.

History: The Great Empires

Oxford University historian Hugh Trevor-Roper once infamously remarked, "Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But, at present, there is none: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness."[3] One need only look to Mali—with its abundant oral and written history—to see the folly of such a statement.

By the beginning of the current era, a rich and varied Neolithic society had evolved in what is now Mali. The Niger River and its vast, annually flooded inner delta offered a special array of opportunities and risks to its early human inhabitants. Fish, game, pasturage, and farming resources were abundant, but they were frequently threatened by severe fluctuations of rainfall, a challenge that has become even more serious in modern times as population pressure degrades an already fragile environment.

As trade slowly developed, the Niger provided a convenient route that linked the gold mines of West Africa with trade routes across the Sahara. These routes were anchored by trading towns on the river, the most famous of which are Jenné and Timbuktu. Archeology at Jenné has revealed the existence of a flourishing urban society that predated the arrival of Islam, overturning earlier assumptions that no such society could have evolved in sub-Saharan Africa independent of Muslim tutelage.

Beginning in about the sixth century CE, a series of multiethnic states based in or near the Niger Basin succeeded one another. Three of them were particularly important in the formation of Malian culture. The first of these three was the Ghana Empire, with its capital near the present-day Mauritanian border with Mali, which flourished as early as the early eighth century and fell in the eleventh century. (Modern Ghana is well south of the old state after which it is named.) The second was the Mali Empire, which existed from roughly the twelfth to fifteenth centuries. Centered in what is today southwestern Mali, it was by far the most important in terms of making a lasting impact on subsequent Malian development. The third was the Songhay Empire, which lasted from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, with its capital at Gao, in what is now eastern Mali.

Although Mali continued to witness a great deal of significant history after the fall of Songhay and before the arrival of the French, it is to these states that Malians refer when they speak of the *grands empires*. Of these states, it is the Mali Empire that holds center stage in the country's present-day national imagination, which is inspiring and reinforcing the process of democratization.

3 Drivers of Democratization

Several years ago a senior Malian official paid a visit to the U.S. State Department. His equally senior U.S. counterpart was eager to talk about urgent and weighty issues, such as security cooperation between the two countries to prevent the Sahara from becoming a terrorist haven similar to Afghanistan. But the Malian visitor persisted in delivering a long and seemingly irrelevant pronouncement on the importance of Malian history, saying, in effect, "We may be poor, but we are proud." The U.S. official later told his State Department colleagues it was one of the most frustrating meetings he could remember. In November 2005, when Malian prime minister Ousmane Maiga traveled to the United States, his only visit outside Washington, D.C., was to Richmond, Virginia, where he met with the city's mayor and the state's governor. He also visited one of the city's public elementary schools. He decided to do so because the Commonwealth of Virginia includes the study of Malian history in the state's third-grade curriculum.

Such episodes illustrate what is arguably the single most important factor in Mali's democratization process: the sense of pride that the Malians have in their own history. A high proportion of the individuals I interviewed for this study told me that historical and cultural factors explain why Mali has been able to achieve significant progress toward democratization within a poverty-afflicted, multicultural environment. They emphasized the importance to this process of political continuity dating back to Mali's experience with multiethnic statecraft under the three *grands empires*. In addition, they cited the importance of a Mali-specific culture of tolerance based partly on familiarity with multiethnic governance and partly on specific traditional practices designed to help avoid or resolve conflict. They often pointed to their country's unique historical and cultural attributes to explain why Mali could not, in their view, fall into serious ethnic conflict of the kind that has afflicted Liberia, Sierra Leone, and now Ivory Coast.

This view is not restricted to relatively wealthy and well-educated Malians, although they are not surprisingly often able to express it with more sophistication than villagers can. Nor does it preclude intense and critical preoccupation with the problems and shortcomings of the contemporary Malian state.

The Epic Center

Mali lies at the center of a great West African cultural zone dominated by an epic tradition, comparable to some extent with the Homeric tradition and the influence of Hellenic civilization in the West. The tradition is most often labeled "Mandé," a term that covers the Bambara, Malinké, and associated languages, literature, and folk memory. Mandé tradition centers around the epic of Sundiata Keita, the Mali Empire's twelfth-century founder. Its area of influence was and still is concentrated most intensely in western Mali and the adjacent

region of Guinea. The epic itself exists in several languages and many variants, only a few of them written.[4]

As in the case of Homer's epics, the story of Sundiata was not committed to writing for centuries. Scholarly debate continues to swirl around its origins, including over the extent to which medieval Arab historians such as Ibn Khaldun may have influenced its formation. In contrast to the Homeric tradition, the oral component of Mandé tradition is alive, well, and often unrecorded. It is still being discussed, performed, and modified by the widespread class of bards and historians best known by the French-derived term *griot*. It is often heard on village radios and has partially inspired the flowering of a music industry that has become one of Mali's most successful exports.[5]

Like most great traditions, the Mandé tradition can adapt to changing circumstances. During the authoritarian rule of Moussa Traoré, for example, the country's leaders portrayed their vaguely Leninist, single-party political system as a natural extension of their tradition. Malians used to tell me in the late 1980s, "Our democracy is not like yours. We believe in a consensus-based process. The wise leader gathers his chiefs under the village palaver tree. Each speaks his piece; the chief listens, then he makes the final decision. For Africans this is a better system than your competitive democracy, which can easily aggravate ethnic or family divisions." Under their new democratic regime, Malians still stress consensus, but the meaning of the word has changed. It now signifies the resolution of difficult issues by compromise before they reach the point of conflict, without necessarily eliminating political competition, and is more in the spirit of Daniel Webster than Vladimir Lenin.

The new emphasis on parliamentary democracy and decentralization has focused attention on what is often referred to as "Sundiata's constitution." According to versions of the epic, after Sundiata won a decisive battle against his enemies, he gathered his chiefs on the slopes of a mountain near Koulikoro, not far from modern Bamako. Each chief, including those who had fought on the losing side, advanced and planted his spear before the victorious leader. Sundiata then gave the spears back to their owners, signifying that he was returning power to them. He himself took the title of *mansa,* often translated as "emperor."[6]

No Malian I interviewed suggested that by this event evil rulers and despotic practices were eliminated from Malian political life, but several of them did argue that it helped establish the principle of decentralization, if not democracy. Sundiata's unwritten constitution is better compared with Britain's Magna Carta than with post-Enlightenment written constitutions, such as those of France or the United States. The political context of the Magna Carta was of course very different: it recorded powers extracted from a weak monarch by a relatively strong nobility. Unlike the Magna Carta, Sundiata's constitution should be regarded primarily as foundation mythology rather than as historical fact. It does not appear in all of the many versions of the Sundiata epic, and the event described in the previous paragraph is omitted from one of the two best-known translations.[7]

Deeper Roots

Archaeologist Roderick McIntosh, the excavator of Old Jenné (Jenné-Jeno), postulates even deeper roots for Malian democracy. He found that this earliest of sub-Saharan urban sites was an agglomeration of economically specialized communities, with no evidence, in the form of a palace or similar structure, of centralized political control. McIntosh traces this tradition back to the Neolithic period, based on archaeological evidence elsewhere in the Niger Delta. He concludes that multicentered or "heterarchic" versus "hierarchic" political systems evolved due to the extreme environmental uncertainty of the delta.[8] Indeed, the archaeological record supplies ample evidence of long-term cyclical variation in the climate of the Sahel,[9] the area of West Africa just south of the desert, and we know from recent experience that even within a generally wet long-term cycle, rains can fail catastrophically, as they did in 1972–74 and again, more recently, in 1984–85.

This environmental insecurity encouraged the early development of alternative economic activities, such as hunting, fishing, livestock raising, and later agriculture, so that in years when one activity failed due to drought, insect infestation, or other causes, other activities could sufficiently support communities. But for the system to work for everyone, trade was essential, injecting economic interdependence and specialization into the social context.

Geography and climate contributed to Mali's political development in another important way. The arrival of horses in West Africa in about the thirteenth century made it possible to use horse-born messengers and cavalry to help unite diverse ethnic groups within one (admittedly loose) political framework, but this could be done only in the Sahelian zone beneath the desert. Further south, in the forest zone of West Africa, diseases carried by the tsetse fly were lethal to horses as well as cattle, making horse breeding impossible.

Not all major states of early West Africa were in the Sahelian zone, but a preponderant number were. The horse factor helps to explain why this was so, and it also sheds light on the relative political sophistication of the Sahelians compared to the forest-dwelling peoples of the coast, where, before the advent of Western colonialism, political development frequently stopped at the village level.[10]

Desert Documentation

By the late Middle Ages, Sahelian African civilization possessed a significant written element. Documents stored in ancient libraries, many of them still in private hands, reveal that the Arabic alphabet was extensively used to record African languages, including Songhay and Peuhl, just as the Roman alphabet is used to write these languages today. Surviving libraries also contain documents in Ladino, the Spanish-based language of Sephardic Jewry, which serves as testimony to the widespread presence of Jewish traders and to the cosmopolitan character of medieval Sahelian society.

These libraries are found wherever the transdesert trade routes ran. Timbuktu is home to more than sixty of them, including three that are open to scholars and tourists. Many more are found in what are today very remote locations, such as Arouane and the area north of Kidal. Libraries have also come to light recently in areas south of the Niger, including Jenné and Segou. Today many of the manuscripts are in immediate danger of physical deterioration, or of sale to collectors by cash-strapped owners, before they can be translated and studied. But scholarship has already made one thing clear: far from being exclusively religious in content, surviving documents are a remarkable trove of secular material, covering subjects from natural history to law.[11]

Traditional Conflict Resolution and the Culture of Tolerance

The Malians insist—again almost to the point of unanimity—that out of this rich cultural stew came a culture of tolerance. The term they use most often to describe it is the French word *brassage*, which means "brewing," with its interesting implication of mildly alcoholic content. The content of the brew derives from the experience of centuries of multicultural statehood and extends to specific practices. Best known among these practices is *cousinage,* or so-called joking relationships *(sanankouya),* between pairs of ethnic groups. *Cousinage* forbids conflict between two ethnic groups or clans and encourages them to trade humorous insults with impunity.

Joking relationships are usually based on some ancient historical encounter and sometimes, to the untutored foreign ear, sound a bit provocative—for example, telling a perfect stranger belonging to ethnic group X that all his ancestors were slaves of your own ancestors belonging to ethnic group Y. But this practice seems to work for the Malians. Some of the most famous joking relationships are those found between the Bambara and the Peuhl, the Dogon and the Songhay, the Diarra and the Traoré, and the Keita and the Coulibaly. The practice even extends to relations between ethnic groups and caste groups, such as between the Peuhl and smiths *(forgerons).*

While *cousinage* is Mali's best-known conflict resolution (or avoidance) practice, another important traditional practice involved the use of people of caste as officials, diplomats, and intermediaries. The term "caste" as used in West Africa is significantly different from the better known South Asian concept. It refers to kin-based groups, specialized by occupation, that are "endogamous," meaning members can marry only within the group. The most famous are the *griots* and the smiths. As possessors of specialized knowledge, they were traditionally and to some extent still are believed to have magical powers. Yet they were also of low social status, inferior to nobles and to peasant farmers.[12] As a result, monarchs often used people of caste as court functionaries because—unable to marry into ruling families—they were politically neutral and hence unlikely to harbor dangerous aspirations. To this day, *griots* (in addition to their role as historians and entertainers) are called on in many parts of Mali to mediate disputes being settled by customary law, as are Muslim imams and customary chiefs.[13] The Malians had other traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, ranging from mat-

rimonial alliances to the keeping of chiefly hostages at the royal court. They were also quite familiar with the concept of deterrence—awing potential enemies by visibly strong military capability—and even with preemptive war.

Commenting on *cousinage*, Malian historian Doulaye Konaté observes that it has allowed West Africans from different regions to fraternize on first contact and to calm situations that might otherwise have led to conflict. In contemporary Mali, he notes, "Sanankouya acts as a therapy employed daily as a means of societal regulation."[14] But he also makes clear that even more important than the mechanisms themselves has been the concept that conflict can indeed be overcome by human agency, a concept that is a vital part of the Mandé cultural heritage and invaluable in a conflict-prone regional context.

The Art of Foundation Mythology

Most successful nations have foundation mythologies that explain national origins, define national character, and provide the moral sustenance necessary to overcome obstacles and survive bad times. These mythologies are usually a blend of carefully selected historical facts, folklore, and ideology. The Malians have such a mythology derived in large part from the Sundiata Epic and the associated values and beliefs briefly described above. But beyond this, they habitually regard the past, and more specifically their ancestors, as a source of strength.[15]

Listening to Malians extolling the virtues of their past often arouses suspicion that sentimental liberties are being taken with the historic record. For example, one foreign scholar has noted that reconciliation is not a dominant theme in the library collections; that Timbuktu was never a truly major center of Islamic learning compared to the El Azhar University in Cairo or even Walata in ancient Ghana; and that although there may have been some concern with conflict resolution, the troubled times in which these manuscripts were written were replete with conflicts that seemingly never got resolved.[16]

Oral tradition presents other difficulties, especially when it exists in multiple versions and is still evolving. Sundiata's constitution, like the partially unwritten British Constitution, does have the advantage of being flexible, but because it is flexible it also has the disadvantage of being of doubtful utility in a court of law. We have already seen that Mandé political tradition has been used, in the space of two decades, to justify both an old-fashioned military dictatorship and a new democracy. Similar ambivalence surrounds the concept of consensus—does it, in the Malian context, signify creative compromise or polite submission to powerful leaders, or perhaps a little of each?

The Malians do not, for the most part, overly romanticize their past. To cite one example, they candidly accept that slavery was a major fact of African social life until very recently. They do not deny Malian complicity in its most notorious phase—the Atlantic slave trade—although they also firmly support the consensus view that the trade was primarily the result of European intrusion and had disastrous consequences for West Africa. Malians are selective about which

past kingdoms they hold in high regard. Most of them do not, for example, include the nineteenth-century Bambara Segou Kingdom among the *grands empires.* This is partly because it was a rapacious state addicted to slavery and other unpleasant customs, such as the recruitment of janissary-like professional armies, that bore a disturbing resemblance to the child-soldier phenomenon that has plagued the region more recently.[17] Malians accept the continued importance of caste distinctions, even though they do not particularly enjoy talking about them, at least not with foreigners.

What is important about the Mandé-based foundation mythology is not whether it is demonstrably "true." What matters is that Malians believe it includes their core values and that it has practical utility in today's world. They have, in other words, demonstrated a capacity for extracting what is positive from their own past. This is a selective process, just as it is for most successful nations. On the Fourth of July, Americans venerate and recall the Bill of Rights and D-Day at Normandy, not our past treatment of Native Americans, the Pullman strike, or Florida in 2000. But remembering iconic moments does not mean that we forget everything else.

To understand fully where Mali's democracy stands today, it is necessary first to go beyond historical and cultural underpinnings and to outline the events surrounding its birth.

4 The Formative Phase

The Events: Revolution or Restoration?

By 1989 it was clear that political change was coming to Mali. The Soviet Union was in turmoil and political tremors were rattling most of Africa's Leninist-model, single-party states. In 1990 Benin held the first National Conference in Africa, which followed the French model of the prerevolutionary "Estates General" and was designed to represent all elements of society. In Bamako, a quasi-clandestine democracy movement, sometimes meeting under the protective wing of a Roman Catholic think tank, was agitating for a multiparty system, while Malian president Moussa Traoré held out for democratization within the single-party system, an alternative that the pro-democracy movement, led by Alpha Konaré, condemned as a contradiction in terms.

The international community watched and waited. As U.S. ambassador at the time, I had no relevant instructions, so I simply told Traoré that the choice of path to democratic reform in Mali was entirely up to him and his people. But I warned him that if repression resulted in severe human rights violations, he could count on repercussions, implying a possible reduction in our already sizable and growing economic aid program to Mali.[18]

Then, on March 22, 1991, Malian troops fired on demonstrators, presumably on presidential orders, killing several hundred of them. It is likely that left to his own devices, Traoré, who was politically shrewd if hardly brilliant, would never have taken such a suicidal step. But he was under tremendous pressure from his wife and her roughly twenty wealthy siblings not to waver. There was clearly a tacit understanding between the president, a military man of humble origins, and his prosperous matrimonial clan. "Your job is to keep the political system on an even keel," one can imagine them telling him, "so that we can make money." Malians dubbed this arrangement the FMI, meaning *Famille Moussa et Intimes,* a pun on the French-language initials for the IMF. Following the March 22 massacre, Amadou Toumani Touré, the young army officer commanding the paratroop battalion, joined forces with the pro-democracy movement and arrested Moussa Traoré. Touré, better known as ATT, agreed to turn over power to a provisional government that would then hold elections. The remarkable part of the story, of course, is that, like Cincinnatus, he kept his word.

The transitional government immediately convened a National Conference, which endorsed the guiding principles for a new democracy and approved a new constitution.[19] This memorable gathering, which lasted only two weeks, gave prominent place to farmers represented by a group called the Rural World (Monde Rural). Due at least in part to village-level participation, the new Malian constitution stresses decentralization, the devolution of real authority to the local level. Apart from this most un-Napoleonic feature, the constitution is modeled largely on French precedent, explicitly secular and providing for a dominant executive branch.

Konaré, a historian and educator, won Mali's first free elections, which were held in 1992. He immediately faced significant challenges, especially from organized student unrest in Bamako and insurgents in the north, which he gradually brought under control. He won a second five-year term in 1997 in an election that was a procedural shambles boycotted by virtually the entire opposition. Konaré, who is said to have stated that what Africa needs is more living ex-presidents,[20] made no effort to breach the constitutionally mandated two-term limitation in 2002. With a lackluster field of candidates in view, ATT, Mali's erstwhile Cincinnatus, announced that he would emerge from retirement and compete as an independent. He was elected handily. After the inauguration ceremony, Konaré left the presidential palace for a new official residence provided by Malian law for ex-presidents, on the theory that a comfortable dwelling would help soothe any unemployment discontent that might otherwise lead to coup plotting.

Last but hardly least for our purposes, while the country's first free presidential election was held in 1992, local elections, for commune councils and through them for mayors, were held for the first time in 1999, and again in 2004. On both occasions they drew enthusiastic participation and were successful from a procedural perspective.

Implications of the Formative Phase

As even this abbreviated version of Mali's recent history suggests, the country's transition to democracy was guided by an extraordinary collection of motivated and talented people, including many individuals not mentioned here. But it cannot be concluded that Mali's democracy is solely the result of fortuitous good leadership.

Mali's political class was mobilized by cumulative unhappiness resulting from authoritarian rule throughout the colonial period and during the two regimes after independence. Then the entire nation was shocked and galvanized by the March 22 killings. The popular explosion that followed wiped the political slate clean, making it relatively easy for the Malians to make a new beginning without the encumbering effect of old regime personalities and constituencies, an advantage not always enjoyed by democratizing regimes elsewhere. But it was the new leaders' focus on decentralization that, more than any other single factor, gave depth and strength to the transition.

Mali's decentralization responded to long-standing provincial and village level discontent with local governance that was both predatory and alien. Decentralization was not a new issue; it had been promised, in various forms, by both the First (Modibo Keita) and Second (Moussa Traoré) Malian Republics. It was not, as one scholar has suggested, invented to deal with the Tuareg rebellion that had broken out in 1990, although it was successfully deployed to do so.[21] In the context of Mandé political tradition, decentralization was not an alien concept—the Bambara term for it is *mara segi so*, or "bringing power home." The speed with which decentralization provisions were drawn up by the founders and enacted by the National Conference is evidence of this keen sense of popular ownership. And, of course, decentraliza-

tion was further nurtured by modern notions of equity and the importance of locally oriented governance for economic development. Indeed, so enthusiastic were the proponents of decentralization that they came close to launching it before anybody or anything was ready for it.

It is hardly surprising then that Malian democracy remains riddled with resource problems and organizational shortcomings. But the national record since 1991 has been one of responding to the most serious challenges as they arise, and then moving ahead. Konaré's early successes in dealing with both endemic student unrest and with the northern rebellion are illustrative. The election of 1997, almost fatally flawed due mainly to an inadequate electoral commission, is another case in point. By the time of the following presidential election in 2002 the problem had been fixed, at least to the extent that a crisis did not recur. The commune elections of 2004, although not strictly comparable, were probably the most successful held to date in Mali. It is too soon to judge whether this habit of coping and moving ahead will prove durable, but after fourteen years of democracy, the record is impressive.

Mali's democracy still faces an array of problems, both political and economic, that could easily become critical in coming years. As we shall see, some aspects of the innately conservative ethos that has been so important to the democratization process thus far are also inhibiting more rapid economic progress, without which democracy itself may be at risk.

5 Threats to Democracy: Malian Perceptions

In August and September 2004, I interviewed dozens of Malians from all walks of life about their perceptions of Malian democracy. The responses fell broadly into two categories, those from educated, usually urban, respondents, and those from mostly uneducated, rural respondents. In general, the rural respondents, unlike the city dwellers, focused on local problems and avoided speaking in generalizations about national affairs. But when it came to the issue of poverty and the imperative of dealing with it, the responses were essentially the same from all respondents.

There is little doubt that Malians hope that democratization will improve their standard of living, and that they believe it will eventually be judged a failure if it does not. Most of them agree that improved education and health care are the most critical quality of life issues, and that substantial progress on these issues will require economic growth. While no one can predict when the legendary patience of the Malian people will run out, the long-term viability of Malian democracy depends on more rapid economic growth than is currently taking place. At the very least, the Malian people should be offered a vision of economic progress more compelling than anything offered thus far, tall order though that may be. Poverty aside, most Malians are quite vocal about a number of other issues that they see as threatening the success of today's democratic state.

Corruption

Malians are irritated and distressed both by the growth of corruption and by the failure of the government to act against it. Perception of corruption is no doubt aggravated by the growth of a small but visible wealthy class in Bamako and the apparent widening of the gap between rich and poor. Indeed, many Malians believe that since 1991 corruption has been "democratized." Under the old regime, Traoré and his family controlled the private sector to their own advantage. The average Malian was not often directly affected by the state-level malfeasance of that era. But today, according to the more pessimistic perceptions, "everyone" is on the take and corruption extends to every level of business and government, with routine kickbacks for vehicle purchases and irregular payments for health care, school placements, and other routine government services. Some believe that Konaré unwittingly stimulated corruption by obtaining funds from Mali's parastatal cotton company to jump-start political party development at the beginning of the transition, setting a precedent for irregular financial dealings.[22]

The Justice System

Most of my educated Malian informants were deeply concerned about the justice system, which they regard as thoroughly corrupt and subject to influence by the state's most powerful. In September 2004, well-publicized trials of government officials for alleged customs fraud resulted only in slap-on-the-wrist punishments. Mali is cursed with a tangled abundance of legal texts dating from both colonial and postcolonial regimes, and the fact that statutes often conflict with each other means in practice that most disputes must be negotiated with the authorities, usually at a price. In 2003, the World Bank issued a report calling for a comprehensive anticorruption program, but my informants agreed that there has been no vigorous follow-up.[23] Attempting to fix the justice system is considered so difficult that most donors, with the important exception of the Canadians, have backed away from further reform efforts under the Ten Year Justice Development Program (PRODEJ).[24] The depth of informed public cynicism on this issue is hard to exaggerate. Some see it less as a problem of judges taking bribes than of a culturally based unwillingness to sanction the powerful. Failure to punish Traoré for his economic crimes, often seen by foreigners as a laudable example of Malian reconciliation, is for some Malians additional evidence that the wealthy and well-connected are never punished for anything.

The Political Parties

There are about one hundred political parties in Mali, apportioned among two weak and constantly shifting alliances, plus some parties not included in either alliance. Many of the latter are, at this writing, associated with President's Touré's Citizens' Movement (Mouvement Citoyen), a nonparty organization that Touré established when he ran in 2002 as an independent.[25] In general, most Malians see the parties as feckless collections of would-be ministers, interested only in government jobs. For the most part today's parties are the result of schisms in previous parties, especially former President Konaré's ruling party, ADEMA (Alliance pour la démocratie au Mali, or Alliance for Malian Democracy). They rarely have any discernible concept of constituent service. They are equally deficient when it comes to developing alternative programs, policies, or ideologies. It used to be said that parties generally did not exist outside Bamako, but with the advent of decentralization some of them have been quite adept at aligning with traditional, usually kin-based, factions at the commune level.

Educated Malians, in particular, are worried about the state of the political parties. Many no doubt share the traditional perspective (quite similar to that of the United States' founding fathers) that parties encourage factionalism, hence conflict, and that professional politicians, as a class, are a nonproductive burden on the nation. (President Touré appealed to this sentiment by running as an independent.) At the same time, Malians are aware that democracy requires both debate and policy alternatives and they recognize that strong political parties are needed to provide such alternatives. In fact, a Malian newspaper poll in late September 2004 suggested that Malians have a more sophisticated perspective on the party issue than many foreign observers realize. Those polled were in favor of a clearly defined opposition to

the nonparty president, as opposed to the current situation where none exists. They also favored a much-discussed rapprochement between two of the major parties, ADEMA and the RPM (Rassemblement pour le Mali, or Assembly for Mali), suggesting a clear awareness that the Malian parties should be playing a stronger role in government.[26] Strong parties are also important for an additional reason: now that Mali's heroic formative period is over, who will produce a new generation of democratic leaders, if not the parties themselves? After a brilliant beginning in 1991, Malian democracy could be facing a leadership vacuum in the next decade.

Some Malians are also worried by the president's Citizens' Movement, which was created during the 2002 election. If it looks like a single party, and quacks like a single party, it may turn into a single party, so goes the suspicion.[27] What if ATT is elected to a second five-year term, as seems probable? What if the parties remain feeble and fractious? Will ATT not be tempted to invoke the model of the wise monarch under the palaver tree, hearing his chiefs but not really heeding them? On the other hand, this president's past record must compel everyone to accord him the benefit of the doubt when it comes to his own sincerity about democratic procedure. Many Malians I spoke with were confident that a better-defined opposition will emerge as the 2007 presidential elections approach.

It is also worth noting that most Malians seem unconcerned about the obvious weakness of the National Assembly, which, in addition to having no defined opposition, rarely introduces legislation (leaving that function to the executive branch) or engages in significant debate. No doubt this is because educated Malians, raised in a tradition of French political culture, are quite accustomed to an executive-dominated system and do not expect the National Assembly to be anything more than a cockpit for the politicians.[28]

Incivisme

Incivisme is a useful French word that means the opposite of "civil," as the term is used in "civil society." There is plenty of *incivisme* in Mali. As viewed from the perspective of a wealthy Bamako suburb, it means ignoring the gaping potholes in the unpaved street and dumping trash in it rather than organizing the neighbors to do something about the ghastly mess. Although one wealthy businesswoman has actually paved the street in front of her Bamako hotel, such outbreaks of voluntarism are all too rare.

At times it seems as if the level of *incivisme* in Mali is proportional to urbanism and wealth, but there is quite a bit of it in rural areas as well, particularly with regard to paying taxes. Under the new decentralization regime, the communes are empowered to collect certain taxes to finance local development, but many villagers refuse to pay taxes. Part of the problem stems from the fact that Konaré abolished the old colonial/Second Republic head tax, touting this as a great achievement of the new democracy. Then the government enacted a new local development tax, levied on all heads of households, so that villagers could help pay for the

new schools and clinics they want and need—projects the national government could not possibly afford to finance on the scale desired.

Villagers are supposed to be able to distinguish between the bad old tax and the good new tax, but instead some, no doubt remembering Konaré's speeches, prefer to believe that democracy means no taxes and free development projects. In 2002, only 39 percent of commune dwellers actually paid their taxes,[29] and anecdotal evidence suggests that the rate has not gone up since then. In theory, commune leaders have the authority to call in the police to compel villagers to pay taxes, but as elected officials they are understandably hesitant to do so. Decentralization strategists are trying to figure out how to sugarcoat the tax pill, perhaps by inaugurating a system of revolving loan funds to make the use of tax-derived moneys more visible.

There is, however, a brighter side to this story. Malians living abroad send remittances to their home communities, and some of the wealthiest communes in the country depend on such external financial support. Probably even more important are the hometown societies known as *grins,* composed of Bamako-dwellers from the same region or village. These societies are largely social, but they also levy contributions from their members for hometown projects and sometimes lobby the government on issues of local importance.

6 Threats to Democracy: Problems Less Clearly Seen by Malians, INCLUDING RADICAL ISLAM AND DESERT UNREST

There are four other issues worth mentioning that were less frequently cited by the people I interviewed, but that nonetheless could pose risks to democratization and the Malian state.

Radical vs. Syncretic Islam

No one among the Malians I interviewed cited radical Islam as a serious, current threat to Malian democracy or to the secular state established by the 1991 constitution,[30] although several expressed concern that such a threat might arise in the future. Malians see Islam in historical perspective, as they do many issues. They are aware of ancient tension between "pure" Islam and a dominant local variety more tolerant of residual animism and other alleged unorthodoxy. Coexistence between Islam and animism has persisted for centuries in Mali, and the values it engenders remain powerful within the population.

Originally, there was a decidedly functional aspect to this religious cohabitation. Islam linked the emerging Malian state to an international community. It put the monarchs on equal footing with Arabs seeking West African gold. It gave Malian traders a kind of spiritual passport when they traveled beyond Mali. Israeli historian Nehemia Levtizion observed that "Islam as a supra-tribal religion contributed to the cohesiveness of the multi-ethnic empire."[31] But Malian farmers and fishermen still believed they needed to propitiate the ancestors and the spirits who controlled land and water, on whom their livelihood depended.

Arab travelers expressed shock at the sight of the emperor of Mali, nominally a Muslim, tolerating pagan rites at his court. But the emperor understood that he had to accommodate both belief systems, if indeed he even perceived any contradiction between them. In time, West African Islam came to be dominated by the so-called brotherhoods, including the Qadiri, founded in twelfth-century Baghdad; the Tidjiani, founded in Morocco in the eighteenth century; and the Hammaliya, a twentieth-century Malian offshoot of the Tidjiani. These brotherhoods were infused with Sufi mysticism and centered around their founders and their descendants, who over time assumed a character broadly analogous to that of saints in Christianity. Even more powerful in neighboring Senegal, the Islamic brotherhoods are today considered, with some reason, to represent Mali's traditional, conservative form of Islam. But it is well to recall that, during the course of their long and complex history, the brotherhoods have played both "traditional" syncretic and "reformist," even jihadist, roles.

One of the better known episodes of conflict between reformers and traditional followers of the brotherhoods peaked after World War II, when the children of wealthy Malian merchants returned from their pilgrimages to Mecca or from studies at Islamic centers, such as El Azhar University in Cairo, determined to spread the fundamentalist, back-to-the-Koran doctrine of Wahabism,[32] which they had encountered in their travels abroad. The resulting struggle centered largely on doctrinal detail, such as whether or not to pray with one's arms crossed, as Wahabi doctrine dictates.

The Wahabis made a significant contribution to Mali's anticolonial movement, but they also aroused fierce opposition from the brotherhoods and other traditional Islamic leaders, culminating in serious anti-Wahabi rioting in Bamako in 1957.[33] The Wahabis, whose women wear black veils, were also regarded by many Malians as the overprivileged, conceited offspring of a wealthy, clannish merchant class, an image that the movement has never entirely shaken.

While the Saudi Arabians have long supported Wahabism in Mali and continue to do so, the Wahabis were hardly the first or the only militant Islamic reformers in Malian history. As early as the eleventh century, Islamic reformers based in Morocco, the Almoravids, contributed to the decline and fall of the ancient Ghana Empire.[34] In 1810, Cheikou Amadou, another fundamentalist reformer, established the theocratic Peuhl Kingdom of Macina and waged jihad against the Bambara Segou state. When he conquered Jenné, he destroyed the great mosque, supposedly because he judged its man-made beauty to be heretical. Under colonial rule it was rebuilt by less doctrinaire clerics, with encouragement from the French. El Haj Omar Tall launched a jihad in 1852, which led to the establishment of the evanescent Tukulor Empire and set a model for several lesser jihadist states. As a general rule, these nineteenth-century militants opposed the advancing French but were not always supported by their own still predominantly animist subjects. Most of the jihadists in Mali's recent history, including both Cheikou Amadou and El Haj Omar Tall, have in fact been associated with one of the "traditional" brotherhoods.

When I arrived in Bamako as U.S. ambassador in 1987, Washington was already concerned about the possibly contagious effect of radical Islam in Mali, if less so than today. Various Muslim powers, including Libya, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, were already building mosques and subsidizing religious activity in the country. Prodded by Washington, and having worked on the same issue in both Indonesia and the Philippines, I bravely set forth in search of political Islam in Mali.

At that time, we were especially concerned about Iranian Shia influence. We were not amused when a Shia Lebanese firm based in Abidjan was awarded the contract to build Mali's new central bank building, directly in front of the American ambassador's residence. Iraq was then a friend of the United States, and the Iraqi ambassador gave me several cables' worth of dubious information about Iranian-funded Shia proselytizing in Mali, information that (for want of anything else) I was glad to send on to Washington, where it was well received. However, nothing ever came of the Shia menace, if it indeed existed.

Today, in democratic Mali, there is a relatively simple way of determining whether extremist Islam is becoming a significant political force, and that is to look at the status of sharia law—that is, at who is advocating it and what degree of political support it is attracting.[35] The question of sharia law is not alien to Mali; the provisions in the constitution establishing a secular state in the French tradition were debated and opposed by some Muslims at the 1991 National Conference. But as of this writing, none of Mali's numerous political parties advocate sharia law. Further, in the current political climate, where virtually no subject is taboo, there is no reason to believe that a significant sharia constituency would hesitate to express itself.

In view of Mali's history, it is hardly surprising that extremist elements continue to exist, although whether they are increasing in number is much harder to judge. A few years ago, Islamic radicals in western Mali burned down the sacred hut at Kangaba—one of the holy places of Mandé tradition—in connection with its customary triennial refurbishment. Recently, Malian authorities arrested members of a rural Islamic sect in the southern part of the country and charged them with treason when they refused to allow their children to participate in a national polio vaccination campaign.[36] When a Bamako study center recently began a campaign against female excision, Muslim radicals accused it of "genocidal" behavior. It was a curious charge given that excision is not mentioned in the Koran or practiced in many Muslim states, including Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and Pakistan. In the country's north, meanwhile, certain radical elements, including the Algerian-based Salafist GSPC (Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, or the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat) and the Tabligh I Jamaat, maintain a presence that is discussed further below.

However, the Islamic brotherhoods remain extremely important in Mali. Although they are less visibly integrated into the political process than in neighboring Senegal, they are courted by politicians and have had some influence on recent elections. There is virtually no Islamic press, but ambitious Muslim clerics routinely buy time on Mali's numerous local radio stations to popularize their views.[37] A rich array of Islamic books and pamphlets is widely available. However, many of the most popular publications focus on esoteric subjects that are anathema to fundamentalist reformers, such as magical formulas to ensure wealth or successful marriage.

Because the radical reformist element in Mali has strong international support—both intellectual and financial—reformism may well be slowly gaining ascendancy over traditionalism, and many Malians are concerned that this is the case. As matters stand, however, it is wrong to see Malian Islam as polarized between radicals and traditionalists. Rather, in a context of freedom of expression, Malian Islam covers a wide spectrum of belief.[38] If radical reformers are making inroads in certain areas, so too, on a more limited scale, are evangelical Christians with their own sources of external support. If some radical reformism exists, so too does pragmatic reformism, epitomized by a group of clerics from many areas of Mali who are working with a USAID-funded project on the promotion of HIV prevention and family planning.[39] When it comes to competition for Malian souls, rampant secularism may be the most dynamic influence of all, especially in Bamako, where, at least among the more affluent, hip-huggers seem to vastly outnumber veils or head scarves.

At the moment, I would agree with those Malians who see no evidence that radical Islam constitutes a significant immediate threat to their emerging democracy. On the contrary, the wide variety of Islamic practice in Mali, the free and prolific discussion of religious topics, and the absence of serious challenges to the secular state all suggest that Mali is a noteworthy example of how Islam and democratic pluralism can coexist notwithstanding a high degree of economic deprivation.

One could go further and argue that Malian Islam still contributes to national unity, much as it did at the time of the Mali Empire, by providing a common religious bond accepted by the vast majority of Malian citizens. There is some parallel here with the way in which most Americans, regardless of their sectarian differences, draw comfort from the vaguely deist sentiment, presumed by most to be Christian, suggested by the motto "In God We Trust." The equivalent Malian national motto, reaffirmed by the secularist constitution, is "UN PEUPLE—UN BUT—UNE FOI" (One People, One Goal, One Faith). As in the American case, very few Malians seem to worry about what "FOI" actually means in terms of specific religious practice.

The Northern Problem

Since 9/11, Mali's Saharan north has become a critical issue in U.S.-Malian relations for two related reasons. First and foremost, the United States fears that the world's greatest desert could become a new haven for terrorists, following the model of Afghanistan. Second, the United States believes that radicals operating from the desert could spread their creeds elsewhere in Mali and throughout the region, potentially threatening U.S. oil interests in the Gulf of Guinea. Either scenario could indirectly destabilize Mali and damage or destroy its burgeoning democracy.[40]

Unfortunately, much analysis of this northern problem, often replete with such worst-case scenarios, pays insufficient attention to local context, and therefore results in distorted analysis. The most important single element in recent northern unrest has been political disaffection among one group of Tuareg inhabiting the region around Kidal, northeast of Timbuktu. This disaffection is well documented and has had little to do with religion; rather, it has been a classic case of conflict between nomads and central authority. Kidal is not typical of the Malian north as a whole—nor even of the geographically divided Tuareg population.

It is important to bear in mind that in addition to the Tuareg, northern Mali is home to two other major groups. First, there is an important Songhay population composed of farmers and town-dwellers along the Niger River, whose forbears ruled the last of the *grands empires*. Second, there is also a small but influential group of Arabs, or Arabized Berbers, living in Timbuktu and elsewhere, including merchants, religious authorities, and customary rulers. Each of these three groups—Tuareg, Songhay, and Arabs—has its own history and, even more important, its own long memory of relationships with the others. Much of this history is relevant to current events.

Independent Mali has been struggling for more than forty years with the problem of integrating the area north of the Niger River into the national state. This issue is important in its own right, but it has only marginal connection with the issue of extremist Islam. As we have seen, Malian Islam is in general well integrated into Malian democracy. For a variety of cultural reasons, religious extremism in the north, should it in fact become significant, will not transmit easily to the south, where more than 90 percent of the population lives.

Historically, the *grands empires* were bordered by the desert but never controlled it. Following Moroccan occupation of the Niger River bend in the sixteenth century, the desert areas were dominated by the Tuareg. Before the colonial period, the Tuareg lived primarily by herding and were rarely town dwellers. They were acculturated to warfare and pillage and were traditionally at odds with the sedentary Songhay people of the Niger River valley. Most but not all Tuareg resisted French intrusion fiercely until the eve of World War I; the future Marshall Joffre made his reputation fighting them. This was the land of mud-brick desert forts and Beau Geste legend. When they were not fighting the Tuareg, the tiny handful of French administrators in the north, mainly military, were intoxicated by their romantic appeal.

On the eve of granting independence to their African colonies, the French government, allegedly encouraged by oil interests, toyed briefly with the idea of creating an independent pan-Saharan desert state for the Tuareg, a proposal that was strenuously resisted by Mali and other Sahara-bordering nations.[41] The idea never got off the ground, but it left a residue of tragically heightened Tuareg expectations. It also stimulated nationalist sensitivity on the part of the Malian regime regarding its all-too-theoretical control of the desert north.

By the late 1980s, the north seemed completely pacified. For example, during the cool season, European tourists regularly crossed the desert from Algeria on one of two roads, one passing through Mali and terminating in Gao and the other, further east, leading to Agadez in Niger. Peace notwithstanding, the integration of the various Malian Tuareg populations varied widely under the Traoré regime. The Menaka Tuareg were relatively well integrated and represented in the single-party state (their senior party member at that time is now the elected mayor of Menaka). The Kidal Tuareg, on the other hand, remained obviously restive, and a trip to Kidal felt like entering occupied territory. By the late 1980s, the United States was providing a trickle of nonlethal military assistance to Mali, and some of this money was spent on a clinic in Kidal. This gave me an excuse to visit the area, which was otherwise of very little interest to the U.S. embassy. The entire north was still excluded from our much larger economic aid program, with the important exception of drought-related food security projects, such as the World Vision project at Menaka, which, as we shall see, was to figure prominently in the 1995 rebellion.

These Kidal Tuareg—the Kel Adagh—had a history of unrest. Living in splendid isolation in the highland area known as the Adrar des Iforas, abutting the Algerian border, they alone among the Malian Tuareg appeared to welcome colonial occupation and did not resist the French. But after independence they fell out with the new Malian government when it refused to allow them the degree of autonomy previously tolerated by the French, and they launched a bitter rebellion in 1963. Religion had nothing to do with it, and they were not joined by

other Malian Tuareg. The Malian army put the uprising down harshly through massacres, poisoning of wells, and destruction of flocks. Many of the Kidal Tuareg fled to Algeria, beginning a pattern of flight to the north that was to last almost three decades. The outbreak left a heritage of bitterness on both sides, and the rebellion of 1990 was in large part a result of this earlier conflict.

With the severe droughts of the 1970s and 1980s, many more Tuareg from throughout the north, deprived of their livelihood by the starvation of their flocks, left Mali for Libya and Algeria. There they sought employment in the military and elsewhere, and some received training in Qadhafi's Arab Legion. By 1980, some among those from Kidal began plotting a return to win independence or autonomy for their homeland, and by 1990 many of them had infiltrated back into Mali. Curiously enough, they seem to have received no support from the Libyans. They were almost ready to strike when, quite by chance, two things happened almost simultaneously.

First, in May 1990, international aid donors implemented a large-scale resettlement of displaced Tuareg who were living in Libya and Algeria back to Niger, Mali's neighbor to the east. On arrival the refugees were dissatisfied by the arrangements made for them (e.g., lack of land), leading to conflict with Nigerien officials. The Nigerien army struck back ruthlessly, killing hundreds of Tuareg and creating a human rights uproar in the international (especially French) press. Second, on June 27, the Malian army captured a vehicle belonging to the Kidal insurgents and discovered arms and plans for their forthcoming outbreak. Led by Iyad ag Ghali, the Kidal group decided to move immediately, before the Malian army could crush them, and in order to claim solidarity with the widely publicized Tuareg victims of repression in Niger.

Equipped with nothing but camels and a few hunting rifles, the Kidal rebels brilliantly targeted a large, USAID-financed project operated by the NGO World Vision at Menaka, near the Nigerien border in eastern Mali, which was designed to safeguard against future drought and promote development among the local Tuareg without destroying their economically rational, seminomadic economy. As the insurgents were well aware, the project was endowed with a fleet of modern vehicles, which they seized in an attack on June 28, along with guns from the local police *(gendarmerie)* post. Now much better armed and equipped, the rebels moved to attack their primary targets in Kidal, where they aimed to establish the independent territory of Azawad. Thus began a rapidly escalating struggle, which soon had all of Mali north of the Niger River in flames. It should be stressed that many other Tuareg did not support the Kidal-led rebellion.

Five years of negotiations, under both President Traoré and then President Konaré, were needed to get the situation under control. Konaré successfully implemented Mali's new decentralization policy in the north as part of his peace strategy. He also agreed to withdraw Malian military posts from the north, a decision that is now criticized by many observers on security grounds. The young rebels had deliberately targeted the older generation of Tuareg leaders and often ended up seizing their leadership positions after killing them. Today these

former insurgents, well aware of their capacity to make trouble, remain leaders in some areas of the north, not least in Kidal.[42]

In Kidal, the original rebel leader, Iyad ag Ghali, who is now the senior traditional leader and effective political boss of the region, has recently become an adherent of the Tabligh I Jumaat, a fundamentalist, proselytizing sect often compared to the Jehovah's Witnesses. The Tabligh was formed in India in the 1930s in protest against the emancipation of women, which its founders believed was being promoted by British colonial rule. There is little in common between the Tabligh's fundamentalist religious doctrine and traditional Tuareg religious and social norms, such as the high status the Tuareg accord to women. This is a matter of concern to knowledgeable Malian observers, but they also believe that the movement itself has no political agenda in Mali.

Some foreigners are nonetheless worried that the Tabligh's radically conservative religious agenda could act as a stepping stone between the Kidal Tuareg and international terrorist movements. This concern remains hypothetical at best. Dutch historian Baz (Jean Sebastian) Lecocq, a leading academic expert on the rebellion and its aftermath, points out that the Kidal leadership was instrumental in achieving a mediated solution to the Malian phase of the 2004 Algerian rebel incursion (described below).[43] It is also believed that the Tabligh leadership deliberately targeted the Tuareg for conversion to their sect, but if so they have succeeded only in Kidal. The primary reason for their success in Kidal may be that Iyad and his followers have recognized that affiliation with the Tabligh creates political space for them and bargaining power vis-à-vis the national government, goals the Kidal Tuareg have consistently pursued.

Despite all the speculation about the Tabligh and growing extremism, the truly salient change in northern geopolitics since 1995 is not Islamist infiltration, but the fact that, since the rebellion, no one has reestablished any semblance of control over the vast, sparsely inhabited desert. The ancient trade routes are today in the hands of armed traffickers in cigarettes, arms, and illegal immigrants, who are smuggled to Europe. Only the most foolhardy of tourists now ventures on the Gao-Algeria road. The remote Sahara, somewhat like the high seas, is once again a space where near anarchy reigns.[44] The potential for terrorism as well as banditry is certainly there.

The only clear case thus far resembling a terrorist incursion occurred in 2003, when a group of Algerian rebels associated with the radical GSPC fled into Malian territory with some captured German tourists. They were led by an Algerian army veteran known as "El Para" (the paratrooper), who was widely suspected of having al Qaeda connections. The captives were ransomed by the Germans (although the Germans deny it), and El Para fled out of Mali and eventually into Chad, where most of his GSPC followers were allegedly killed in a fight with Chadian and Nigerien troops supported by U.S. Special Forces. El Para himself escaped but was captured by Chadian rebels who eventually released him to the Chadian government. They passed him on to Qadhafi, who turned him over to the Algerian authorities.[45]

Despite ongoing U.S. training programs for the Malian military aimed at reducing the threat of desert-based terrorism, the U.S. military has let it be known that it regards Malian performance as less than adequate, epitomized by the fact that it was the Chadians and not the Malians who eventually captured El Para. The subtext to this criticism is that the Malians are not being tough enough on potential terrorists. U.S. experts have suggested that Mali would be the best place in the region for any ambitious would-be terrorist to set up shop. This unflattering view of Mali's resolve is apparently shared by certain neighboring governments, including Morocco and Algeria, whose military are less hesitant about using harsh measures against bandits and dissidents.

In truth, Malian and U.S. perspectives on the northern problem differ significantly. While the Malians understand the threat of terrorism, they are more fundamentally alarmed by the possibility of a recurrence of the 1990–95 rebellion. They know from hard experience that such a conflagration could rapidly escalate beyond their capacity to control it. Some Malians are no doubt worried about their ability to apply tough measures in a manner that would not aggravate old political grievances. They are bemused that the Americans, so admiring and supportive of Malian democracy in general, apparently would like them to abandon procedural niceties and simply get tough with the bad guys in the desert north.

The north remains very poor compared to the rest of the country, and Kidal is the poorest of Mali's eight administrative regions. Any long-term solution for the north will require a heavy investment in development without any dependable economic return. This is a tough nut for the cash-strapped Malian government, which fully realizes the need for more development in the north, but faces much greater investment needs in the south, where at least 90 percent of the population lives. At the moment, developmental activities in the north, largely dependent on foreign aid, are focused on road building, the expansion of irrigated land along the Niger River, and small projects designed to improve health, education, and decentralized local government. An accelerated effort could emphasize more rapid progress on roads, airports, and schools, including perhaps a system of boarding schools for the Tuareg and other nomads. Some Tuareg are still hoping for a major dam on the Niger River at Tossaye, west of Bourem—perhaps a lower, more environmentally acceptable, structure than the vast one first proposed by the Russians decades ago. And while there is once again oil exploration in the region, it has no sure outcome as of this writing.

Assuming that law and order can be reestablished in the north, there is no reason to doubt that Mali's democracy will continue to do at least as well there as it does elsewhere in the country, perhaps better. Decentralization is thriving in the north, despite its economic problems. In the 2004 local elections, the rate of voter participation in the three northern regions (Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu) was high, with Timbuktu's being the highest of any region in the country.

Strife in the South

At the present time, continuing unrest in coastal West Africa (Liberia, Sierra Leone, and now Ivory Coast) is an even more critical problem for Mali than the northern unrest. Mali's long-term economic development, and hence the long-term viability of its democracy, depends heavily on access to markets and ports in the south. However proud the Malians may be of their culture of tolerance, the element of Muslim-Christian hostility in the current Ivoirian conflict is bound to be unsettling, as is the broader anti-immigrant thrust that led to the crisis in the first place, since many of the immigrants in Ivory Coast are from Mali. The Malians deserve much credit, as do the Burkinabé, for emphasizing diplomatic solutions and repressing, thus far, any inclination to take sides militarily. However, if coastal West Africa continues its recent pattern of economic and political decline, Mali's economic and democratic prospects will be increasingly threatened. Already the southern portion of the country, once its most prosperous, is visibly suffering from the impact of the conflict, with much less cross-border traffic in evidence than I remembered from visits in the late 1980s.[46] During my 2004 travels to the south, I heard complaints about war-related disruption of commerce and employment in virtually every commune I visited. The Malians are aware that while the United States is keenly interested in the northern problem because of its relevance to the global war on terrorism, it is quite content to leave the Ivoirian crisis to the French and others.

Cultural Complacency

I have emphasized the importance of cultural elements in driving Malian democratization, but a cautionary note is necessary. Malian culture is conservative, in the sense that it gives unusual priority to a sense of history and historically derived social and political values. In general, the effect of this phenomenon has been positive. It has helped the Malians draw inspiration from their own past, avoid ethnic conflict, and interact effectively with the outside world. Additionally, it has contributed to the moderate quality of Malian Islam and, quite probably, to the low rate of HIV/AIDS in the country.

Yet there is also a downside to any conservatism. By definition, in Mali as elsewhere, it often results in resistance to change. The path of educational reform is a case in point. Virtually all Malians want more and better education. Because of the obvious need for education funding—and Mali's good developmental and political track record—donors, including the United States, have made education a major focus of their aid packages since the late 1980s. Throughout this period, they and their Malian counterparts have endorsed a cluster of reform elements, including more emphasis on elementary education rather than on tertiary, elite-level education; a curriculum with more vocational components adapted to Malian conditions; and initial instruction in local languages, eventually phasing over to French.[47]

Nevertheless, despite the universally perceived need for improved education and hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign aid, progress on the education front has been painfully slow. Large numbers of new schools have been built in rural areas, thanks to a new program of

community schools. School enrollment has risen from about one-third to just over one-half of school-age children,[48] in part because Koranic schools, previously not counted, are now included in enrollment statistics. This increase is no small achievement especially given Mali's rapidly rising population (about 2.4 percent annually); a third of the population still does not attend school at all. Curriculum and language medium reforms are still struggling to get beyond the experimental stage.

Some educated, urban Malians are extremely unhappy about the slow progress in improving education. Some of them blame Konaré for talking a good game but not doing enough for education during his ten years in office. They are motivated by a keen desire to see their children move ahead in a situation of daunting difficulty. They are worried about initial instruction in local languages, because they fear it will disadvantage their children compared to those who can afford private schools taught entirely in French.

Rural Malians are, for the moment, less demanding. Based on my experience, they simply want more classrooms. The majority of them have not yet started to worry much about the quality of the education. Yet they are frequently reluctant to send their children to school or to keep them there, especially girls, because they see a greater need for them at home. The same value system, linked to the need for farm and household labor, keeps population growth rates high. It is not always appreciated that rural African agriculture remains labor intensive. As long as that is true, and as long as infant mortality rates remain high, opting for large families is rational economic behavior.

There is no question that the slow pace of change in Malian education is largely poverty-driven: a shortage of funding means classes are chronically far too large to allow effective teaching and students often have no books of any kind. But it also seems likely that if the Malian middle and upper classes cared sufficiently about the need for reform, more progress would have been made, especially since 1991.

The problem of education is broadly typical of many other sectors of Malian life. When cultural factors are positive, they assist development, but when they are negative, things bog down. To cite two other examples, the country has not yet developed a significant commercial agricultural sector, despite obvious potential. Farming is still seen through a subsistence optic. People still really do not like to sell their cattle: they love and cherish their herds as something to be proud of—that is, until overgrazing becomes critical, or drought hits, and animals must be sold at fire-sale prices.

Likewise, genuine risk-taking entrepreneurship remains rare. Malians know how to trade and practically everyone does it. The national economy, it sometimes seems, consists mainly of hundreds of thousands of people trading small volumes of similar goods. Profit margins are low but predictable, as are capital requirements; no one really competes with anyone else, and, judging from retail prices, the system is highly inefficient. But it is what people know. They have been doing it for a very long time, and despite the rarity of good housing, paved streets, or modern amenities, they do not seem to want to venture into high-risk, competitive

capitalism. To an unhealthy degree, entrepreneurship is still left to the Lebanese and other foreigners.

And that, in a nutshell, is the downside of Mali's cultural self-confidence. It brings with it a high degree of patience and pride. It also involves a degree of ambivalence about whether change is really urgent. It can and does extend to practices such as excision and caste. Self-confidence can easily slide into self-satisfaction, especially on the part of the relatively wealthy and powerful. It is reflected in the *incivisme* mentioned earlier, and in the lack of strong measures, thus far, against corruption. It contributes to continued economic stagnation and over-dependence on foreign aid, despite the fact that Malians are almost unanimous in recognizing an imperative need to end poverty.

The status of women, however, reflects another instance, like democratization itself, where tradition and the need for change are intersecting with generally encouraging results.

7 Women in the New Democracy

Respect for women is deeply rooted in Mandé culture, but it is an ambiguous kind of respect. As one scholar has written, "[The portion of the Sundiata epic that deals with the hero and his mother, Sogolon] reflects an essential truth of the Mandé intellectual system. This is the acknowledgement that men derive their power from their mothers and that human existence and survival depend on the strength of women."[49] But in the epic context, this respect is heavily tinged with male fear and distrust of female power.

While women are still not full and equal participants in Malian democracy—and have traditionally had no equality in the political sphere—their position is certainly improving. There are currently fifteen female members of parliament out of a total of 147; five female ministers out of twenty-eight; two female ambassadors out of twenty-two; and one female prefect—a central government official at the circle level—out of forty-nine. At the local level, where decentralization is most operative, there are 704 female communal counselors out of 10,789, and seven female mayors out of 703 (up from five before the 2004 elections).[50]

The ability of educated, middle-class Malian women to compete effectively with men is still limited, yet on balance it compares favorably with the situation in the United States and many other developed countries. This is partly because Malian women enjoy relatively easy access to child care compared to Western women, whether through servants or extended families. For a long time urban Malian women have been prominent, if underrepresented, in certain professional fields, such as law and education, and especially in the increasingly important world of NGOs. This does not hold true for some other sectors, including business (beyond the village level), the executive branch, and the military. As in certain Western countries, the presence of women in prominent civil-service jobs is sometimes a reflection of tokenism. Yet on balance there is an infectious degree of dynamism about Malian women that often leads to impressive results and does not seem to evoke significant male resentment—quite the contrary, in most cases.

The situation in the rural areas, where the majority of the population lives, is another story. Women still lag behind men in school enrollment and literacy. All too often families do not see the advantage of education for girls beyond the primary level, especially when it involves travel to a distant secondary facility, with attendant hazards and expenses. On the other hand, as noted above, they understand very well the importance and economic value of household labor in what is still a labor-intensive rural economy. In addition to child rearing, women do most of the hard physical labor associated with village life, including hauling water, often from distant sources. At the same time, women are generally very active in village economic affairs, all the more so now thanks to the effective, NGO-led promotion of microfinance development activities.

Given the circumstances in the rural areas, the growing role of women in local government is encouraging. Women are important both as supporters and as agents of democratization, because they understand full well that they can take advantage of it to press their social and economic concerns. In many communes, they are also enthusiastic consumers of the services that can result from democratization, including better access to education, health, and marketing opportunities. As anyone who has worked with them can testify, Malian village women are often talented organizers, and despite the hardships of village life, they are almost never beaten down or bereft of hope in a better future.

8 Freedom *IS* Ringing: The Joy of Political Liberty and the New Role of the Military

The most obvious and remarkable change in Mali since 1991 has been the flowering of political expression. Under the First Republic of Modibo Keita (1960–69), radicalism was accompanied by paranoia. The successor state of Moussa Traoré, after a turbulent beginning riddled with attempted coups, was mainly just dull. By 1987, the problem was not so much that Malians were afraid to talk about politics. Rather, it was that they had little if anything interesting to discuss. The events of 1990–91 changed that. Today there are no inhibitions about political expression beyond a degree of ingrained respect for rank and authority. That does not, however, prevent individuals or journalists from criticizing the president or other officials.

The press, if uninhibited, is far from perfect. There are too many newspapers (about twenty dailies plus a number of less-than-dailies). All based in Bamako, they are highly variable in quality, with only scant advertising or other visible means of support. It is widely assumed that some reporters are routinely bought by political parties or other interests. The Malian press tends to imitate the more shallow examples of French journalism; a cute turn of phrase matters far more than digging for facts or serious analysis. Newspapers cost about fifty U.S. cents per copy, far too much for the average Malian, and none of them has a distribution system outside Bamako. They are rather reminiscent of the broadsheets of pioneering U.S. journalism, though less vitriolic. On the positive side, the Malian press does not run in herds; when one newspaper ran a sensational story critical of U.S. behavior in Mali during my 2004 stay, none of the others picked it up.

But the truly extraordinary aspect of the Malian media is radio. From a single state-run station in 1991, Mali has progressed to the point where virtually the entire country is covered by local radio. There are now more than 140 FM stations,[51] mostly broadcasting in local languages. They have not lost their amateurish enthusiasm and even enjoy asking recently assigned U.S. Peace Corps volunteers to act as disc jockeys, practicing their newly acquired Bambara on the air to the great amusement of Malian audiences. USAID has played a major role in diffusing local radio, including through the provision of transmitters for mini-stations, originally designed for Canada's far north, that fit in a suitcase.

Despite, or perhaps because of, its amateur quality, local radio is of major value to Mali's newly decentralized local governments. In addition, while offering a form of entertainment, local radio also extends the reach of the print media. One station in Bamako has a popular morning program featuring two characters reading stories out of the daily press; they trade wisecracks and offer grassroots punditry much in the spirit of Mr. Dooley, Finley Peter Dunne's classic American satirical character.[52]

Only slightly less important than press freedom has been the change in Mali's military and law enforcement institutions, especially the latter. Throughout the country democracy has meant a different relationship between police and public, with some observers complaining that the police are now unwilling to take stern measures against anyone and, indeed, are no longer doing much at all. In rural areas an even more momentous change has been the greatly reduced power of the once-feared Direction des Eaux et Forêts (Waters and Forests Department), which polices forest land around villages. The relationship between elected commune governments and Eaux et Forêts, since renamed Conservation de la Nature (Conservation of Nature) to avoid the stigma of the old name, has yet to be defined, but the organization no longer pushes the peasantry around with impunity for often imaginary infractions the way it used to.

Freedom has real meaning in Mali today. Malians may be equivocal about some aspects of democracy, including political parties and politicians, but I do not think they will give up their newfound liberties easily. And they are sophisticated enough to realize that freedom will endure as long as the country does not revert to authoritarian rule. Public opinion surveys have confirmed that one thing Malians clearly do not want is a return to military dictatorship.[53]

What about the army itself? Armies have generally been regarded as an antidemocratic force in Africa—and not without reason. However, there is no hint that the Malian army is currently such a force. In fact, the army is relieved no longer to be identified with a dictatorial regime. More important, it is very aware and genuinely proud of President Touré's role as the coup-maker who promised to return power to the people and actually kept his word.

There are nonetheless a few small danger signs that are worth noting. Although officers do not seem to yearn for the good old days, when they were routinely assigned to be ministers, governors, and local administrators, they now feel that they are ignored in situations where, as in the case of the northern problem, military expertise is relevant. In short, they feel that having (as an institution) helped to create Mali's new democracy, they are now disengaged from policy dialogue. Mali's equivalent of a political-military national security council is moribund, they say. It is strange but true that, despite having received considerable U.S. and French training in peacekeeping activities, Malians have yet to participate in any major UN peacekeeping missions other than as observers, for reasons not clear to me.

In addition, the Malian military is naturally unhappy over the inadequacy of its training and equipment. This sentiment is felt with special keenness when Mali's willingness to pursue terrorists in the desert north with no-holds-barred enthusiasm has been questioned by friends and neighbors. Rightly or wrongly, the military believes that U.S. military aid has been seriously constrained due to Mali's refusal to meet U.S. conditions regarding the International Criminal Court (ICC), despite a large loophole for aid relating to terrorism, thus denying it some badly needed spare parts. The military's attitude seems to be "give us the tools and training to do our job and it will be done better." As of 2004, Mali spent only 0.4 percent of GDP on the military,[54] one of the lowest figures in the region and hardly a large amount for a country that still faces genuine security problems.

9 Decentralization: The Heart of the Matter

The Structure of Decentralization

Decentralization is correctly regarded as the heart of Mali's democracy; it is the institution that best reflects popular ownership of the new order and thereby improves its prospects for sustainability. Here, in brief, is how decentralization is working.

Malian decentralization provides for elected commune councils in both urban and rural areas. There are 703 of them, which averages out to about seventeen thousand people per commune. In rural areas this usually means that each commune covers a handful of villages. Commune councilors choose the mayor, who is assisted by a small staff. They also elect representatives to councils at the two higher administrative levels, the circle *(cercle)* and the region, of which there are forty-nine and eight, respectively. The state appoints parallel representatives at each level: subprefect *(sous-préfet)* at the commune level, prefect *(préfet)* at the circle level, and high commissioner *(haut commissaire)* at the region level.

Before the first local elections could be held in 1999, the government had to determine how villages would be grouped together in communes. It was a lengthy process, designed to reflect the will of local communities. This concern for popular sentiment, admirable though it was, led to contention because of grievances that had accumulated during decades of arbitrary boundary changes under previous regimes, and there was some violence. But the violence did not persist and the elections were successful.

The second round of local elections, held in May 2004, was even more successful. In a majority of communes, incumbent mayors were voted out by newly elected councilors, which is itself an indicator of local-level democratic vitality. Voter participation rates were inversely proportional to the degree of urbanization, with Timbuktu Region witnessing the highest participation rates among possible voters (54 percent) and Bamako the lowest (23 percent).[55]

Newly elected councilors took the matter of choosing a mayor seriously, sometimes resulting in feverish logrolling as various factions made deals with one another. In a few cases this resulted in the choice of compromise mayors representing minor parties, at the expense of those preferred by the electorate, leading to popular protest but no serious unrest. As noted in the earlier discussion of political parties, some of them have flourished at the local level by aligning with traditional geographic or kinship factions.

Decentralization has changed Mali's rural landscape. New mayoral offices *(mairies)* are proudly on display, and communes located on main highways have flexed their democratic muscle by installing speed bumps, now ubiquitous, where vehicles once rushed through with scant regard for goats or children in the road. This new spirit of self-assertion is also reflected in

growing comprehension on the part of once-powerless villagers that they can lobby Bamako and maybe get results. For example, in Jenné, members of a women's association were fearful that a new dam on a Niger tributary would destroy their already declining local fishery, so they lobbied against it through a retired government official of Jenné origin now living in Bamako. While their petition has apparently failed, the government has responded by promising Jenné a small dam of its own.[56]

I asked Térába Togola, Mali's leading archaeologist and head of the National Heritage (Patrimoine) Office, what democratization had meant to him in his work of cultural preservation. He said that local people now regularly come to him from all corners of Mali to seek assistance in preserving local sites. Moreover, they have learned that they can successfully lobby the government to make sure that some funding is available. When I left his office there was a rural delegation on the premises waiting to see him.[57]

Local governments are financed by grants from the state, and, as noted earlier, they also have a right to retain the income from certain minor taxes, most notably the local development tax. Communes get 80 percent of this revenue, circles get 15 percent, and regions get 5 percent. Under a hallowed French administrative principle known as "account unity" *(unicité de caisse),* local governments are forbidden to keep their own money but must give it back to the central treasury and then rely on central government accounting agents and disbursements, thus slowing down the availability of funds and depriving the commune leaders of full control of their own financial affairs. This is a much-criticized feature of the current system,[58] but I found that at the local level concern about the accounting system is dwarfed by the more urgent problem of sheer lack of money. The most important national taxes, including the VAT, are not shared with local governments, ensuring their continued dependence on subventions from the central government and aid donors.

To underline the importance of decentralization, the founding fathers created a High Council of Local Government (the HCC, or Haut Conseil des Collectivités), which is supposed to represent the interests of commune governments at the national level. Envisioned as being similar to a second house in the national legislature—though never designated as such—with the power to introduce legislation relevant to the communes,[59] the HCC was set up with glacial slowness and has never fully assumed its intended role.

The success of government at the commune level depends on four elements, and in the best communes it appears that all four are beginning to work as a team. First there are the elected councilors and the mayor and his staff, who draw up the required five-year plan and the commune budget. Second, there is the subprefect, the central government official at the commune level. His job is to make sure that commune operations are not contravening national law, and that the central government is fulfilling its obligations through its various services. Third, there are the traditional rulers, the village chiefs, and sometimes the *griots*, who interpret and implement customary law in such vital matters as land tenure and inheritance and who are the primary adjudicators of most local conflicts. Finally, there are the NGOs, with their ubiquitous white four-by-fours, which provide technical training for the commune gov-

ernments and financial support for small projects. The great majority of them are, directly or indirectly, foreign funded.

The Kaleidoscope in Action: A Glimpse of Rural Communes

There is so much variation among communes that generalizing about them is difficult. Below are some vignettes from my travels in the Sikasso and Mopti Regions in August 2004 that illustrate the great variation among communes and the problems they face:

- The new mayor of Bandiagara, the largest town in Dogon country, said he was elected because of his experience as an NGO employee working on development issues; the people felt he would know how to bring all the elements of local government together. He indicated land disputes are his biggest problem, and his failure to develop tourism more rapidly is one of his biggest disappointments. In back of the *mairie* was a brand new, USAID-funded information-technology center with a class in full swing teaching local youths how to operate computers.
- In one urban commune I met the mayor and his two assistants in the dusty attic of the old regime's administrative office. One assistant spoke about the city's hygiene problems, which were hindering the development of tourism. The other explained how the commune had been lobbying against a major infrastructure project that would likely have a detrimental environmental impact on the city. The mayor, seated between his two assistants, looked uncomfortable and said absolutely nothing. Such reticence sometimes results when political deadlock among local factions has led to selection of a compromise mayoral candidate—one who can be counted on not to be a real leader himself.
- At an animist commune near Sikasso an unpopular mayor had just been reelected. Why? The village chief has a drinking problem, and the mayor, a wealthy man, gives the chief money so he can satisfy his thirst. In turn, the chief strongly supported the mayor for reelection. The chief has the village fetish in his house; people are afraid of what he can do with it, so they do what he says.
- At Keleya, south of Bamako, the commune government seemed active and ambitious. The mayor was sharp and enthusiastic, his *mairie* was full of constituents coming and going, and his secretary was a bright young man with an up-and-coming air about him. The commune had an 80 percent tax-collection rate last year, an excellent record by Malian standards. It received some new first-cycle (primary) classrooms a while ago, but the mayor and his staff complained that the graduates had nowhere to continue their education, so they wanted a second-cycle school (beginning at year nine) to be built. The mayor was critical of the cotton company for not picking up the recent crop on time. The commune also wanted, among other things, its own small radio station, some help with small irrigation works, and a better marketplace.
- In a southern commune a reputable European NGO was leading a training session for recently elected commune council members and staff. The subject of the training was commune financing. The instructor advised the councilors to be more self-reliant, suggesting that they could tax traffic on the main road between Sikasso and Bougouni, which runs

through the commune—palpably not a good idea. The commune had already demonstrated some measure of self-reliance through the creation of a very active cooperative that markets its *karité* (shea nut) products in Bamako.

As these glimpses suggest, the world of the communes is a kaleidoscope, with bright flashes and dark spots. Some are floundering; others seem to have hit their stride. Within them one can find naive hopes and pragmatic visions, cynical deal-making and genuine cooperative initiatives, and corruption as well as integrity. But, whatever the quality or state of the commune, there always seems to be an endlessly entertaining public spectacle in progress in what used to be a drab political landscape weighed down by opaque central authority. If there are complaints about all sorts of things, there is also hope that somehow that dam or those extra classrooms will get built. In the democratizing Malian countryside, political springtime is in the air.

The Great Debate

Despite its halcyon aspects, many observers are deeply worried about the future of the commune system. They point out that almost none of the communes are approaching economic self-sufficiency, except for a few being bankrolled by wealthy emigrant communities in France. They cite an ongoing tug-of-war in which the mandarins of the old civil service, centered in the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Local Government, are resisting measures to give the communes more control of local resources. They wonder why the HCC has been so slow to exercise its powers to propose solutions to some of the thornier problems faced by the communes.

Some of these problems revolve around land. For all its seemingly vast spaces, Mali is a country plagued with land issues that are likely to become more critical in the future. For example, commune boundaries have never been precisely demarcated, which presents an open invitation to land disputes. Traditional tenure systems, in which the village chief allocates rights to land but no one has title, prevent the use of land as collateral to secure financing for local investment. The relationship between central agencies such as Conservation de la Nature and commune governments remains undefined. Further, the division of powers between elected commune governments and traditional authorities is totally ad hoc. The list of problems that need to be addressed is seemingly endless.

The threat of a mandarin-inspired rollback of the entire decentralization experiment is real. The professional administrators of the old order argue that the country can no longer afford the disorderly experimentation that prevails at the moment.[60] They are calling for a centrally directed reorganization of communes to eliminate those that are not viable. When it is pointed out that the 1999 borders were democratically, if inexactly, defined (not without some strife), thereby greatly enhancing a sense of local ownership, their answer is "that was then and this is now."[61] The more pessimistic proponents of decentralization believe that the

mandarinate is deliberately starving local communities of resources to prove its case that the experiment is not working.

Despite decentralization, the Malian state remains highly centralized overall, and more central government units are constantly being added. Mali's heavy reliance on foreign aid exacerbates this problem, since most donors need ministries to be their partners, inevitably strengthening them in the process. The power of the center is bizarrely symbolized by a huge, Libyan-financed office complex being built on the banks of the Niger, across the street from Bamako's fanciest hotel, which is designed to house most of the central government.

One important concern about decentralization involves the potential use of land as an economic resource for the financially hard pressed communes. Under Malian law, any local entity can subdivide and sell land. Two steps are required: (1) permission from the central government, which in effect cedes its underlying, sovereign control to the commune, and (2) a process of negotiation with the traditional leaders, who may be rewarded by the promise of choice parcels in return for cooperation. The commune authorities may then proceed to subdivide and sell the land in question.

This has already been done by some urban communes in Bamako, resulting in highly publicized charges of malfeasance, and it is beginning to happen in other urban and quasi-urban areas where land values are escalating and commune governments are unable to meet their increasing obligations without more funds. Some critics believe that rural communes are woefully unprepared to deal with this problem and are likely to be caught between would-be land developers and corrupted traditional leaders.

While such failings are emphasized by critics of decentralization, its most fervent admirers argue that the genius of the system from its beginning has been its very boldness. It was purposely set in motion before all the problems could be thought through on the theory that local entities, in their infinite variety, would be able to thrash out solutions without being swathed in centrally imposed laws and regulations. The philosophy was "throw them in at the deep end and let them swim." But critics now say, "What if they are simply unable to swim? They may become discouraged and drown before they reach the other side. And the hardest stretch is yet to come."

While Mali's founding fathers provided for oversight of decentralization and remedial authority in the form of the HCC, everyone agrees that the HCC has not lived up to expectations. At present, it acts as little more than a kind of trade union for mayors, who, being human and serving with minimal compensation, would like to receive the same salaries, perks, and status accorded to the old centralized civil service. But on this issue, too, opinion is divided, even among ardent proponents of decentralization. Some believe that the HCC should be formally converted into a second house of the legislature, representing local authorities much as the U.S. Senate represents the states. Others argue that the HCC is simply too new to be effective, especially given that the National Assembly is not a very inspiring role model, and that it will

grow into its job in time if Malian civil society gets itself organized to apply pressure on behalf of decentralization.[62]

Others argue that the danger of an impoverished, discouraged, and corrupted local government system is potentially serious enough to warrant attention from the president, if for some reason the HCC will not or cannot do its job. Decentralization was conceived at the center, and there is no reason why it cannot receive vitally important support from the center without danger of suffocation.

10

The Niger Authority: Democratization vs. Hydraulic Despotism?

There is one special case in which Mali's two most important goals, democratization and economic growth, sometimes seem to be in conflict. It involves the evolution of a huge, French-created irrigation project, the Niger Authority (Office du Niger).

In 1932 the French launched a grandiose scheme to irrigate unpopulated, dried-out lands in ancient flood basins of the Niger's Inner Delta. For this purpose they created the state-run Niger Authority. The project was originally designed primarily to grow cotton to help liberate France from the yoke of Anglo-Saxon textile dominance. Remaining capacity was intended to produce food to nourish cash-crop plantation workers elsewhere in French Africa.

The authority rapidly became a state within a state, forcibly recruiting colons (peasant settlers) from what is now Burkina Faso and elsewhere. Because these settlers had no traditional rights to the authority's previously vacant lands, they—and their descendants—remained uniquely vulnerable to central control. Although badly battered by the Great Depression in the 1930s, the authority never went under. Between the end of World War II and Malian independence in 1960, the authority even received U.S. Marshall Plan assistance. Part of this assistance was used to purchase giant earth-moving equipment whose remains could be seen until recently, rusting away not far from the main dam at Markala, near a terminal constructed for a never-built 3,700-kilometer railroad that was to have carried French cotton across the Sahara.

After independence the Malian government narrowed the authority's imperial focus to rice production, giving it two objectives: to produce cheap rice, the favored staple of the Malian elite, and—though never publicly stated—to employ as many middle- and upper-class Malian administrators as possible. In order to keep the rice cheap, the price paid to the authority's farmers was kept as low as possible. This had the unintended consequence of minimizing the farmer's incentive to produce more. At the same time, the top-heavy administration of the authority kept it in the red, leaving no funds to maintain adequately the irrigation infrastructure—much less expand the canal system into new areas. As a result, only about one-twentieth of the authority's one million hectares of potentially irrigable land has been brought under cultivation. It should be noted that it is not clear whether the full amount could be irrigated without unacceptable environmental risk and/or resistance from other potential users of the needed water.

In the 1980s, the World Bank and other donors undertook to reform the moribund authority against what seemed to be heavy odds. But the application of much-maligned structural adjustment economic principles succeeded brilliantly. In return for their investment and technical assistance, the donors insisted on liberalization of the rice market—along with other cereal markets—and privatization of the authority's industrial-scale rice mills, which were replaced with smaller and much more efficient private mills.

Further encouraged by high-yielding rice varieties and better cultivation methods—for example, the introduction of Asian-style transplanting—the farmers began to produce more rice. Yields climbed from three tons per hectare in 1986 to six tons in 1998. The devaluation of the CFA franc[63] in 1994 increased rice prices and hence income to authority farmers. It also made imported rice more expensive. As a result, Malian rice became more competitive on the national market, and the authority now produces more than one-half of the rice consumed in Mali.[64]

At the same time, the authority retained its rights to water and never lost its state-within-a-state character. The peasant cultivators, many of them the descendants of the non-Malian *colons,* still have no tenure to land or—more significantly—assured access to water. They pay an annual fee for water for their small plots and must repay money borrowed from the authority or risk being cut off. But since the implementation of economic reforms, rights to irrigated land and water have become profitable. Although it is theoretically forbidden, some of the rights holders—exactly how many is not known—now live elsewhere and/or employ hired labor. The labor force, whether hired or not, still lacks the traditional land rights typical of ordinary Malian villages. The authority was, after all, there before they were.

Malian and donor opinion on the Niger Authority remains polarized. Advocates of the authority give priority to the need for economic growth. They cite Mali's vast expanses of potentially productive land, including but not restricted to the authority's unexploited irrigable areas. They stress the feasibility of counter-season vegetable exports to Europe—a single hectare of rice land can produce forty tons of tomatoes in the off-season—and believe that existing small-cultivators can be fairly accommodated, with room left over for large-scale commercial exploitation. They also believe that a serious effort in the authority zone could help create a capacity for commercial agriculture that would then spread to other areas of the country. A USAID-supported pamphlet designed to attract foreign investment in the "New Niger Authority" sets forth these arguments in more detail.[65] Recently, President Touré offered up to 100,000 hectares of authority land to the Libyan-sponsored Community of Sahelian and Saharan States (CENSAD) for commercial-scale development.

Malian opponents of the authority remain distrustful of it. They cite its continuing lack of transparency in awarding water rights and its toleration of de facto tenancy. The authority has a tense relationship with some of the new, elected commune governments now operating among its roughly 200,000 people. The communes want, inter alia, control over land needed for commune projects. Critics state that the authority has maintained its traditional relationship with the central government, which continues to tolerate its antidemocratic practices. Some critics simply do not like the general idea of commercial agriculture, even though its development in the authority area need not damage existing smallholder agriculture.

The reality probably lies somewhere between the two viewpoints outlined above. It is true that none other than Karl Marx first proposed, as part of his theory of political evolution, a

connection between the development of irrigation and the evolution of centralized, authoritarian power in the ancient world. Huge irrigation systems do require a degree of central control and decision making, whether in the Central Valley of California or in Mali. But it is also evident that the authority is evolving as both free market forces and political liberties erode its old dominance. This fact was made clear to me by the leaders of a village association not far from Niono. In response to a question I posed to them about what democracy meant to their village, they replied: "Before democracy, the authority gave us what it wanted. But with democracy, the aid donors [in this case the Dutch] said they would not help unless we were given a hand in managing our affairs. The donors then helped us get our small rice mill. Now we just pay for water; we can sell our rice where we want to. We can say what we want to." This commentary was followed by a brusque complaint about the poor performance of the authority in its delivery and drainage of water during the last crop season. The farmers also cited the need for more help with counter-seasonal vegetable processing and marketing.[66]

Other expert observers confirmed that, while it still lacks transparency, the once all-powerful authority is not what it used to be. The establishment of schools in the authority area—driven by strong local demand and support from USAID and other donors—is producing a new generation of villagers less amenable to being abused. The resolution of the ongoing dispute with the communes will probably further erode the authority's political power. Recently, USAID provided financing to build a new canal serving thirteen villages. When the local farmers protested the land distribution scheme, a new and more equitable arrangement was worked out. People are beginning to understand that in today's Mali there is no reason why irrigation must be despotic.[67]

11

Malian Democracy in Regional Perspective

Mali's relative success with democratization is of limited interest in isolation from its neighbors, several of which have been wracked by conflict in recent years, and most of which are still governed by more or less authoritarian regimes. Is the Malian case relevant to them, or to countries elsewhere in Africa? The brief analysis that follows is intended for generalist readers unfamiliar with the area. It is based on limited travel to the region in early 2005 combined with previous Foreign Service experience there.[68] Given the limited time I spent in the area and resources available to me, my analysis is necessarily impressionistic.

I looked at five of Mali's seven neighbors—Senegal, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, and Niger—because, despite great differences, they are similar enough to Mali to be comparable. All are former French colonies and members of the confederation of French West Africa (Afrique Occidental Française, or AOF) headquartered in Dakar. Under radical postindependence leaders, both Mali and Guinea rejected Charles de Gaulle's plan for close, franc-zone ties with France, but the others remained in the French-supported francophone family and Mali rejoined it in 1984. I do not include Mali's very important North African neighbor, Algeria, or Mauritania, in this survey, because both countries are so radically different from Mali in cultural and historical terms as to make comparison between them difficult if not meaningless.

I began the survey with the assumption that while cultural factors similar to those that have been so important to Mali have widespread if not universal importance in Africa, such factors are often trumped by bad history, bad leadership, bad geography, or a combination of all three. My brief survey fully supported that assumption.

In the precolonial period, Mali's neighbors were all to varying degrees affected by the Mandé cultural tradition, which diffused unevenly over time from its center in eastern Guinea and western Mali. Later, all were influenced by French political norms, including secularism and centralized government with strong executive and weak legislative functions, factors that are particularly relevant to democratization. Finally, all of them felt the impact of the fall of communism, which with breathtaking speed delegitimized Leninist-style authoritarian regimes throughout Africa, leaving democratic norms without serious intellectual competition, at least for the near term.

France's West African megacolony was never wealthy or intensely governed. Beyond the regional capital at Dakar, in remote areas such as Mali and Niger, colonial expenditure on social services was meager to nonexistent. The borders of member states shifted constantly. Burkina Faso, then Upper Volta, was gerrymandered out of existence during the Great Depression to reduce administrative costs and revived only just before its independence thanks to Roman Catholic influence on De Gaulle. Exposure to colonization also varied widely.

For example, Senegal was under French rule for more than two centuries, while Mali's colonization lasted less than half that time.

Geography is a habitually underrated factor in comparing these countries. Mali is fortunate to have a relatively good (if underdeveloped) resource base and coherent geography, despite recurrent tension between the agricultural majority and nomadic pastoralists north of the Niger River. Neighboring Niger, on the other hand, must cope with the most difficult geographic fundamentals in the region. It is landlocked, relatively dry (even in the Sahelian context), and therefore acutely drought prone. It is also located next to Nigeria, which exerts a distorting influence not unlike that of the United States on Mexico. The dispersion of Niger's population across vast, near-desert spaces makes democratic decentralization difficult and expensive.

Mali and its five neighbors are extremely poor. None of them will ever be prosperous in isolation from one another or from Nigeria. Ivory Coast would have been a partial exception before the current civil war struck with devastating effect. It is noteworthy that variations in quality of governance among these countries have thus far been only faintly reflected in economic well-being—in other words, the better governed countries, such as Senegal and Mali, are still extremely poor in relation to world standards.

Despite the existence of other important variables, a brief look at any of these countries suggests that the primary influence on democratization has been national history. A few salient examples follow.

In Ivory Coast, successful commercial agriculture beginning in the colonial era led to a combination of massive immigration, particularly from Burkina Faso, and French-supported authoritarianism that in the end proved destabilizing. This of course is a common theme throughout the developing world: too much money too fast, especially but not exclusively from oil, can depress or overwhelm new and fragile national institutions. Seen from this perspective, Mali's poverty and isolation during the colonial period was not totally unfortunate.

Eastern Guinea includes part of the Mandé heartland, yet Guinea's political history is still in the shadow of authoritarianism and ethnic paranoia, and neither the Mandé-speaking peoples—about one-third of the Guinean population—nor their traditions have been politically central since independence. Guinea is arguably the least democratic state in the region, yet the situation there is not without hope, symbolized by the existence of what some believe may be the best newspaper in the region.[69]

Senegal has a well-rooted democratic culture and its political performance rivals Mali's, but the components of its success are quite different. Mandé values and practices, such as *cousinage*, have indeed played an important role in the country's democratic evolution. But the Senegalese give more credit to their relatively long exposure to French rule and the development of a sophisticated elite, epitomized by their first president, Leopold Senghor, who was inspired by both French and African ideals. Precisely because Senghor was a Catholic, he was

Table: Mali and Its Neighbors

Country	Population [a]	Population Growth [b]	Infant Mortality [c]	Income per Capita [d]	Aid per Capita [e]	Literacy Rates [f]	Freedom House Rating [g]	HIV/AIDS Prevalence [h]	HDI Index [i]
Mali	11.7	2.4	122	290	45	35/15	Free	1.9	174
Senegal	10.2	2.3	78	540	44	46/27	Free	0.8	157
Guinea	7.9	2.1	104	430	30	—	Not Free	3.2	160
Ivory Coast	16.8	1.9	117	660	15	59/36	Not Free	7.0	163
Burkina Faso	12.1	2.3	107	300	37	—	Partly Free	1.8	175
Niger	11.8	2.9	154	200	38	25/9	Partly Free	1.2	176

Source: World Bank Development Indicators based on 2003 data unless otherwise stated; hence the figures do not reflect the recent warfare in Ivory Coast.

[a] In millions.
[b] Annual population increase by percentage.
[c] Deaths per 1,000 births.
[d] In U.S. dollars.
[e] In U.S. dollars.
[f] Male/female percentages, over 15 years of age.
[g] Freedom House ratings based on 2002 conditions.
[h] Percentage of population.
[i] UNDP Human Development Index country ranking from 1 to 176 based on a combination of life expectancy, adult literacy, school enrollment, GDP, GDP per capita, and education, based on 2002 data.

careful to court the powerful Islamic brotherhoods, assuring them a strong role in Senegal's evolving democracy.

Burkina Faso is one of the most interesting cases in the region because, at this writing, it seems within reach of a democratic breakthrough despite a recent authoritarian past. As in the case of Mali and Senegal, aspects of the Mandé value system play a role in Burkina Faso, as does the heritage of precolonial Mossi statehood. Although landlocked, the country is geographically coherent and its recent record of economic development has been superior to Mali's in many respects. The Burkinabé are fashioning their own foundation mythology, drawing in part on the self-reliance ethic of their late military ruler, Thomas Sankara, and a well-established reputation for hard work and straight dealing. Much will depend on whether or not the current ruler, Blaise Compaoré, is willing to relinquish real power in the face of growing democratic sentiment.

Despite their differences, Mali and its neighbors have many problems in common. All of them face a vicious circle of poverty linked with population growth, though Niger represents an extreme case in this regard. This has led to the equally common phenomenon of seemingly endless aid dependence, which generates heavy debt burdens and impedes democratic control of economic policy. Entrepreneurial capacity remains restricted and is still concentrated in the hands of foreign minorities, such as Lebanese and—in some countries, including Mali—newly arrived Chinese. Further, as yet there is little sign of a significant African commercial agricultural sector developing beyond traditional, largely subsistence patterns. However, one scourge common elsewhere in Africa, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, is relatively less serious in these countries, thanks in part to social conservatism and the prevalence of Islam.

Two other problems are also clear: patronage politics and the related problem of corruption. Patronage politics exerts a drag on democracy and is an obstacle to peaceful alternation of power. This situation is epitomized by the current dilemma of Blaise Compaoré in Burkina Faso. Rulers do not want to relinquish power, partly because of allies and kinsmen who depend on them and function as a potent pressure group opposed to change. The same pattern, repeated down the authority chain, results in the proliferation of corruption, repeatedly cited as a problem by my informants in every country discussed here.

Corruption is getting worse because the gap between salaries and middle-class aspirations is widening. One result of globalization is that educated Africans are more aware than ever before of how the middle and upper classes live elsewhere. They, and their wives and children, feel they must have an ever-increasing inventory of expensive necessities, though some may be less than wholly necessary, such as cell phones. Other amenities, such as automobiles, good schooling, and access to modern medicine—the latter requiring evacuation to points abroad for serious illness—cannot be so easily dismissed. As the demand for such necessities and services expands through kinship structures, the economic pressure on the educated middle classes becomes overwhelming.

What does this comparison of Mali and its neighbors tell us? The most obvious conclusion is that democratization throughout the region will continue to depend on primarily national circumstances, as it does in Mali itself. The other obvious conclusion concerns the long-term link between democratization and economic aspirations. While economic development per se is a subject that goes beyond the scope of this paper, it may be worth mentioning that both national leaders and their foreign friends need to refocus attention on the urgent need for regional economic integration, which would include Nigeria as a full partner. I will return to this point in the conclusion, where I will also argue that while there may be no "Malian model," other countries can and should draw sustenance from their own traditions and culture to nurture development and governance.[70]

12 Recommendations and Conclusion

All things considered, Mali's democratization is in remarkably good shape. By building on deep cultural foundations, the leaders of the transition ensured widespread appeal for and a sense of ownership in the process. By giving pride of place to decentralization, and by implementing it with almost reckless speed, they guaranteed that the rural majority would not—for once in Africa—be treated as an afterthought. Mali's new political freedom has turned out to have universal appeal, thanks in no small part to rural radio. The symbol of the country's new democracy, meanwhile, is the small but proud mayor's office, often constructed at local expense, with the mayor out front greeting constituents.

Some of the problems that remain, such as the flaws in decentralization, are the almost inevitable result of rapid innovation. The founders believed that the best way to build democracy in such a huge and diverse setting was to create a framework in which problems could be tackled and solved as they arose, by the people concerned, not prepared for in ultimate detail by the nation's best and brightest. Most frequently, however, shortcomings are simply the result of national poverty. The Malians are correct in asserting, as they do, that viable democracy demands more rapid economic growth. That must be the primary "lesson learned" of any study such as this.

While economic growth is a sine qua non for sustainable democracy in Mali, this study suggests a number of other important issues that in my view need increased attention from Malian policymakers and their foreign partners.

Sustaining Traditional Values

If, as seems clear, Malian democratization has been critically sustained by Mali's culture and sense of history, it is important that cultural values continue to be transmitted to future generations. But there is reason to doubt that this is happening today as it did in the past. Many of the traditional means of transmission—age-grade societies and circumcision ceremonies, for example—are either dying out or losing their impact. While Malians are exceptionally well, if selectively, informed about their own past, real expertise is confined to *griots* and social scientists who rarely have the means or the motivation to spread their knowledge to wider audiences. The school system should of course be a critical player, but despite decades of foreign aid for education many schools have virtually no books at all, especially in rural areas, and there is no good textbook on Malian history at any level. Granting that the entire educational system remains seriously impoverished, the provision of history—and other—textbooks deserves priority attention. Meanwhile, much can be done through the medium of local radio. The U.S. embassy's program of small cultural preservation projects has been extremely effective in supporting local efforts, such as the preservation of old libraries in the desert north.

This and similar programs should be expanded. As an essential first step, the Malians should evaluate the broader problem of sustaining traditional values and identify a strategy to address it, with donor support as needed.

Recognizing and Utilizing Customary Law

Customary law is the neglected stepchild of decentralization. Everyone recognizes that at the local level, the law of the land remains customary. But many foreign development experts and educated members of the Malian elite see it as vaguely embarrassing, an anachronism that should be somehow phased out and replaced as soon as possible.[71] Academic writing on the subject often uses polite but disparaging terms such as "neopatrimonial" to describe customary law. Critics of both customary law and customary leaders argue that the leaders, who draw sustenance from the law, are often opposed to modern development-oriented reforms, such as improving the status of rural women.

It is important to differentiate between traditional leaders and customary law—the latter will remain important whether or not the former are exercising political power. In Mali, traditional leadership is no less diverse than the rest of the society. It includes village chiefs but also religious leaders and *griots*. It was noted earlier that in a well-functioning commune, traditional leaders are often part of a quadripartite team that also includes the elected commune leadership, the local representative of the central government, and civil society, especially the resource-bearing NGOs.

Benefiting from inherited wealth and status, traditional leaders have both run for office and backed other candidates with varying results. In one case in the north, some traditional leaders belonging to the Arab-Berber Kounta group[72] reacted violently when they were voted out of office, resulting in a small, ongoing insurgency. In another commune not far from Bamako, the defeated traditional rulers are now on the sidelines, grumbling but not contemplating violence. One may not always agree with the motives or policies of traditional leaders, but there is no indication in Mali that their political role, highly variable from place to place, is undemocratic.

As for customary law itself, it will no doubt need to be changed over time. But given its vitality and importance, the change should evolve in accordance with political realities and resources, and Malians should set the pace. Foreign advisers are often anxious to impose fundamental reforms with a speed and logical consistency that would never have been possible in their own home countries. They tend to forget, for example, that in the West, and particularly in the United States, modern local governments have often evolved from "neopatrimonial" institutions. Urban political machines such as Tammany Hall in New York City and the Daley Machine in Chicago are good examples of this. In their day, and whatever their failings, they provided services to local populations that no one else could.

The content of traditional law is not often analyzed by outside observers. When it is, the results are sometimes surprisingly positive. In the Douenza area, for example, traditional rules governing the collection of firewood forbid the cutting of live trees or "green wood." In this

instance, the customary code has provided a good foundation for "modern" environmental practice.[73] A better known example—on a much larger scale—is the regime governing annual cattle migrations into the Niger Delta, which must be carefully timed to avoid conflict between herders and farmers. This system, still in use today, was originated by Cheickou Amadou of Macina, the same early-nineteenth-century Islamic fundamentalist who destroyed the great mosque at Jenné. The French recognized the importance of such major legal customs and began to compile them in a project known as "The Great Customary Laws" *(les grands coutoumiers),* which unfortunately was never finished.[74]

Most legal disputes in rural areas are settled by customary law at the local level. Only when customary mediation fails are disputes referred to a magistrate. But Malian magistrates are not trained in customary law, which in any case varies greatly from one region to another. More important, they often hold it in low esteem. This is one reason why the beginning-level magistrates assigned to rural areas often do not perform well, and it contributes to the overall weakness of the Malian judiciary mentioned earlier.

Customary law will remain important for the foreseeable future. It should be recognized as a great if far from perfect asset and not prejudged to be a liability. It is indeed the prime operational expression of the same Malian culture that has sustained democratization in general. One problem is that any effort to enhance the status of customary law could easily lead to an effort to encode it. This would not be a good idea because most customary law is oral by nature and hence flexible. Codification would remove the element of flexibility, which—among other things—could complicate the implementation of reform efforts.

Instead of a code, the government should sponsor the compilation of a nonbinding guide to customary law that would enable administrators and magistrates to understand its principles. It should be organized by region, not by ethnic group, so as to include the very important issue of relations between ethnic groups. Such a guide could have multiple uses. It could be used to help compile case studies for use in the training of magistrates.[75] And it could be used to familiarize government and NGO representatives—not least expatriates—on the nature of customary law. Doing so would help give customary law the status that it deserves. Even a summary outline of Mali's customary legal system would be a large and complex undertaking, but there is no shortage of expertise to undertake such a task provided that funding is made available.

Decentralization Policy: Get the High Council in Gear

It is ironic that while Mali's democratic decentralization is widely seen as a model elsewhere in Africa, decentralization in Mali itself remains under attack, primarily from professional civil servants. The resulting great debate on this subject is healthy in the sense that it can be solved by democratic choice. Questions involving the degree of central intervention that is healthy, or what to do about the failings of the HCC, will not be answered by donor intervention. However, donors can and should continue to help those Malians who recognize the vital

contribution of decentralization to Mali's new democracy. And they should avoid unwittingly helping those who are seemingly bent on recentralization.

On the merits of the debate, it is true that certain looming problems, such as the land issue and the financial viability of the system, demand urgent attention. The founders created the HCC to represent local communities in this process and to redress the imbalance between the Bamako-based executive and the rest of the country. The HCC's continued weakness threatens the viability of decentralization itself. For that reason, as noted earlier, HCC reform deserves the attention of both the National Assembly and the president.

Self-Regulating the NGO Sector

The proliferation of NGOs has been a positive development in Mali. They have become a fourth branch of government in rural areas and an indispensable source of financing and technical assistance to struggling communes. NGOs provide formative employment experience for educated Malians, who emerge from it with both a sense of service and keen awareness of the rural areas and their needs. A better source of recruitment for future generations of Malian leaders can scarcely be imagined.

Despite its deep involvement in issues of governance, Mali's nongovernmental sector itself remains, almost by definition, anarchic. One estimate says there are about five thousand NGOs in Mali,[76] but no one knows the exact number, much less what their sources of financing are. There is really no quality control—anyone can hang a sign and proclaim a new NGO. The government requires NGOs to register, but the office that takes registrations has no computers and offers no further oversight. There are several NGO umbrella organizations, organized by sector, but none claims comprehensive coverage. More important, there is no oversight of NGO activities vis-à-vis the communes. The lucky communes are on main roads and get lots of attention. The unlucky ones are in remote areas, where to reach them often requires hours of bone-jarring travel over rural tracks. It seems unlikely that such communes get equivalent service.

What is needed is not government control but a system of self-regulation, which the NGO sector is fully capable of organizing, in cooperation with the government. The first priority should be to make sure that the sector as a whole strives to achieve equity in the distribution of its invaluable resources. Obviously this should be linked with the national-planning effort.

Anticorruption Policy

Mali's corruption problem is an insidious, nagging drain on national self-esteem. To the extent that economic performance improves, corruption will probably get worse in the short term. It requires much more public attention from the president and his ministers than it is currently receiving.

Experience elsewhere, both in the region and beyond, suggests that worsening corruption is the inevitable result of the growing gap between salaries and perceived necessities. Preaching about it will do no good. It will require decades of more vigorous and reasonably broad-based economic growth to reverse the trend. Pursuing and punishing high-profile corruption is nonetheless important, because it would demonstrate to an increasingly exasperated public that Mali's democratic government is at least conscious of the problem and trying to do something about it.

Mali's foreign friends can do something to help. Anecdotal accounts of foreign missions paying bribes abound, usually on such small matters as customs exonerations. What proportion of these tales is valid is unknown; it is the nature of corruption that there is no way of quantifying it. But donors should get together and announce a zero tolerance policy on corruption. Strict implementation should follow. Such a policy would be extremely welcome to those Malians who are trying to combat corruption.

Economic Vision and Malian Ownership of Economic Policy

Malians agree that the long-term viability of their democracy is linked with faster economic growth. Yet there is virtually no public debate on how to achieve this goal. Mali remains a typically poor, aid-dependent West African state buffeted by external forces, from the vagaries of climate to the ever-changing behavior of the donor community. The Malians have become expert at sustaining aid flows from multiple sources. They do this with great skill and charm, utilizing the same interpersonal and diplomatic aptitudes that they have used so effectively in launching democracy. Successful democratization has increased Mali's leverage vis-à-vis the donors, who are desperate for more examples of good political performance in Africa, and Mali is now the largest per capita recipient of foreign aid in the region (see table on page 55).

While this pattern enhances aid flows, it subjects the economic policymaking process to severe distortions. Aid flows create economic fiefdoms within the Malian government; there is no central strategy and little control. Lack of donor coordination, already a severe problem by the mid-1980s, is if anything worse today. The donors remain preoccupied with home-office priorities, while the Malians are by and large content to play the traditional, aid-maximizing game with the diversified donor community. The World Bank's effort to promote a unified framework through its Poverty Reduction Strategy is praiseworthy, but no one would argue that it has fundamentally changed the traditional pattern of donor-government relations.

If Malian democracy is to mature, the government must have a broad vision of future economic policy[77] that is rooted in popular concerns, and it must also develop the wherewithal to control that policy. At the moment the Carter Center has a project under way to provide the Malian government with an independent economic planning capacity. This is a small step in the right direction. Eventually the Malians should be able to decide what kind of assistance is needed to support its own goals. Absent this kind of national commitment and ownership,

it is hard to believe that any foreseeable increase in aid flows, with or without debt forgiveness, will achieve the required acceleration of economic growth.

President Konaré recognized the need for accelerated regional cooperation within West Africa, and he accepted that anglophone Nigeria, however hard to live with, would inevitably play a lead role in the new order. It was a good example of the kind of leadership that is needed. Within Mali, President Touré's recent focus on developing commercial agriculture could be another positive move in the direction of economic vision. Equally encouraging is what may be the beginning of new official emphasis on promoting cultural events, expressed through regional festivals and the like, which could enhance both tourism's economic importance and the preservation of Mali's cultural capital. But President Konaré's realization that, for all its past failures, regional economic cooperation is essential, seems to have stalled out under his successor. Meanwhile, the big aid donors, especially the World Bank and the IMF, continue to discourage regional thinking by focusing their lending and policy reform efforts almost entirely on nation-states, whether they are viable or not. At the moment no one is telling the Malian people how they can reasonably work their way out of poverty. They will no doubt have to do it themselves, in cooperation with their neighbors.

The Role of the United States: How Can It Help More Effectively?

Until recently, U.S. interests in Mali were almost wholly humanitarian in nature. U.S. economic aid to Mali dates back to the Marshall Plan, when the country was still a French colony. For the last three decades, the United States has consistently been among the major aid donors to the country, especially during the catastrophic drought years of the 1970s and 80s, but it has rarely if ever contributed more than a tenth of total economic aid to Mali. U.S. assistance has nonetheless at times been of critical strategic importance. In the 1980s, for example, during the Reagan and Bush administrations, Mali was among the first countries in Africa to receive multidonor aid conditioned on economic policy reform, thanks in large part to American leadership. This pioneering venture into what was later to become known as "structural adjustment" helped Mali to achieve major progress in agriculture, including the achievement of food self-sufficiency in normal rainfall years.

Our humanitarian focus changed with 9/11 and the emergence of the Sahara Desert as a potential refuge for terrorists. Today, as we have seen, the U.S. military is substantially involved in Mali and neighboring countries, both in order to develop U.S. strategic knowledge of the region and to train Malian and other African forces in antiterrorism and peacekeeping operations. This new antiterrorism priority has eclipsed our traditional development concerns and now appears to be the single most important element in U.S. policy toward Mali, even though it has not been publicly advertised as such. At the same time, Malian democracy—together with the country's willingness to cooperate in the war on terror—has enhanced the United States' view of Mali as a valuable partner. This virtually assures that Mali will continue to be a favored recipient of U.S. aid—for example, from the new Millennium Challenge Account.

My visits in 2004 and 2005 suggested to me that there is some danger of contradiction between our support for Malian democracy and our strong desire for tough measures against terrorism—a desire partially based on overly alarmist analysis both of the situation in the north and of Malian Islam generally. In my view, U.S. policy for the northern region should be grounded in a few principles not always followed to date:

- First and foremost, Malian concerns about the danger of renewed rebellion in the north along the lines of the 1990–95 struggle should be recognized as valid, and U.S. support should be fashioned to help alleviate them. The United States should make sure that its activities do not require the Malian military to undertake actions that would risk breaching the consensus achieved by the 1995 peace settlement. This will require ongoing diplomatic and military dialogue with the Malian authorities.
- The U.S. embassy in Bamako should, as a matter of highest priority, master the complexities of the northern political terrain, including historical factors and the dynamics of interethnic relations. Not to do so is to risk missteps similar in character, if less lethal in consequence, to those that characterized the United States' flawed policy in Afghanistan during the rise of the Taliban. This is a critical task that requires a range of analytic skills and that should be undertaken by resident U.S. Foreign Service Officers, not by Foreign Service Nationals or contractors.
- The United States should pursue a rigorously multiethnic approach to its activities in the north. Appearing to favor one ethnic or geographic group over others risks arousing animosities dating from earlier conflict. In 2004, well-publicized U.S. support for the small Arab community of Timbuktu resulted in mystification and dismay on the part of the Malians, who eventually asked that a high-profile ceremony symbolizing this support be indefinitely postponed.[78]
- A multilateral diplomatic initiative should be vigorously pursued with Mali's desert-sharing neighbors to help eliminate the current transfrontier lawlessness. It should emphasize better border security and a regional effort to control the illegal trafficking that has run rampant there since the end of the 1990–95 rebellion. This is a long-term agenda and must be implemented in a manner that will neither stir up more trouble by suddenly denying the smugglers their livelihood nor damage northern communities, which have become accustomed to living on cheap staples smuggled from Algeria.
- U.S. antiterrorism policy in the Malian north should meet local concerns by putting more emphasis on economic versus military assistance and by involving local people and their elected representatives in the choice and implementation of all projects.
- The United States should rigorously avoid undermining its own credibility by extolling democracy and justice nationwide, while at the same time appearing to regret the absence of a tougher, process-be-damned approach in the north. Divergent thinking along these lines no doubt reflects differences of perspective between U.S. military and civilian officials, but it nonetheless suggests that a double standard is being applied to antiterrorism issues on one hand and democratization on the other.

Leaving aside the special problem of the north, there are certain actions that the United States could usefully take to increase its support for Mali's democratization. Some of these would

require multilateral, donor-community effort, including a joint zero-tolerance initiative on corruption and self-regulation of the NGO sector. Others, such as increased support for cultural heritage projects (financed by the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation) and a project to summarize and enhance the status of customary law, would require relatively little expenditure and could be undertaken within current USAID and U.S. embassy programs.

The United States should also consider proposing and leading a new, high-profile initiative to address the interrelated issues of Malian overdependence on foreign aid and the overdue democratization of Malian economic policy. No one who has followed this country for more than two decades can avoid the conclusion that the current system of largely donor-driven economic policy is not producing adequate results. The pathological aspect of the situation results from the fact that the Malians, formed by decades of highly conditioned foreign aid, now find it easier to accept and manipulate external largesse than to exert sovereign responsibility for the way their budgets are spent. Mali's democratization will not be complete until it includes the economic sphere. Mali's democratic leaders, therefore, must become more involved in determining how to formulate and achieve national economic goals.

Changing the situation will require a long-term, multidonor effort and does not imply any immediate reduction in aid to Mali. Any such effort should begin by building on the Carter Center initiative, mentioned earlier, to create a national economic planning capacity independent of the donors and should continue with training of senior planners, similar in spirit to the successful Ford Foundation effort to train economic planners in Indonesia in the 1960s. Such an initiative will need to be supported by more vigorous regional economic integration and might well be undertaken as part of a wider effort to train economic planners throughout ECOWAS (the Economic Community of West African States).

The Malian Experience: Hope, Inspiration, and Utility for Others

Trevor-Roper's statement that Africa has no history has been paralleled more recently by an assumption that even when political chaos is not a factor, the building blocks of African democracies will for the most part need to be imported and installed with foreign help. Yet, in Mali's case, and despite continued aid dependence, the critical features of democratic progress thus far have been linked to local initiatives and homegrown cultural content, working within a modern constitutional framework. As we have seen, this success is partly due to Mali's exceptionally fortunate geographic and historical attributes.

Not many African states have such a clear advantage. Most lack the political coherence that comes with a long precolonial past. In some cases, overwhelming population shifts and/or irrational borders—both dating from colonial times—have created cockpits for violent ethnic tension, such as in Ivory Coast. In other cases, potentially coherent states, such as Burkina Faso, have been dragged down by bad history but could quite easily break the pattern of the recent past and achieve a democratic breakthrough in short order.

But there is no state in Africa that does not have the cultural resources needed to support democratization and stimulate political pride and ownership. In states where there were no "great empires," a wealth of tradition at the village or regional level exists. Further, the agonies of colonial rule can be legitimately invoked to help promote national pride. The South Africans, whose past is as unpleasant as any, are well on the way to a unified mythology that will include Shaka Zulu, the Voortrekkers, the Boer War, and Nelson Mandela. Of course, not least, it will also include the reconciliation that initiated a new era and made possible such a rich tapestry of national self-esteem.

Although Mali's creative use of history and national mythology is instructive, there are many other lessons from the Malian experience that should be useful to other countries on the road to democracy. Mali shows that the political power and common sense of village people can indeed find expression at the national level, however difficult that may be. Mali's ongoing struggle to create a decentralized state serves as a vital example for others embarked on the same problem-ridden but ultimately essential effort. Mali demonstrates that real democracy is often messy—should that surprise anyone?—and that wrenching poverty is not an insuperable obstacle to democratization. The flourishing of religious and political liberty in Mali should disabuse those who assume that pluralism is inherently alien to "African tradition" or to Islam. The Malian case proves that utilization of local cultural content is wholly compatible with a modern institutional framework and with universal humanitarian and political norms.

Finally, Mali illustrates the close interrelationship between interethnic reconciliation and a broader habit of peaceful problem solving. Mali's exemplary behavior toward conflict in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Ivory Coast, for example, surely derives from a culture of reconciliation at home that now finds expression in foreign policy as well.

Notes

1. Massa Coulibaly and Amadou Diarra, "Gouvernance, démocratie et lutte contre la pauvreté au Mali: Eclairage methodologique et analytique à partir des résultats Afrobaromêtre" (Bamako: Groupe de recherche en économie appliqué et theorique, June 2004).

2. Economic statistics are drawn mainly from World Bank sources; the figure on aid dependence is from Sikoro Keita, *Le Piège de la Pauvreté au Mali,* Economic Report Series (USAID–Bamako, March 2004), 10. See also the table in this study.

3. Quoted by Kwame Anthony Appiah in a review of *Africa: A Biography of the Continent,* by John Reader, *The New York Review of Books*, December 17, 1998. Trevor-Roper's remarks were made in a BBC broadcast in about 1963.

4. For recent scholarship on the epic, see Ralph A. Austen, ed., *In Search of Sunjata: The Mandé Oral Epic as History, Literature and Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

5. For a glimpse of the interplay between Malian music and social change, see Heather A. Maxwell, "Divas of the Wassoulou Sound: Transformations in the Matrix of Cultural Production, Globalization, and Identity," *Consumption, Markets and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2003): 43–63.

6. The best-known printed version of the epic remains D.T. Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (Harlow: Longman African Classics, 1986). For the spear-planting episode, see pp. 75–78 of this edition. See also Nehemia Levitzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali* (London: Methuen, 1973), 60. Levitzion concluded that after the decisive battle, "The country of the Malinké ceased to be an alliance of independent chiefdoms and became one empire with independent provinces, with the Keita as the ruling clan."

7. Although the spear-planting episode is included in Niane's narrative of the epic, it is omitted from John William Johnson's translation, the only other easily accessible translation: see John William Johnson, ed. and trans., *The Epic of Son-Jara: A West African Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). Johnson's translation elaborates on a text of the epic related by a famous *griot,* Fa-Digi Sisoko. The omission of the episode from this version implies nothing one way or another with regard to historicity: major episodes of the epic were and are routinely omitted from the various versions, depending on the inclination of the performer. See Ralph A. Austen, "The Historical Transformation of Genres: Sunjata as Panegyric, Folktale, Epic and Novel," in *In Search of Sunjata,* ed. Austen, 81–82.

8. See Roderick James McIntosh, *The Peoples of the Middle Niger* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 5–10 and passim; see also his most recent book, *Ancient Middle Niger: Urbanism and the Self-organizing Landscape, Case Studies in Early Societies 7* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2005).

9. For a chart of Saharan climate variation over the past 15,000 years, see ibid., 70.

10. On the horse factor in West African history, see Robin Law, "Horses, Firearms and Political Power in Pre-Colonial West Africa," *Past and Present* no. 72 (August 1976): 112–132.

11. I am indebted to Stephanie Diakité and Abdel Kader Haidara for much of this information. For a recent survey of the manuscript libraries being discovered in Mali, see "Les manuscrits anciens de Tombouctou: Comme une lampe à nos pieds," *Jamana, Revue Culturelle Malienne,* no. 53 (March 2005).

12. Hunters, another ancient group with special knowledge and powers, are not people of caste and have never been socially restricted by endogamy. For an overview of the West African caste systems, see Tal Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," *The Journal of African History* 32, no. 2 (1991): 221–250.

13. In addition to the *griots,* other specialized mediators included the "female kings" of the Segou region, women descended from the founders of the monarchy and respected for their occult powers. Written documents dealing with conflict resolution and mediation—often inspired by Islam—continue to come to light in the country's ancient libraries. One striking manuscript records a fifteenth-century Islamic jurist in Timbuktu protesting the tyrannical arrest of Jewish merchants in Gao. See Mahmoud Zouber et al., "Islamic Tradition and Historical Conflict Resolution in Timbuktu," Special Conflict Resolution Research Group in Mali, provided in an e-mail to author by a member of the research group, August 11, 2004.

14. See Doulaye Konaté, "Les fondements endogènes d'une culture de paix au Mali: les mécanismes traditionels de prévention et de résolution des conflits," UNESCO, http://www.unesco.org/cpp/publications/mecanismes/edkonate.htm, 3. This paper offers an excellent summary of traditional conflict resolution practices.

15. On the continuing importance of ancestor reverence, see Adama Ba Konaré, "Perspectives in History and Culture: The Case of Mali" in *Democracy and Development* in Mali, ed. R. James Bingen et al. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 200), 15–22. Mme. Konaré is the wife of Mali's first elected president and a talented historian.

16. See Alex Ulam, "Elusive Libraries of Timbuktu," *Archaeology*, July–August 2004, esp. pp. 39–40.

17. There are exceptions: some Malians do cite the Segou Kingdom among the Malian states that established precedents for decentralization. This is, not surprisingly, likely to be true of descendants of its Coulibaly royal family. See David Rawson, "Dimensions of Decentralization in Mali," in *Democracy and Development in Mali,* ed. Bingen et al., 266–68.

18. My tour in Mali ended in September 1990, before the overthrow of Traoré's government.

19. Louis Massicotte, "Blazing the Path to Democracy: A Report on the National Conference of Mali, 29 July to 12 August 1991" (mimeo report, USAID and the Government of Canada, Bamako, August 1991).

20. I have been unable to locate the source of this quotation; it may be apocryphal.

21. See Jennifer C. Seeley, "A Political Analysis of Decentralization: Coopting the Tuareg Threat in Mali," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 39, no. 3 (2001): 499–524.

22. Interviews with knowledgeable Malian civil society leaders. I am not aware that the issue of Konaré's use of cotton company funds to jump-start political parties has been discussed in writing elsewhere.

23. World Bank, *Recommandations visant à renforcer le programme anti-corruption* (March 2003).

24. Interviews with World Bank and Canadian aid mission officials in Bamako. For the origin of PRODEJ (Programme Décennal de Développement de la Justice), see Moussa Batchili Ba, Leslie Fox, and Willet Weeks, "Ten Years On: An Assessment of Democratic Governance in Mali" (draft final report prepared for USAID by Associates in Rural Development, January 28, 2002), 7–8.

25. For more detail on Mali's political parties, and for a good description of its democratization generally, see Leonardo A. Villalón and Abdourahmane Idrissa, "The Tribulations of a Successful Transition: Institutional Dynamics and Elite Rivalry in Mali," in *The Fate of Africa's Democratic Experiments: Elites and Institutions,* ed. Villalón and Peter VanDoep (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), esp. 66–67.

26. "Non à l'unanisme politique . . . Oui au rapprochement Adéma-RPM," *Info-Matin,* September 27, 2004.

27. Rowdier elements in the Bamako press have been known to express this concern bluntly, as in a headline across the front page of the September 2004 *Le Zenith Balé* that read: *"Réunion secrète des amis de ATT: Le Movement Citoyen s'érige en parti politique!"* September 3, 2004.

28. For a discussion of the National Assembly, see Ba, Fox, and Weeks, "Ten Years On," 34–5.

29. Anna Diallo, "Working Toward Progress—Slowly but Surely: Challenges and Prospects in Financial Decentralization in Africa" (unpublished ms., Center of African Studies, Cambridge University, June 2003), 28.

30. Constitution of Mali, Preamble and Article 25.

31. See Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali,* 191.

32. As the French authorities became concerned about this new wave of political Islam, they applied the term "Wahabi," the name of a specific sect of Saudi Arabian origin, to a wider range of fundamentalist reformers. While this usage is not technically correct, it was later adopted by the Malians and by most foreign observers, hence I use it here.

33. For a history of the Wahabis in Mali, see Lansiné Kaba, *The Wahabiya: Islamic Reform and Politics in French West Africa* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

34. Traditional accounts according to which the Almoravids conquered Ghana and forced the conversion of its inhabitants to Islam are not supported by modern scholarship. See Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 86–87.

35. Debate on this subject has raged in northern Nigeria, which is not very far away from Mali. Indeed, pro-sharia sentiment has spread from Nigeria into neighboring Niger, a country badly positioned to resist religious trends from its giant neighbor, all the more so since the two countries share a contiguous and interrelated Hausa population. For the importance of the Wahabist Izala movement in Niger and its links to fellow Hausa in northern Nigeria, see Robert B. Charlick," Islamism in West Africa: Niger," *African Studies Review* 47, no. 2 (September 2004): 101–102.

36. "Fanatisme religieux—une nouvelle secte devant le juge ce mardi à Yorosso," *L'Indépendant,* May 9, 2005.

37. Local radio has become so widespread in Mali, with broadcasts in so many languages, that studying its content would be extremely difficult. It apparently has not yet been attempted.

38. For this insight, and for much else in this section, I am indebted to anthropologist Benjamin F. Soares, the only person of whom I am aware who has comprehensively studied Malian Islam in recent years. His new book is titled *Islam and the Prayer Economy: History and Authority in a Malian Town* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), and I heartily recommend it to anyone seeking a thoroughly knowledgeable and dispassionate discussion of Malian Islam.

39. Modibo Maiga, the project director and architect, in discussion with the author. This is the POLICY project; see http://www.policyproject.com and http://www.futuresgroup.com.

40. For a report on the U.S. military's antiterrorist and training operations in the region, see Ann Scott Tyson, "U.S. Pushes Anti-Terrorism in Africa; Under Long-Term Program, Pentagon to Train Soldiers of 9 Nations," *Washington Post,* July 26, 2005.

41. For a recent and highly colored description of this episode, see Pascal Baba Couloubaly, *Le Mali d'Alpha Oumar Konaré: Ombre et lumières d'une démocratie en gestion* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004), 37–99.

42. Two in-depth studies of the history of the northern problem and the 1990–1995 revolt now exist. The first is Pierre Boilley's *Les Touaregs Kel Adagh: dépendence et revoltes: du Soudan français au Mali contemporain* (Paris: Karthala, 1999), which offers a superb, in-depth history of the Kidal Tuareg, from the beginning of French colonization to the 1990 rebellion and National Pact of April 1992. It is based on interviews with participants, such as Iyad ag Ghali, and archival sources. I have relied heavily on Boilley's book for my sketch of the history of Kidal. The second study is Jean Sebastian Lecocq's "'That Desert is Our Country': Tuareg Rebellions and Competing Nationalisms in Contemporary Mali, 1946–1996," (PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2002).

43. Lecocq, in discussion with the author.

44. See William Langewiesche, *The Outlaw Sea: A World of Freedom, Chaos and Crime* (New York: North Point Press, 2004). Originally published in part in the *Atlantic Monthly*, this book strikingly illustrates the security problems common to high seas and great deserts.

45. The "El Para" affair is covered in the International Crisis Group report by Mike McGovern, *Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction?* Africa Report No. 2, March 31, 2005, 5, http://www.crisisgroup.org. See also Tyson, "U.S. Pushes Anti-Terrorism in Africa," for a description of U.S. cooperation with the Chadian military in this incident.

46. Based on travel to Bougouni and Sikasso in August 2004.

47. For a history of educational reform, see Deborah Fredo, "The Stakes for Quality Education in Mali: Institute for Popular Education, 2004" (unpublished ms. courtesy of USAID).

48. In 2001 the overall rate of enrollment in primary school was 62 percent—73 percent for boys and 52 percent for girls. Ibid., 5, n10.

49. David C. Conrad, "Mooning Armies and Mothering Heroes: Female Power in Mandé Epic Tradition," in *In Search of Sunjata*, ed. Austen, 190.

50. These figures were gathered from a variety of sources during my 2004–5 visits to Mali and updated in November 2005 by the Democracy and Governance Team at USAID–Bamako.

51. "USAID Mali's Experience in Community Radio Activities" (unpublished briefing paper, USAID–Bamako, n.d.).

52. The title of the program is "Jeka' Fo"—Let's Talk Together.

53. See Zeric K. Smith, "Mali's Decade of Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 12, no. 3 (July 2001): 77. This article cites Afrobarometer reports and is consistent with my own findings.

54. CIA World Fact Book, entry for Mali, http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook.

55. Participation figures, rounded to the nearest whole percentage point, are courtesy of the DNCT (Direction Nationale des Collectivités Territoriales). For a good snapshot of these elections, see Yaroslav Tropimov, "Polling Timbuktu: Islamic Democracy? Mali Finds a Way to Make It Work," *Wall Street Journal*, June 22, 2004.

56. Based primarily on a visit to Jenné and conversation with local officials in September 2004.

57. Térába Togola, interview by the author, August 9, 2004. A student of Roderick McIntosh and a key figure in Mali's cultural preservation efforts, Togola died in November 2005.

58. See, for example, Diallo, "Working toward Progress," 19–20.

59. See Article 99, Constitution of Mali.

60. This section is based on interviews conducted in February–March 2005 with a wide range of Malian observers, including NGO employees and officials. I am indebted to David Rawson for the mandarin metaphor. See his "Dimensions of Decentralization in Mali" in *Democracy and Development in Mali*, ed. Bingen et al., 280–281; he notes inter alia that "decentralization has become official doctrine, yet the opposition challenges it as ill-advised and unworkable."

61. Quotation paraphrased from an interview with a senior civil servant in the Ministry of Territorial Administration into whose office I was ushered by mistake while seeking a more junior official. Although he knew I was a former U.S. ambassador, he may not have known exactly who I was or what I was doing in Mali. His comments on the inadequacies of decentralization included a strong pitch for donor support in reforming (by which he meant recentralizing) the system.

62. A recent study partially funded by USAID supports the idea that the HCC needs primarily to do a better job of communication with actual and potential supporters of decentralization and by dialogue and lobbying for decentralization with other decision makers. See Ousmane Sy, Sheldon Gellar, et al., *Etude d'assistance au Haut Conseil de Collectivités pour l'élaboration d'un programme d'actions et le développement de plaidoyer pour la décentralization* (rapport definitive, USAID, January 2005).

63. The CFA franc is the common currency used by most former French colonies in Africa, including Mali. The initials stand for *Communauté Français Financière* (French Financial Community).

64. Jose Dioné, "Food Security Policy Reform in Mali and the Sahel," in *Democracy and Development in Mali*, ed. Bingen et al., 135.

65. *Ministère du Développement Rural, Le nouvel Office du Niger: Un bon créneau pour l'investissement au Mali* (Bamako: Editions Jamana, 2001).

66. Interview with the Association Villageois de Seriwala, Km 30, Niono, September 3, 2004.

67. Based partly on their analysis of a commune in authority territory, the authors of "Ten Years On" concluded three years ago that "while the bureaucracy can be counted on to provide at least passive resistance, the [commune] councils should be able to forge political alliances in high places with other political players, and perhaps more importantly at the local level with their partners in civil society and emerging business interests." See Ba, Fox, and Weeks, "Ten Years On," 27–28. It is clear that something like this is indeed happening, albeit slowly.

68. I served for two years as deputy chief of mission at the U.S. embassy in Burkina Faso during the Sankara regime.

69. It is the satirical weekly *Le Lynx,* http://www.mirinet.net.gn/lynx.

70. In a recent article, Stephen Ellis argues for more attention to the need for better-grounded local institutions in Africa. See Stephen Ellis, "How to Rebuild Africa," *Foreign Affairs* (September–October 2005): 147–48.

71. Ba, Fox, and Weeks somewhat grudgingly admit that traditional norms, authorities, and institutions have played a positive role but generally portray them as undemocratic and antithetical to decentralization. See Ba, Fox, and Weeks, "Ten Years On," 22. Another study notes that "the socio-cultural environment that surrounds Malian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) is governed by still vital secular norms and values that do not correspond with the principles and practices of democratic governance." See Robert Charlick et al., "Study of the Context for the Emergence and Activation of Malian Civil Society," (PRSC 2002 Learning Process, USAID, March 2003), 4.

72. The Kountas or Kuntas are an Arab-Berber group of scholars, marabouts, and sometimes warriors with deep roots in northern history, traditionally prominent in Timbuktu and elsewhere. See Elias N. Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables, 1400–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 150, 214–15.

73. Yacouba Dème, *Natural Resource Management by Local Associations in the Kelka Region of Mali,* Issue Paper 74 (International Institution for Environment and Development, London, 1998), 8–9.

74. Abdoulaye Konaté, in discussion with the author.

75. I am indebted to Bouare Bintou Samaké for this suggestion.

76. Ba, Fox, and Weeks, "Ten Years On," 44.

77. In the late 1990s, the African Development Bank and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) sponsored a national study on the future of Mali. It contained cogent questions on past practices but only a vague discussion of future policy. See *Mali 2005: Rapport de synthèse de l'Etude National Prospective* (African Development Bank and UNDP, Bamako, 2001).

78. See "Le report de la Conférence des Bérabich a créé un incident diplomatique," *L'Observateur,* August 26, 2004.

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