

Struggle, Neglect and Archives

In June 2019, Mali's National Assembly representatives voted to adopt a Law of National Unity that then-president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, ratified the following month. The law caused a bit of a commotion. It was meant to chart a path towards justice and reconciliation in the aftermath of the 2012 crisis, when a military coup in Bamako had snowballed into a separatist rebellion and sprawling jihadi occupation in the country's northern and central regions, prompting the Malian government to request military intervention from France. The 2019 law's main feature was a set of articles that would grant amnesty for certain crimes committed in the course of these events. Critics vehemently decried it as conceding impunity to perpetrators of atrocities for which victims had yet to receive justice.

Another feature of the law was striking, though it sparked much less discussion. Articles 9 and 10 consecrated the writing of a textbook, a "general inclusive history of Mali", to be used in primary and secondary schools throughout the national territory.¹ The law thus bound the achievement of peace and unity to amnesty for some crimes, neglect of their victims and the commemoration of particular historical narratives.

The law's framing bluntly reminds us how the production of history, particularly when state-sponsored, often co-opts real and imagined versions of the past to bolster present-day imperatives. But it is also an invitation to think about the myriad frictions between the

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past and the present that reveal themselves in the current crisis. Recently, Malians have staged months of popular protest against the government. It might shed light on this movement to comb through stories of political struggles and neglectful governance, as well as Malian archives.

On 11 May 2020, a month before the first anti-regime rally was held in Bamako, an off-duty police officer shot and killed seventeen-year-old Seyba Tamboura in Kayes.² Since March, the town's population had experienced heightened economic anxiety due to COVID-19: remittances from abroad were on the decline, and the government had imposed a nightly curfew, which dried up other sources of income. In April, the Supreme Court's proclamation of the nationwide parliamentary election results, which the regime likely rigged, further fuelled discontent. And for several months, workers in the education, health and justice sectors throughout the country had mobilised and gone on strike over poor working conditions and unpaid salaries. So when a policeman shot a teenager dead in the course of an altercation, a mere day after the curfew was lifted, Kayes erupted.

A border town, Kayes sits in the upper valley of the Senegal River

in western Mali and occupies a particular place in the colonial and contemporary histories of Mali and Senegal. In the late nineteenth century, using Kayes as their base, French generals organised the conquest of much of what would become the French Soudan (colonial Mali), mobilising forced labour to build the infrastructure they needed to back their military campaigns. The cosmopolitan town, connected to the Atlantic coast through the Senegal River, functioned as the colony's first capital and was a commercial and migration hub. Women from the region passed through it in great numbers, travelling to Guinea, Senegambia or elsewhere in the Soudan to escape dire matrimonial situations or enslavement, or to seek work in the goldfields or groundnut-growing areas.³ Kayes was also a major town on the Dakar–Niger railway, a colonial project designed to link Senegalese ocean ports and river towns to caravan trading routes in the Soudanese hinterland. Construction was completed in 1924 under lethal labour conditions. A little over two decades later, for five months in 1947–48, Senegalese and Soudanese workers on the railway would organise and sustain one of the largest labour actions in French West Africa, a strike that forced the metropole to grant them fairer wages and benefits.

This is but a glimpse of Kayes' rich recent history, attested in its people's memories and testimonies, and documented through its extensive administrative archives, which France initiated post-

conquest and Mali maintained post-independence. In 2008–9, a team of historians and archivists conducted a painstaking inventory of the archives. Thousands of court disputes, surveillance files, youth theatre scripts, papers related to the railway strike and myriad other records revealed both mundane and remarkable aspects of the region's social and economic life, governance, histories of popular contestation and more.

On 13 May 2020, these documents all burned to ashes.⁴ In the days that followed Seyba's killing, Kayes' youth mourned, marched and fought back. Protesters torched a police precinct and multiple government buildings. As officials apologised for Seyba's death and pledged to prosecute his murderer, the police shot demonstrators, injuring several and killing two, including a twelve-year-old boy. As for the Kayes archives, they were consumed entirely by the government headquarters' fire.

Incidentally, two weeks before the archives burned, another fire made the headlines, this time in Bamako. The Garbal, a livestock market that doubles as a camp for hundreds of internally displaced persons, caught fire. Echoing our nation's concern for its citizens, the camp is contiguous with one of the largest open-air rubbish dumps in Bamako. The region the camp residents had fled, the greater inland delta of the Niger River, was historically a hub for commercial, intellectual and religious networks that once sprawled through much of the West African Sahel. Today, it is no longer safe to live in. For the past few years, the conflicts ravaging the central region of Mopti have rendered its inhabitants extremely vulnerable to various armed groups: jihadi organisations, militias, community

self-defence groups, and Malian and foreign state forces, including the French. As of June 2020, more than 250,000 internally displaced people were registered in Mali, and among them, hundreds of fatalities were being recorded monthly.⁵

As for the Kayes archives, their destruction tells a banal tale of administrative procrastination, to which many in Mali have largely grown accustomed. The team that inventoried the repository in 2008 had made basic recommendations, including the appointment of a local archivist, as required by law, who could have facilitated the digitisation of the archives. A decade later, this appointment had not materialised, likely due to idleness or bad faith. Neither had dedicated regional archival research centres been created, also planned for by law. Through indifference, the administration allowed the past lives of Malians to be obliterated, in addition to their present livelihoods. The social and environmental conditions that enabled the Kayes and Bamako fires were thus born out of parallel state politics of harm and neglect. Yet all the while, state officials were busy embezzling public funds, engaging in lucrative corruption deals and narcotics trafficking, or rigging elections. It is no surprise, then, that the people of Mali took to the streets to remove its government.

In August 2020, the popular protests culminated (and as is now evident, were hijacked) in a military coup. As citizens of Mali, it is now incumbent upon us to imagine post-coup futures and to try to achieve safe living conditions for all. To do so, it is indispensable that we tap into the archives that remain of Malian social life, political governance and struggles, and intellectual or artistic innovations. These archives and the stories they

hold are diverse, extensive and are our common good. For instance they include, scattered among dozens of families and often casted away in dusty cabinets and deeply buried memories, the oral, written and visual archives of women's activism in colonial and independent Mali.⁶ As these archives reveal, women performed momentous work in past political movements, only to have their actions eclipsed, co-opted or ignored. In that vein there is much we are likely missing about gendered dynamics of the 2020 protests, which on the surface often appeared overwhelmingly male. Likewise, as many citizens now advocate for a 'return' to granting more power and authority to customary chiefs, the colonial archive might hold insights that invite caution.⁷ Indeed, state governance enforced through local chiefs has often resulted in violence and impunity, and at times was legitimated through state co-option and in fact invention of customs. Therefore, more so than state-generated historical narratives and textbooks, it will be crucial in the months and years to come to foster independent historical inquiry, maintain and provide access to dedicated facilities and fund public research.

Notes

1. « Tout sur la Loi n°2019-042/du 24 Juillet 2019 portant Loi d'Entente Nationale », *Bamada.net*, 5 August 2020, <http://bamada.net/tout-sur-la-loi-n2019-042-du-24-juillet-2019-portant-loi-dentente-nationale>.
2. M.A. Diallo, « Kayes: des organisations réclament des enquêtes indépendantes après la mort de trois jeunes », *Sahélien.com*, 15 May 2020, <https://sahelien.com/kayes-des-organisations-reclament-des-enquetes-independantes-apres-la-mort-de-trois-jeunes/>.
3. Marie Rodet, *Les migrantes ignorées du Haut-Sénégal, 1900–1946*, Paris: Editions Karthala, 2009.

4. Marie Rodet, Aïssatou Mbodj, Souleymane Koné, Mamadou Sène Cissé and Mariam Coulibaly, « Sauvons le patrimoine archivistique du Mali ! », *Libération*, 25 May 2020, https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2020/05/19/sauvons-le-patrimoine-archivistique-du-mali_1788817; and Matteo Maillard, « Au Mali, la mort de trois jeunes embrase la population de Kayes et ses précieuses archives », *Le Monde*, 15 May 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/05/15/au-mali-la-mort-de-trois-jeunes-embrase-la-population-de-kayes-et-ses-precieuses-archives_6039829_3212.html.
5. Jose Luengo Cabrera, 'Mali: violence & displacement', Twitter, 4 September 2020, https://twitter.com/J_LuengoCabrera/status/1301901820374257665/photo/1.
6. *The Projet Archives des Femmes du Mali* has begun collecting and digitising some of these archives. UCLA Library, 'UCLA library program announces new projects to digitize and document activism, political expression and communal memory around the world', 18 August 2020, <https://www.library.ucla.edu/news/ucla-library-program-announces-new-projects-digitize-document-activism-political-expression>.
7. Recent projects adroitly make use of state and family archives, oral and written, to revisit the legacies, successes and controversies around individual chiefs. See Seydou Camara, ed., *Nambala Keita: chef de canton de Naréna (1895–1969)*, Bamako: Imprimerie Bah Nord-Sud, 2005; and Chérif Keita, dir., *Namballa Keita: A Soldier and His Village*, 2019, 85 min. Note that these works do not refer to the same individual.