Review of Roberts, R.L. (2022) Conflicts of colonialism: the rule of law, French Soudan, and Faama Mademba Sèye

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BOOK REVIEW

Conflicts of Colonialism: The Rule of Law, French Soudan, and Faama Mademba Sèye

RICHARD L. ROBERTS

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022; pp. xvii + 337, $44.99 hardback; $39.99 paperback and ebook.

I highly recommend this book, not only for students of French colonialism and Africa's history, but for any historian wishing to explore the extent to which individual creativity and agency are limited by structures and systems, or perhaps even determined by them.

This study features the life and deeds of Mademba Sèye, a man born in 1852 in Saint-Louis and educated at the French school there. Mademba became the ruler (*faama*)––a king for all intents and purposes––of Sansanding/Sinsani. Sansanding/Sinsani was a *Bamana* (Bambara) commercial town along the river Niger in present-day Mali but that had just been integrated in the new French colony of Soudan and had never previously had a king. In 1879, when France started to subdue the Soudan, Mademba was put in charge of a crew of workmen tasked with building a telegraph system, a dangerous job that took courage because the area still was a war zone and that he accomplished successfully. In short, in 1891 Colonel Louis Archinard appointed him "king" in what amounted to an administratively experimental variant of indirect rule. It should be noted that Mademba himself, although obviously an African, was not *Bamana*—despite changing his surname from Sèye to Sy.

Ever since his first research in West Africa in the 1970s, Roberts has collected documents about Mademba, whose career is remarkable and exceptional.

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Drawing from the myriad of often detailed legal and political administrative documents on Mademba that he has assembled from a number of archives, Roberts has been able to offer valuable insights into the transition process that came along with colonization. Mademba navigated effectively during the 1890s when the colony's administration made a transition from circumstances of "protective" occupation by representatives of the French Army to rule by professional French bureaucrats and its attendant *civilisation*. Mademba executed his kingship with great loyalty to the French cause, but exhibited an air of grandeur and the kind of rudeness that was reminiscent of a "traditional" African king. Roberts meticulously describes the increasing pressure Mademba came under amid complaints that he was abusing his power, for example, from the Sansanding people, who accused him of kidnapping women and keeping them hostage within the walls of his palace (132ff).

At the end of the century, Mademba was sent to Kayes for further investigation of the accusations against him. Roberts explores the economic development of the Soudan area during this period; it was a time when slavery was about to be abolished, and the very concept of forced labor was coming under challenge. In France itself, there were tensions between cleric-supporting conservative parties and anti-clerical republicans. At the administrative level, civil servants were being unexpectedly promoted to posts elsewhere or were suddenly dying, leaving their replacements short of time to update and upgrade existing policies. Finally, it proved impossible to decide which court should hear Mademba's case, because there was no category of "appointed king" in French colonial law, and all the while Mademba was actually legally a French citizen thanks to what he had done as a "war hero" for the French cause in the 1890s.

In the end, in 1900 Mademba was allowed to return to Sansanding without trial. Back home he soon reinvented himself as a proponent of agricultural modernization, actively involving himself in the promotion of cotton, and it was that role that eventually brought him to France. On that occasion––dressed like a typical European gentleman and speaking perfect French and without any royal paraphernalia––he created a stunning impression, which was amply reported in the national press. However, the abolition of slavery, his mistaken hopes for the benefits of forced labor, and the general misunderstanding of the climatological needs of cotton seeds soon put a stop to Mademba's cotton-growing initiative.

Mademba kept his appointment as king and remained dedicated to France until his death in 1918. During World War I he even enlisted eight of his nine sons into the colonial army––son number nine was too young (287). After Mademba's death, however, the French managed to prevent the continuance of the dynastic tradition. A son with a high military function wanted to "continue [his] father's tasks" (296) and become "resident" in the area. Mademba's son's efforts proved to

be in vain, although he did manage to accomplish his father's task at least metaphorically, by publishing a biography of him in 1931. Richard Roberts's life history of Mademba has now convincingly revised the biography's hagiographic text, leaving it better documented and with a deeper analysis. It was a respectful choice by Roberts to wait until the final chapter of his book to discuss the son's biography of his father, as Roberts' image of Mademba may not be welcomed by Mademba's offspring.

The family left the Sansanding area as suddenly as Mademba had appeared there in 1891; it sold its property in 1926 and invested the revenue in business in Bamako (302). It seems that in Sansanding today Mademba isn't widely remembered, if remembered at all. . . . Roberts cites a few of his own interviews from the period 1976–92, but that information is rather general and really offers no new insights into Mademba's life.

Although I enjoyed every page of this book, I nevertheless saw room for improvement or points that could have been better discussed. For a work by this author and in this series, I had expected more attention to detail in the spelling of key concepts in bamanakan: *ka kaliya* should be *ka kalifa* (112); *foraba* should be *foroba*, although I noted that both *faama* (correct) and *fama* (incorrect) are printed. In a similar vein, "Kouluba" for the ancient location of Mali's National Archives mixes two systems of orthography. Finally, I think the index could be more complete, particularly regarding references to authors.

A point I would particularly like to have seen discussed is Mademba's treatment of women. Reports about Mademba and women came from local people as well as from colonial administrators (for instance, see 132) with Mademba standing accused of kidnapping unattached women and holding them hostage in his palace. Roberts attempts to provide some nuance to this, saying (142): ". . . unattached women were socially and economically vulnerable and they may have welcomed the opportunity to join Mademba's household," but concludes (143) that Mademba "conflated challenges to his control over his women with challenges to his control over his kingdom." Roberts offers us detailed descriptions of a few cases of conflicts over women, revealing webs of entitlement and claims that are difficult to interpret as simply criminal or immoral. Additional data on numbers of wives by *contemporary* chiefs might have been useful in this respect, as I hope this example will explain. The first "chef de canton" of Simandou (present-day Guinée) was appointed in 1894. He had been *faama* of the kingdom of Simandou, south of Kankan, an area formerly controlled by Samori Touré, and on his death in 1917 a detailed list was drawn up of his 105 children born from forty-five of his fifty-six "épouses légales."[1] Perhaps therefore Mademba was not entirely unwise in "conflating" control over women and control over his chiefdom, for clearly in

those days a high number of wives might well have been necessary to "manage" from a "central office."

I should like to end this review by mentioning something important that Roberts has accomplished here. After collecting all the numerous documents on Mademba over the decades, he clearly found himself faced with a dilemma: "As a historian of social change, I use evidence of individual lives to illustrate larger trends. I remained uncomfortable dedicating a whole book to the life of one individual" (xi). Strangely enough, the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president in 2016 prompted Roberts to write this book on a single individual, because he considers both Trump and Mademba to have been "driven by narcissism and insecurities" and "deeply misogynistic" (xi, see also 141). Although I can say I agree with him regarding Trump, I doubt Roberts's judgment of Mademba––and it is worth pointing out that, perhaps wisely, Roberts avoids such terms in most of his book. In point of fact, Roberts's analysis perfectly illustrates how dynamic, complex, demanding, and confusing colonial rule was for people in West Africa at the turn of the century, and that it needed much intelligence along with first-class *bricolage* and diplomacy to survive the system for forty years, as Mademba managed to do. *Conflicts of Colonialism* is therefore a well-chosen title and Roberts has succeeded in writing an in-depth study of the impact of the "larger trend" of colonialism on individuals. This is thanks to his decision to limit himself to one exceptional individual on whom he collected data for four decades. That has enabled him to write his best book so far, as a historian of social change.

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Note

1. List published in: Diontan Djiguiba Camara (manuscrit préservé, enrichi et rédigé par son fils Daouda Damaro Camara), *Aspects de la civilisation mandingue—Tome 1: La reconstitution de la société précoloniale du pays natal de l'Almamy Samory Touré, héros emblématique mandingue* (Conakry, Guineé, private publication, 2024): 428–40.