

Contesting France: Rumors, Intervention and the Politics of Truth in Mali¹

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Abstract

This article explores rumors, conspiracy theories and other unverified information to study local representations of French intervention in Mali since 2013. The aim is not to verify the veracity of rumors, but to probe why they are locally credible and what they reveal about local perceptions of political order and authority. I argue that rumors are a contestation of French-led intervention. They constitute a politics of truth which draws to a significant extent on historical registers to inscribe the current situation in past events; that is, colonial encounters. The permanence and depth of intervention makes possible and legitimates a form of internationalized government that many Malians perceive as a humiliation and a violation of national sovereignty, turning them into objects of intervention that are deprived of power and agency. This critique, however, extends to Mali's extraverted political elites, who are blamed for the crisis itself, but also for inviting and enabling internationalized government, which has helped them to maintain their political power.

Introduction

In Mali's capital Bamako France has become the subject of intense public scrutiny in recent years. Citizens of all stripes engage in heated debates about the role that the former colonial power plays in their country, particularly since the onset of French military intervention in 2013 (Operation Serval). France has suffered a significant alteration of its reputation. As opinion polls have showed, Serval was nearly unanimously greeted by Malians as a "liberation" from the yoke of radical Islamist groups that had occupied vast parts of northern Mali. Its successor, the regional counter-terrorism Operation Barkhane, has received far less favorable views.² In 2019, a national umbrella of civil society groups called for an "audit" to evaluate the presence of foreign armies on the national territory.³ Certain declarations by politicians, activists and religious leaders provide ample evidence that skepticism and resentment dominate local discourses about France. In February 2019, the head of Mali's Haut Conseil Islamique (HCI), Mahmoud Dicko, told a 50,000 member audience in Bamako: "Why does France imposes its law here? This France that colonized us and still continues to

¹ This article has been published in French in *Critique internationale*. See Denis M. Tull, « [Contester la France: rumeurs, intervention et politique de vérité au Mali](#) », 90 (1), 2021, p. 151-171.

² Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, "Enquête d'opinion. Que pensent les Malien(ne)s?", Mali-Mètre, no. 10, Bamako, 2018, p. 88f.

³ "Sahel : cinq ans après sa création, Barkhane peine toujours à convaincre", *RFI*, 1 December 2019.

colonize us and to dictate everything we have to do. France should end her interference in our country".⁴ Three months later, in May, for example, a parliamentarian of the ruling party has alluded to Mali's "occupation" by foreign armies with "imperial-colonial intentions".⁵ Pop star Salif Keita has stated that France financed jihadist groups in Mali.⁶ Writings in the press and social media platforms are likewise saturated with skeptical or hostile views of France.

Local reactions to intervention take the form of a narrative that is driven by rumors, conspiracy theories and other forms of uncertain information. As elsewhere rumors in Mali circulate by word of mouth and via personal exchanges at informal social gatherings in markets, restaurants and public transport, but also via radio and internet. They center on the idea that French policy in and towards Mali is driven by sinister motives, namely that France seeks to exploit, dominate and divide the country.⁷

Resentment towards the French involvement is not hegemonic. Nevertheless, the question is how, within a short period of time, Malian images of France could have morphed from "liberator" to that of a former colonial power intent on inflicting damage on Mali. I consider rumors as building blocks of larger narratives to study collective Malian perceptions and representations of French intervention.⁸ Consequently, the veracity of rumors is secondary, for they are not mere descriptive renditions of events. Rather they should be understood as representations steeped in political and moral judgements that demonstrate "the historical depth of the most ephemeral and contemporary mobilizations".⁹ They articulate local identities and worldviews, although they should not be equated with public opinion. The prevalence of certain rumors attests to their intrinsic interest to a large number of people.¹⁰ Steady repetition transforms rumors into "accepted representations of social reality", even if they seem implausible or eccentric.¹¹

The aim is to explain how and why they enjoy local credibility and what they reveal about how Malians imagine the past and present relationship with their former colonial power, and

⁴ Nicolas Beau, "Mali, l'Imam Mahmoud Dicko s'en prend aux Français", 11 February 2019 (<https://mondafrique.com/mali-limam-mahmoud-dicko-sen-prend-aux-francais/>).

⁵ Moussa Diarra, "Lettre à Monsieur Emmanuel Macron, Président de la République Française", 21 May 2019 (<http://bamada.net/lettre-ouverte-du-depute-moussa-diarra-a-emmanuel-macron>).

⁶ "Salif Keita à IBK : 'arrêtez de te soumettre à ce petit Macron'", *BBC*, 15 November 2019.

⁷ Bruce Whitehouse, "Public Perceptions of Violent Extremism in Mali", in Olivier J. Walther, William F.S. Miles (eds.), *African Border Disorders: Addressing Transnational Extremist Organizations*, London, Routledge, 2017, p. 176; Yvan Guichaoua, "The Bitter Harvest of French Interventionism in the Sahel", *International Affairs*, 96 (4), 2020, p. 895-911.

⁸ Julien Gavelle, Johanna Siméant, Laure Traoré, "Le court terme de la légitimité : prises de position, rumeurs et perceptions entre janvier et septembre 2012 à Bamako", *Politique africaine*, 130 (2), 2013, p. 23-46.

⁹ Juliette Rennes, "Les formes de la contestation. Sociologie des mobilisations et théories de l'argumentation", *A contrario*, 16 (2), 2011, p. 151.

¹⁰ Stephen Ellis, "Tuning In To Pavement Radio", *African Affairs*, 88 (352), 1989, p. 322.

¹¹ Glen A. Perice, "Rumors and Politics in Haiti", *Anthropological Quarterly*, 70 (1), 1997, p. 1.

their normative expectations of political order, power and authority.¹² I argue that rumors are a contestation of French-led intervention, on account of its disappointing results, but also because they draw heavily on historical registers to inscribe the current situation in past events. In Bamako, terms like "tutelle", siege and even occupation have long entered the political lexicon of the crisis. The durability of intervention makes possible and legitimates a form of internationalized government that many Malians perceive as a humiliation and a violation of sovereignty. But the critique extends to Mali's political elites, who are blamed for the crisis itself and for inviting and enabling internationalized government, which has permitted them to entrench their power through strategies of extraversion.¹³

There is nothing fortuitous about the fact that rumors circulate widely in Mali. Areas affected by violence and uncertainty have been found to be prone to their proliferation. Scott reminds us that "life-threatening events such as war, epidemic, famine, and riot are thus among the most fertile social sites for the generation of rumors".¹⁴ Back in 1832, Clausewitz wrote that "A great deal of the news one gets in war is contradictory, an even greater one is false and by far the greatest is subject to considerable uncertainty".¹⁵ Many studies that take rumors seriously are based on empirical material collected in areas of violent conflict.¹⁶ Amid pervasive uncertainty, the quest for knowledge, truth and clarity turns societies into "worlds of investigation", geared towards "exposing imposters, spotting booby traps, identifying signs of danger".¹⁷ In this context rumors are contests over knowledge and truth. They constitute an "alternative source of information" that challenges dominant and officially-sanctioned narratives over what counts as truth.¹⁸

¹² Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires. Rumor and History in Colonial Africa*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000.

¹³ Jean-François Bayart, "L'Afrique dans le monde: une histoire d'extraversion", *Critique internationale*, 5 (1), 1999, p. 97-120.

¹⁴ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992, p. 144. See also Lee Ann Fujii, "Shades of Truth and Lies: Interpreting Testimonies of War and Violence", *Journal of Peace Research*, 47 (2), 2010, p. 231-241.

¹⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, Berlin, Area, 2004, p. 59.

¹⁶ Paul A. Silverstein, "An Excess of Truth: Violence, Conspiracy Theorizing and the Algerian Civil War", *Anthropological Quarterly*, 75 (4), 2002, p. 643-674; Susanna Fioratta, "Conspiracy Theorizing as Political Practice in Guinea", *Africa*, 89 (3), 2019, p. 457-478; Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle, "Les violences dans l'Extrême-Nord du Cameroun: le complot comme outil d'interprétation et de luttes politiques", *Politique africaine*, 38 (2), 2015, p. 163-177; Sverker Finnström, "Gendered War and Rumors of Saddam Hussein in Uganda", *Anthropology and Humanism*, 34 (1), 2009, p. 61-70; Philippe Aldrin, "Penser la rumeur: une question discutée des sciences sociales", *Genèses*, 50 (1), 2003, p. 139.

¹⁷ Laurent Gayer, "La 'normalité de l'anormal': recomposer le quotidien en situation de guerre civile", *Critique Internationale*, 80 (3), 2018, p. 184.

¹⁸ Mariane C. Ferme, *Out of War. Violence, Trauma and the Political Imagination in Sierra Leone*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2018, p. 75 ; Placide Ondo, "Le 'kongossa' politique ou la passion de la rumeur à Libreville. Un mode de participation politique", *Politique africaine*, 115 (3), 2009, p. 75-98.

This paper considers rumors as a form of contestation that underwrites political struggles over legitimate forms of government in post-2013 Mali. Specifically, it addresses the salience of rumors in the context of international intervention. This is a neglected aspect in research on military or humanitarian intervention despite the fact that the relationship between interveners and host societies shapes intervention outcomes.¹⁹ This paper will contribute to close this gap by examining how interveners in foreign lands are represented through rumors. It also contributes to the comparative study of the postcolonial relationship between African societies and France. In Niger, Burkina Faso, Cameroun and Côte d'Ivoire, a seemingly growing number of citizens question French interests and policies in their country.²⁰ Against the backdrop of domestic political crises or the "war on terrorism" they possibly represent reactions to the perceptible increase of French military and political activism in the region.²¹ Finally, the paper also speaks to emerging debates on the significance of disinformation and post-truth politics. It is suggested that rumors and conspiracy theories are not necessarily the product of disinformation. Their spread is inscribed in and informed by local histories that have a vitality of their own.

This article is part of a research project on the international intervention in Mali since 2013, its political effects and local responses to it. Neither rumors nor the role of France were initially part of my research agenda. In fact, they almost accidentally emerged as one subject of inquiry amid the larger theme of intervention in Mali due to the frequency with which interviewees raised the matter. After I had decided to include the subject in my interviews, my strategy was to ask a few questions about France, but not explicitly about rumors - until interlocutors invoked themselves gossip and hearsay, either explicitly as a category ("rumor has it that...") or as a specific storyline. In this way I thought to not pre-determine the importance of rumors in representations of France. Since 2016 I have conducted 145 semi-structured interviews with Malian interlocutors and foreign interveners, some of whom I met several times. The paper draws on empirical material obtained from interviews with a range of Malian citizens and actors such as representatives of socioeconomic associations, civil society groups and political parties, military officers, journalists, academics, religious figures, students and taxi drivers. Most interviews were conducted as one-to-one interactions. Due to

¹⁹ Béatrice Pouligny, *Ils nous avaient promis la paix : opérations de l'ONU et populations locales*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2004, p. 216-217. Exceptions are M. C. Ferme, *Out of War. Violence, Trauma and the Political Imagination in Sierra Leone*, *op. cit.* and Adam Sandor, "The Power of Rumour(s) in International Interventions: MINUSMA's Management of Mali's Rumour Mill", *International Affairs*, 96 (4), 2020), p. 913-934.

²⁰ Jean-Pierre Dozon, *Frères et sujets : la France et l'Afrique en perspective*, Paris, Flammarion, 2003 ; Richard Banégas, "France's Intervention Policy in Africa Seen from Below: Some Thoughts on the Case of Côte d'Ivoire", *European Review of International Studies*, 1 (3), 2014, p. 60-79; Antonin Tisseron, *Quand la France ne fait plus rêver : L'exemple du Niger*, Paris, Institut Thomas More, 2016.

²¹ Ruben Andersson, "Here Be Dragons: Mapping an Ethnography of Global Danger", *Current Anthropology*, 57 (6), 2016, p. 707-731; Bruno Charbonneau, "Intervention in Mali: Building Peace between Peacekeeping and Counterterrorism", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 35 (4) 2017, p. 415-431.

the sensitive political and security situation, all interviews and the names of interviewees are anonymized.

I selected interviewees not because they may be "in the know" about the international intervention, but to integrate a diversity of backgrounds (age, profession, economic and social status etc.) and potential variations of perceptions. Interviewees are not representative of society as a whole. All were Francophone and had thus higher than average formal education. However, education, income, age, and gender do not determine individual receptivity of rumors, belying the common idea that educated people are more immune to rumors than less educated ones.²² To a lesser extent I also draw on content from Malian media and internet platforms that are vectors of diffusion of rumors and unconfirmed stories.

The paper is organized as follows: the first section briefly sketches the general context of conflict and intervention in Mali since 2012. Section two describes predominant sets of rumors that circulate in Bamako about French intervention. It explains that rumors build on some of the contradictions of French policy, which form the raw material through which Malians establish their politics of truth. Section three describes the historical registers that inform this truth regime, making rumors and narratives locally compelling. In section four I explain that local critique extends to Mali's political elite as it is complicit with the transformation of intervention into an internationalized government that is at odds with local visions of political order. The conclusion will summarize the results.

Crisis and Intervention in Mali

Mali has been witnessing a crisis since 2012, sparked by a joint insurrection of Tuareg separatists and radical Islamist groups and further compounded by a revolt of military officers in Bamako. By April, the rebels were in control of northern Mali, including Kidal, Gao and Tombouctou. On April 6, the principal Tuareg rebel group Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) announced the creation of the independent "Republic of Azawad". However, the radical Islamists soon sidelined the separatists politically and militarily. Meanwhile in Bamako, a transitional government replaced the military junta, but proved unable to organize a military riposte in the north.

When the Islamists moved southward in January 2013 the French army intervened upon the request of the Malian government.²³ In less than a month, Operation Serval had evicted the Islamists from their strongholds. Malians welcomed the return of the former colonial power enthusiastically. Five weeks into the intervention, an opinion poll showed that 97% of Bamako's residents held favorable views of Operation Serval.²⁴ In July, a UN Stabilization

²² Kelly M. Greenhill, Ben Oppenheim, "Rumor Has It: The Adoption of Unverified Information in Conflict Zones", *International Studies Quarterly*, 61 (3), 2017, p. 660-676; S. Ellis, "Rumour and Power in Togo", *Africa*, 63 (4), 1993, p. 470.

²³ Roland Marchal, "Military (Mis)Adventures in Mali", *African Affairs*, 112 (448), 2013, p. 486-497.

²⁴ Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, "Enquête d'opinion. Que pensent les Malien(ne)s?", *Mali-Mètre*, 2, Bamako, 2013, p. 27.

Mission (MINUSMA) started deployment in Mali. In August Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was elected as the new president.

Popular enthusiasm for the French intervention proved short-lived. Contrary to expectations among Bamako's nationalistic public, Serval failed to reestablish territorial integrity and state authority everywhere. The MNLA regained its foothold in northern towns such as Kidal. France, the UN and other international actors promoted a conflict resolution for north Mali on the premise that the rebels had a legitimate political agenda. The transitional government duly negotiated with the rebels the preliminary Ouagadougou Accord (June 2013). This created conditions for presidential elections even in the rebel-held north, and stipulated comprehensive negotiations once an elected government was in place. The result was the 2015 Alger Peace Accord.

Nearly eight years into the French intervention, which was progressively accompanied by a vast international presence (UN, EU, numerous bilateral donors and NGOs), peace remains elusive. The implementation of the peace accord has stalled while radical Islamist groups have reorganized, expanding towards central Mali and neighboring countries. The heavy engagement of international actors seems to produce few tangible effects. Assessments of the situation are increasingly bleak²⁵. Local communities suffer insecurity and precarious livelihoods. They also fear the risk of secession in the north.²⁶ Partly as a result, the government is increasingly contested. But international partners are also subject to stinging criticisms, including the UN mission MINUSMA. The critique of a former minister in a pre-crisis government summarizes a common view in Bamako. Describing Minusma as "expensive, disconnected and powerless", he argued that the mission "wasn't fit to help Mali. These people risk nothing, they are well paid, they don't go to the hot spots. At one point they even ran patrols on the streets of Bamako. That was the last straw".²⁷

France, the former colonial power, has a far greater visibility. It has played a primordial role since the start of the crisis and has maintained a heavy military footprint and decisively shapes international action via its influence in the UN Security Council and the EU. Yet, these factors provide an insufficient explanation for the fact that France is crystallizing rumors and conspiracy theories in Bamako. As we will see, French engagement in Mali is marred by a number of contradictions and inconsistencies.²⁸ Malians interrogate and analyze these contradictions in line with their world views and historical experiences. Malian ambiguities

²⁵ Audition de François Lecointre, chef d'état-major des armées, Assemblée nationale, Paris, 11 June 2019, p. 14.

²⁶ Massa Coulibaly, "Impacts et séquelles de la crise et du conflit du Nord au Mali", Bamako, Afrobarometer, 2018, p. 13.

²⁷ Interview, 12 December 2019.

²⁸ Y. Guichaoua, "The Bitter Harvest of French Interventionism in the Sahel", art. cit.; Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, *Une guerre perdue : la France au Sahel*, Paris, JC Lattès, 2020.

vis-à-vis France are not new, but intervention provides the context in which new debates and contestations have flourished.²⁹

France is not the only object of the Malian rumor mill. Rumors circulate all the time and very much about everything. A random sample of rumors encountered during fieldwork included imminent government reshuffles or coups d'état, the alleged stoning of a woman by Islamists, drug trafficking by members of parliament or the contamination of fish in the market. Rumors also circulate about external actors, be it with respect to the venality of the visa-issuing personnel in the US embassy, allegations that an international NGO uses helicopters to supply terrorist groups or the failures of Minusma.³⁰

Rumors, Revelations and Truth

Reproducing rumors is an attempt to make sense of an unprecedented crisis and, above all else, the paradox of a progressive degradation of the situation *despite* intervention.³¹ On the most general level, Malian interlocutors doubt that France is interested in stabilizing their country, much less assisting the government in reclaiming state authority. The official explanation for the French military presence – fighting terrorist groups – is derided as a smokescreen that hides actually existing objectives or a "hidden agenda", a term that is frequently invoked in Bamako, sometimes as an affirmation, but often as a question and a possibility.

As Issa C., a lecturer at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure (ENSUP) explained:

"France's role is pointed out everywhere, at all levels. One wonders if France doesn't have another agenda. Everybody's wondering. But I'm not so naive as to believe that France would come and hunt down terrorists, pack up and go home. There's a bill to pay...a war is expensive!...People say so! Me, I really haven't got my hands on the document that says that, well, here's France's intention to exploit the minerals or this or that. But France is under suspicion, everyone's talking about it. Why so much complacency with Kidal, with the Tuaregs? ...We don't understand that, it irritates us, that's all. But well, it stops there, afterwards people really don't have any tangible proof, but we can see that France has a negative image more and more, that's obvious".³²

²⁹ J. Siméant, *Contester au Mali*, Paris, Karthala, 2014; GEMDEV and Université du Mali (eds.), *Mali-France : regards sur une histoire partagée*, Paris, Karthala, 2005.

³⁰ A. Sandor, "The Power of Rumour(s) in International Interventions: MINUSMA's Management of Mali's Rumour Mill", art. cit.

³¹ Vincent Boncase, Julien Brachet, "Les 'crises sahéliennes' entre perceptions locales et gestions internationales", *Politique africaine*, 130 (2), 2013, p. 5-22; Janet Roitman, interview, translation and notes by Sara Angeli Aguiton, Lydie Cabane, Lise Cornilleau, "Anti-Crisis : penser avec et contre les crises ?", *Critique internationale*, 85 (4), 2019, p. 107-121.

³² Interview with a lecturer at the École nationale supérieure (ENSUP), 13 February 2019.

These remarks indicate that rumors represent uncertain knowledge. Uncertainty is a function of the political context, in which vast numbers of Malians are cut off from reliable information and in which the vetting of information is difficult due to poor communications and transport infrastructure, insecurity and restrictions on mobility. Interlocutors sometimes acknowledge this uncertainty explicitly when a lack of palpable proof ("a document") is admitted. Vague allegations are also an indicator of uncertainty. When pressed for details, interlocutors often admit not to know any specifics.

Uncertainty also reveals itself when multiple allegations are substantiated in random fashion. Above, Issa C. alludes to possible economic interests and French relations with Tuareg rebels. A similar approach is evident from the list of allegations advanced by Seydou D., a well-respected and wealthy lawyer who runs a law clinic in Bamako asked: "What does the international community want in Mali? Testing arms? Getting hold of our resources? Controlling Tessalit as a strategic location? We are under the impression that Mali has become a district or a region of the international community, which is directed by France".³³ Framing rumors as questions may be a rhetorical device, but it also demonstrates ambiguity and doubt, in particular when interlocutors advance multiple story lines as "proof" or explanations that, taken together, stretch the limits of what seems conceivable. The attribution of rumors to "the people", "the street", as in "people say" is another indication of uncertainty. This distancing towards rumors as something passively heard is part and parcel of the rumor economy.³⁴ This may have to do with the identity of the interviewer (possibly suspected of not believing the rumor), but not necessarily. Interviewees were hardly ever apologetic about a rumor they mentioned.

Rumors about France in Mali have two features in common. First, they are generated and reproduced by all segments of society, including educational elites, some of whom hold doctoral degrees from Western universities. But as elsewhere, this encompasses a huge diversity of people from different backgrounds. Rumors spread too widely to attribute them only to officials in search of foreign scapegoats or Bamako's small but noisy circle of alter-mondialistes activists. A second feature is that, despite a variety of stories, nearly all rumors come down to two distinct though connected types of tales or narratives. The first one stipulates that France supports Tuareg separatism, thus undermining Mali's unity and integrity. The second one alleges the illegal exploitation of Mali's mineral wealth by France.

Rumors about French support for Tuareg separatism emerged as early as 2013, in parallel with Operation Serval. As French troops moved up north, they handed the liberated towns over to the accompanying contingents of the *Forces armées maliennes* (FAMA). This did not happen in Kidal, though, where French troop allegedly prevented the FAMA from entering the town. Intentionally or not, this enabled the MNLA to reestablish a foothold in Kidal,

³³ Interview, 5 February 2019. An adviser at the presidency offered a similar range of possibilities. Interview, 11 February 2019.

³⁴ M. C. Ferme, *Out of War. Trauma and the Political Imagination in Sierra Leone*, *op. cit.*, p. 75-76.

which it had previously lost to the jihadists. In a rare public critique, President Ibrahim Keita echoed wider Malian suspicions:

"These [foreign] troops are intended to help Mali recover its territorial integrity and sovereignty. Unfortunately, we are witnessing a situation where the presence of these troops has prevented Mali from re-establishing state authority in Kidal, whereas it has done so in Gao and Timbuktu. Why is that the case? We are not naïve, the Tuareg rebellion of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) returned to Kidal in the wake of the troops that came to liberate us".³⁵

Many Malians express similar disbelief about Kidal. A leader of the social movement Antè A Bana (Touches pas à ma Constitution) exclaimed: "Someone tell us the truth! We want to know what's going on and what's behind it. Why can't we go to Kidal? Why can't the ministers go to Kidal without negotiating... [with the Tuareg rebels controlling the town]?"³⁶

The centrality of Kidal in nationalist narratives can hardly be overstated. To see the national flag back in Kidal was to represent the ultimate marker of Mali's restored "dignity" and "grandeur".³⁷ Instead, Kidal remained, in the words of a FAMA officer, a "dark spot" both for Mali's wounded pride and for the relationship with France.³⁸

The rebels' renewed control over Kidal forced the government to start negotiations with the MNLA. To many Malians this was a direct result of French "betrayal", "complicity" or a "collusion" with the MNLA to promote secession. As a matter of fact, French policy was deeply ambiguous. To argue, as the Quai d'Orsay did, that the priority was to fight terrorist groups, "not to intervene in Mali's domestic affairs", was inconsistent and unconvincing.³⁹ To Malians, it amplified the illegibility of French policy. Issa C., the ENSup lecturer, argued: "I think that today it might be in France's interest to clarify things, because it's an ambiguous situation... We don't really know what France's position is. That's what's bothering the Malians. In fact, we don't know its position".⁴⁰ The difficulty to interpret French policy has been a recurrent subject in conversations.

As public opinion turned against France, stories to explain and validate the belief of a French conspiracy spread swiftly. Many claimed that Paris had been instrumental in the creation of the MNLA. Interlocutors of all stripes frequently underlined the consequences of NATO's 2011 Libya intervention, but some even insinuated that France had spearheaded this intervention in the ultimate goal to destabilize Mali. Malians drew connections between the

³⁵ "La communauté internationale oblige le Mali à négocier avec un groupe armé", *Le Monde*, 4 December 2013.

³⁶ Interview, 6 June 2018. Antè A Bana organized large street demonstrations in 2017-2018 against the constitutional reform project that the government said was necessary to integrate the provisions of the Peace Accord into the constitution.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Interview, 5 June 2018.

³⁹ "Mali : L'armée subit une cuisante défaite à Kidal", *Le Point*, 19 May 2014.

⁴⁰ Interview, cit..

events in Kidal, NATO's Libya intervention and the birth of the MNLA, creating a narrative that attributes considerable coherency to French policy.

The controversy was amplified when Prime Minister Moussa Mara went to Kidal on 22 May 2014. His visit sparked heavy fighting between FAMA units and the MNLA, resulting in a bruising defeat of the army. The disaster spurred the rumor mill further, with one story claiming that French troops - disguised as jihadists - had fought in Kidal alongside the MNLA.⁴¹ In the following days, several thousand protestors in Bamako, Gao and other towns denounced the complicity of France and Minusma with the MNLA, demonstrating that rumors can have significant political effects.

A second ubiquitous narrative argues that France's military presence hides strategic and economic objectives. Fighting terrorists serves as an excuse for the French army to stay in north Mali where it exploits natural resources.⁴² Some interlocutors point to French convoys of large vehicles making their way up north, supposedly carrying heavy mining machinery. A program officer from Gao who works for an international NGO in Bamako reported "strange explosions" in the vicinity of the French Camp in Gao. Pictures have also circulated on the internet, showing French soldiers handling large caterpillars and dredges, alleged "proof" of the exploitation thesis. A related story circulated via a video posted on social media in September 2019, supposedly showing Malian customs officers intercepting French soldiers smuggling gold out of Mali. While this was clearly false – the video had appeared in a similar story in the DR Congo weeks before – it attracted thousands of views in only a few days, testimony to the popularity of the mineral exploitation thesis. A doctoral student claimed that France is dumping toxic, possibly nuclear waste in north Mali's Tessalit area, a widely circulating rumor that is likely connected to the nuclear tests that France conducted in the Algerian Sahara between 1960 and 1966.

Another persistent story emphasizes the region's strategic importance. Malians commonly affirm that the control of Tessalit is major stake for France, where its army has allegedly imposed a large perimeter around its camp, to which Malian officials have no access. The story builds on collective imaginings of Tessalit as "one of the most strategic places on earth", an idea that is apparently taught at school.⁴³ A university professor connected these various dots into a seemingly coherent narrative about French "neocolonialism", arguing that France makes a forceful return

"...because Mali on 20 January 1960 had expelled the French. Today we have the impression that France is working hard to come back, it wants a military base in

⁴¹ Interview with a civil society activist, 12 June 2018.

⁴² "Des images de l'armée française 'pillant l'or' du Mali ? Attention intox !", *France24*, 15 April 2019.

⁴³ Interview with a NGO worker, 12 December 2017; see also B. Whitehouse, "Public Perceptions of Violent Extremism in Mali", *cit.*, p. 176.

Tessalit, like the United States. As they were denied that, France is now taking its revenge on Mali".⁴⁴

While intellectuals present such analysis in a sober, straightforward manner, highly placed state officials, for whom the political stakes are higher, seem to embrace conspirational views more readily. A former senior official in the presidency remarked that "France is looking in caves and the underground for golden jihadists", to suggest that the French army, pretending to track terrorists, was in reality extracting gold from Malian soil.⁴⁵ While this was said half-jokingly, an advisor in the presidency advanced allegations in far more serious terms, including French supplies of arms and logistics for the Tuareg rebels via Libya and Burkina Faso. He also claimed that Mali only asked France for air strikes in 2013 to stop the jihadists, not a full-fledged intervention, which, he insinuated, provided France with a justification to establish itself in northern Mali, allegedly in the pursuit of sinister plans (resource exploitation, the control of Tessalit etc.).

It is difficult to know how widespread conspirational thinking is at the apex of the state. No doubt accusations are often a self-serving tool to exculpate officials from their own responsibility. Foreign diplomats in Bamako frequently make this point, including ones from other West African states.⁴⁶ But rumors may also reflect the Malian frustration with their international partners, few of whom concede that they, too, carry a degree of responsibility, be it with regard to the willful ignorance of "bad governance" under the previous regime of President Amadou Toumani Touré or as regards the consequences that NATO's intervention in Libya.

Malian representations may not always be persuasive, but they seek to establish truth through a more or less consistent reading of post-2012 events. Truth-seeking involves the relentless search for French contradictions and inconsistencies. A frequently mentioned puzzle is the inability of the French military to defeat the jihadist forces. Interlocutors in Bamako find this simply unconvincing in light of the previous success of Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane's phalanx of troops, fighter jets and drones. In the local imagination, they are overwhelming evidence that France has the actual means to eliminate the jihadists, if it wanted. Seydou D., the lawyer, observed: "In 2013 it was said that there were 1,500 jihadists in Mali. How do you explain that today so many do still exist, despite the many neutralizations that were announced, despite all the efforts, means and equipment that the French have mobilized?"⁴⁷ The failure to capture the figurehead of Mali's jihadist galaxy, Iyad ag Ghali, is the subject of particular suspicion. It is locally compelling to argue that, if Iyad is still at large, it must mean that his ties with the French endure.

⁴⁴ Interview with a university professor, 8 February 2019.

⁴⁵ Interview, 15 June 2017.

⁴⁶ Interview, 4 June 2018.

⁴⁷ Interview, cit.

The ambiguities of French policy offer ample material for these "hermeneutics".⁴⁸ In this way, revelations are exposed that confirm preexisting convictions about France's hostile intentions. Accordingly, French inconsistencies are not due to accidents or contingency, but are linked to a hidden agenda that reveals historical continuities. A great deal of intentionality and coherency is assigned to French policies. Ambiguities and contradictions are explained away. They are considered as being part of a ruse, e.g. they are logical and rational.

Maliens are keen collectors of evidence. Even minor stories are talked up as "revelations" that corroborate sinister French intentions, for example, when a geography teacher at a French college in Bamako used the term "Azawad" in a class test. Azawad is the name that Tuareg rebels use to denote the part of northern Mali where they intended to create the independent "République de l'Azawad". To most Malians, the mere invocation of the term is to recognize separatist aspirations. Predictably, the story created a public uproar and commentators noted yet "another French plot to divide the country".⁴⁹ The French embassy presented its excuses, but the Malian government expelled the teacher. A similar episode occurred in May 2019, when, in separate French media, a retired general and a commentator (both French) advocated autonomy or even independence for north Mali. The news spread quickly across the Malian internet. The French embassy felt compelled to put out a statement, noting that the remarks by the two commentators, "both non-specialists on Mali, are their own and do not in any way reflect the position of the French authorities".⁵⁰

The view that France has hostile intentions is backed up by efforts to establish a body of knowledge that is credible and legitimate. This is the "politics of truth", that is, knowledge that a significant part of the Malian public accepts as true.⁵¹ It puts forward a vision of the world that competes with and contests official accounts, by both French and Malian governments that describe the French intervention as indispensable to protect Mali. The alternative truth regime is not produced from above, under the control of an institutional apparatus, Malian or foreign. Rather it seems to be based on common-sense, expressing a vernacular form of truth that claims to be self-evident.⁵²

⁴⁸ Armando Cutolo, Richard Banégas, "Gouverner par la parole : parlements de la rue, pratiques oratoires et subjectivation politique en Côte d'Ivoire", *Politique africaine*, 127 (3), 2012, p. 21-48.

⁴⁹ "Scandale de l'Azawad à l'école 'Liberté A': le gouvernement expulse l'enseignement français", *bamada.net*, 25 October 2017.

⁵⁰ Via Twitter: @FranceauMali, 20 May 2019.

⁵¹ Lorna Weir, "The Concept of Truth Regime", *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 33 (2), 2008, p. 368, citing Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power", in James D. Faubion (ed.), *Power. Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, New York, The New Press, 2000, vol. 3, p. 131.

⁵² L. Weir, "The Concept of Truth Regime", art. cit., p. 378; P. A. Silverstein, "An Excess of Truth: Violence, Conspiracy Theorizing and the Algerian Civil War", art. cit., p. 646.

Historical Registers: the Past in the Present

The willingness of Malians to regard rumors as knowledge and truth is grounded in a historical context. As Marc Bloch has written:

"False news is always born out of collective representations that pre-exist at its birth; it is fortuitous only in appearance, or, more precisely, all that is fortuitous in it is the initial incident, absolutely unspecified, which sets in motion the work of the imaginations; but this setting in motion only takes place because the imaginations are already prepared and ferment in quietly fashion."⁵³

Malian analyses of French policy draw on historical experiences rooted in colonialism and nationalism. It is the persistence of the past that shapes contemporary relations, including local readings of intervention.

Wary of continued French influence, Mali's first President Modibo Keita embraced a resolute anti-imperialist and anti-colonial posture, providing a foundational narrative for the new state. His decisions to expel the French army and to leave the Franc CFA zone has led some to argue that Mali went further than other former colonies to free itself from French influence and oversight, except Guinea.⁵⁴ Mali's quest for sovereignty culminated in a new national currency in 1962, an act that Keita likened to "a declaration of political and economic war" against France.⁵⁵ The rupture was less clear cut than Keita's martial rhetoric suggest, but nationalist discourse still celebrates Keita as an unflinching anticolonial hero.⁵⁶ Prior to the 2018 presidential elections a pamphlet circulating in Bamako argued:

"Rare are the candidates for the presidential election who do not identify with the father of the nation, Modibo Keita...But extremely few are those who claim the socialist and pan-Africanist inspiration of his economic project and who endorse the red line as regards the presence of foreign troops on our soil that he drew by asking for their departure on 20 January 1961. It was crossed in 2013 all the more gleefully."⁵⁷

Narratives of nationalist grandeur precede the crisis. Animated by anxieties over separatism and the designs of foreign powers, a fiery nationalistic discourse has imposed itself in some quarters. The idea of Mali as a special place ("un pays à part") with significant historical depth ("un pays historique") is mobilized by political, intellectual and religious elites.⁵⁸

⁵³ Marc Bloch, *Réflexions d'un historien sur les fausses nouvelles de la guerre*, Paris, Allia, 1999, p. 48-49.

⁵⁴ See the special issue on "Modibo Keita's Mali: 1960-1968", *Mande Studies*, 5, 2003.

⁵⁵ Gregory Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: the Road to Nongovernmentality*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 6.

⁵⁶ Guia Migani, "L'indépendance par la monnaie : la France, le Mali et la zone franc, 1960-1963", *Relations internationales*, 133 (1), 2008, p. 37.

⁵⁷ *Manifeste. Demain le Mali. Sur la natte des autres, l'insécurité est structurelle*, Bamako, 2018, p. 4.

⁵⁸ On Mali's national narrative see Catriona Craven-Matthews, Pierre Englebert, "A Potemkin State in the Sahel? The Empirical and the Fictional in Malian State Reconstruction", *African Security*, 11 (1), 2018, p. 18-20.

Reaffirmations of nationalism are increasingly connected to an emerging type of populist politics, embodied by the prominent religious leader Mahmoud Dicko. As Thurston has argued, "the circulation of conspiracy theories combining with anti-Western sentiment allow clerics such as Dicko to present themselves as defenders of what is 'authentically' Malian and Muslim against an alleged foreign onslaught".⁵⁹

Conspiracy theories are rooted in persistent postcolonial suspicion of France. This is particularly true for the abiding idea that France seeks to control and exploit northern Mali and the wider Sahara. In December 2017, a few days after French President Macron had given a speech at the University of Ouagadougou about his government's policy towards Africa, I asked an acquaintance from a local NGO for his reaction. He conceded that it was novel format for a French president to address students, but he insisted that the content was still the same. As he saw it, "Macron is part of the continuity, France has no choice, she lives off African resources" and since France was losing more and more economic influence in Mali, it was obliged to defend its interests through the deployment of its military.⁶⁰ As I asked more interlocutors about the speech, one phrase by Macron in particular was singled out, provoking incredulity and sarcasm. This was the claim that "there is no longer any French policy towards Africa." To many interviewees, French involvement in Mali and the wider Sahel seemed to be the exact opposite of this assertion.

Current debates are connected to a much older narrative. Writing in 2005, Pierre Boilley has documented that the short-lived colonial-era project of the Organisation commune des régions sahariennes (OCRS), an attempt to create a quasi-autonomous Sahara zone (1957-1963), has remained an important reference in Mali.⁶¹ Every Tuareg revolt since independence (1963-64, 1990, 1996, 2012) has been linked to a French conspiracy, allegedly seeking to fulfill the old ambition of the failed OCRS. The tropes that were then mobilized are back today, such as the untrustworthiness of the Tuareg, the French pro-Tuareg bias, the legendary mineral wealth of north Mali or the strategic importance of Tessalit. It is not accidental that the French presence in north Mali is the focus of a nationalist zeal that takes the intended dismemberment of Mali by a joint French-Tuareg cabal as an article of faith. This explains, for instance, the hostility of the nationalist public towards the peace accord of 2015. The trope of the French-Tuareg conspiracy thus connects the present and the past. It also explains why the nationalist public frames the Tuareg as Mali's main threat, as opposed to the jihadist groups. After all, the jihadists did not call into question the integrity of the Malian state.

⁵⁹ Alex Thurston, "Mali: Clerics Rally to Defend Their Class and Weaken the President", 12 February 2019; B. Whitehouse, "Public Perceptions of Violent Extremism in Mali", *cit.*, p. 171.

⁶⁰ Interview with a NGO worker, 11 December 2017.

⁶¹ Pierre Boilley, "Un complot français au Sahara ? Politiques françaises et représentations maliennes...", in GEMDEV and Université du Mali (eds.), *Mali-France, regards sur une histoire partagée*, *op. cit.*, p. 161-182; André Bourgeot, "Sahara : espace géostratégique et enjeux politiques (Niger)", *Autrepart*, 16, 2000, p. 21-48.

These representations are the subject of a cognitive asymmetry. The one-sided awareness of colonial history troubles current French-Malian interactions. For instance, the OCRS episode, regularly reactivated in Mali, has fallen into "total oblivion" in France.⁶² The French therefore resemble other interveners who often „behave as though nothing has happened before their arrival. Yet that past explains that, for local people, "foreigners" had already "intervened" in many ways in their country".⁶³

This analysis shows just how much the writing of truth and knowledge is a political process. They contain elements of interpretation that are grounded in worldviews shaped by the past, including colonialism, nationalism, but also an enduring relationship of asymmetry and dependency towards outside powers. It is less about what has happened, and more about the meaning of events and who has the authority to make an authoritative representation.⁶⁴ One conclusion that one may draw is that the puzzle in recent French-Malian relations is not so much the sharp reversal of France's image in Mali in the aftermath of Operation Serval. The real anomaly may be the popularity that Serval had initially enjoyed.⁶⁵

French officials are increasingly aware that Malian attitudes oscillate between malaise and contestation.⁶⁶ One reaction has been to step up communications to refute allegations or to publicize French contributions to peace and stability in Mali. Another has been to suggest that France is the victim of a disinformation campaign by "foreign powers". The most visible reaction was a high-level summit to which French President Macron invited his Sahelian counterparts, including Mali's President, to reaffirm their demand for the French military presence and to clarify their "ambiguous attitudes".⁶⁷

However, such a reading may overestimate the element of (dis-)information and downplay the depth of local skepticism with regard to the French-led international presence. It underestimates that President Keita's political survival depended on extraversion, and hence the very ambiguity that Macron denounced. Keita was caught between his dependency on foreign support to maintain a minimum of stability for Mali's political center and growing popular skepticism towards the foreign presence. This explains why Keita's rarely talked about or robustly defended the foreign military presence. Ultimately, France may be more dependent on Malian cooperation than vice versa to extract itself from the Malian quagmire.

⁶² P. Boilley, "Un complot français au Sahara ? Politiques françaises et représentations maliennes...", *cit.*, p. 164.

⁶³ B. Pouligny, *Ils nous avaient promis la paix : opérations de l'ONU et populations locales*, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

⁶⁴ Katharine Hodgkin, Susannah Radstone (eds.), *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, London, Routledge, 2003.

⁶⁵ Isaline Bergamaschi, Mamadou Diawara, "The French Military Intervention in Mali: Not Exactly Françafrique, but Definitely Postcolonial", in Bruno Charbonneau, Tony Chafer (eds.), *Peace Operations in the Francophone World. Global Governance Meets Post-Colonialism*, London, Routledge, 2014, p. 146.

⁶⁶ Interviews with French army officers, 4 June 2018 and 13 December 2017.

⁶⁷ "Emmanuel Macron convoque un sommet du G5 Sahel à Pau", *Le Figaro*, 12 January 2020.

A Critique of Domination and Extraversion

In Bamako rumors are a political and moral critique of intervention, which enables foreigners to exert domination. Rumors articulate a sense of disempowerment and dispossession on the part of intervened-upon Malians. Given its history as a colonial power and its political and military preponderance in the crisis, there is an element of inevitability about the Malian focus on France. However, this hides a more fundamental point of contention, which is that intervention has become durable. Now approaching a decade and with no end in sight, intervention by France and its international partners has shed its temporary and exceptional character and has morphed into a routinized form of open-ended internationalized government that shapes public policies, including security.

The proliferation of interveners since 2013 has further stimulated images of a comprehensive, all-encompassing international endeavor, seeking to govern Mali by casting a dense web of programs and projects. The popular phrase "mise sous tutelle" is a marker of Mali's alleged loss of sovereignty as well as its subjection to French-led, but broader international domination.⁶⁸ This is a view that interlocutors of all stripes embrace. When I asked the representative of a Catholic NGO about this, he gave the following example:

"Mali doesn't have full sovereignty, especially in terms of security because the army doesn't have a free hand to do what people think they should do, especially when you think of human rights, which are often mentioned by the UN Mission in Mali. The FAMA are prevented from using their own methods".⁶⁹

In this view, the external footprint becomes part of the problem because Malian solutions are hindered by external powers and prerogatives, in this case human rights concerns, incidentally a point that has been invoked to explain that French troops did not permit the FAMA to return to Kidal.

But there is also a second view, not necessarily in contradiction with the previous one, which depicts Malian authorities as complicit, if subaltern actors.⁷⁰ An academic and development consultant whom I have met several times since 2017, argued:

"The international community, it is they who run Mali, who occupy Mali and who have an agenda that Malians do not know... Mali has no sovereignty. The international community also directs all public policy... Malian rulers are like the concierge when you arrive at a hotel reception. The international community does what it wants in

⁶⁸ Interviews with a politician from Timbuktu, 16 June 2017 and a former advisor to the transitional government, 15 June 2017.

⁶⁹ Interview, 6 February 2019.

⁷⁰ Interview with a researcher, 11 December; a consultant, 11 June 2018; a police officer, 16 June 2017.

Mali, be it Minusma, EUTM, Barkhane. It has the ideas, the money and the timetable".⁷¹

This critique, coming from someone who benefits from the vast international presence ("I live off the international community, they are my clients") is hardly exceptional among Malians who work with international partners. This is a view that speaks to the paternalism to which Mali has been subjected as an object of intervention, which, it is often implied, has no autonomous capacity or expertise.⁷²

A Malian analyst summarized Malians' sentiment "to be dispossessed of decision-making, the impression that the country is no longer theirs, what is decided, whether to negotiate [with the rebels, the terrorists], or not, whether to take a loan or not, is not the decision of the Malians".⁷³ A consultant with an academic background and a doctoral degree from a French university said:

"All study reports are commissioned by external actors, Mali does not even have the capacity to think, to organize research, to develop itself, to arrive at its own analyses and positions, independently of international bodies. All public policies are financed by foreigners like migration policies, land tenure etc. Reforms are thought out elsewhere. We are not even capable of "tropicalizing" these ideas".⁷⁴

Intellectuals frequently bemoan the displacement of sovereignty and the "substitution" of the state by foreign actors, a telling expression of local anxieties over internationalized government, albeit one that works through delegation and the willful outsourcing of policy by inept or overwhelmed Malian authorities. Consequently, the narrative of dispossession and domination needs to be nuanced.

An adviser to the former transitional government once suggested to me that the growing tide of criticism against the foreign presence may be a political "windfall" for the government, distracting public opinion and, permitting it to shift responsibility for its own failures towards foreigners.⁷⁵ However, this scapegoating does not seem to be very successful. Most interviewees are very critical of interveners, but they are equally if not more critical of Mali's political elite, blaming it for the crisis itself, and for inviting internationalized government. In so doing they attribute a degree of agency and autonomy to Malian authorities, a view that is corroborated by recurrent and relatively large anti-government demonstrations in Bamako in recent years. Mali is not under alien rule. It is governed by a hybrid form of authority that is both external and domestic, international and local. Domestic elites and foreign actors

⁷¹ Interview, 9 February 2019.

⁷² Denis M. Tull, "Rebuilding Mali's Army: The Dissonant Relationship between Mali and its International Partners", *International Affairs*, 95 (2), 2019, p. 405-422.

⁷³ Interview with a researcher, 12 February 2019.

⁷⁴ Interview, 11 June 2018.

⁷⁵ Interview, 9 December 2017.

reinforce each other in the exercise of power and authority and are connected through interdependencies. If, as a student put it, France is "the devil's advocate because it supports the thieves who are our rulers", these rulers are recognized as self-interested elites, who fail to deliver on things like access to water and health care.⁷⁶ In other words, local observers critique foreign interveners as well as the strategies of extraversion that Malian elites deploy, and which have grown more salient with intervention.

Such views reflect a long-term perspective on politics, and which considers the current crisis just as the latest manifestation of a larger "governance" problem. As one interlocutor argued, Mali has seen numerous upheavals since independence, but none has triggered structural changes to render Mali's political system more effective and legitimate. Everything suggests that muddling through will also prevail this time.⁷⁷ The idea of crisis as an opportunity was already perceptible in 2012, when a significant part of Bamako's population supported a coup d'état, frustrated by the government's handling of the war in the north and corrupted politics. International intervention closed this window, restoring an institutional order that remains in the hands of a relatively cohesive political class that has led the country since the onset of democratization in 1991. The incapacity or unwillingness of the Malian state to conceive, finance and implement public policies is an entrenched feature of Mali's postcolonial "governmentality".⁷⁸ The current crisis, rather than reversing delegation, will in fact reinforce it. In so doing, it contravenes normative expectations about accountable national government, rather than opaque hybrid formations that perpetuate complicit dependencies and blur lines of responsibility.

Conclusion

An unprecedented crisis and large-scale foreign intervention have contributed to collective Malian efforts to unveil and explain a turbulent political fracture. Finding the "official" Malian and French representations of the post-2013 crisis not compelling, citizens engage in the construction of their own narrative by assembling an alternative truth regime, in which France receives a level of public attention that is commensurate with its present visibility and its colonial past. Rumors seamlessly integrate current events into a longer history. But the inscription of rumors and narratives in their historical context is by no means to suggest that collective Malian representations and beliefs are stuck in a postcolonial paradigm of victimization that sees the world as a cycle of conspiracies.⁷⁹ It is common to see fervent believers in seemingly extravagant rumors about France to emphatically insist on shared – i.e.

⁷⁶ Interview, 12 December 2017.

⁷⁷ Interview, 8 June 2017.

⁷⁸ G. Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality*, *op. cit.*

⁷⁹ Achille Mbembe, "African Modes of Self-Writing", *Public Culture*, 14 (1), 2002, p. 251.

Malian and French – responsibilities for the crisis. The politics of truth articulate a critique and contestation of power that targets both foreign interveners and local extraverted elites.

Its ambiguous relationship with foreign partners is well understood by Malian citizens who recognize both the dependency and the rewards that it generates for the country's political elite. International intervention may be denounced as tutelage and neocolonialism, but the government's complicity in this process of "mise en dépendance" is similarly condemned in the rumor-filled "spaces of alterity and opposition".⁸⁰

To dismiss rumors as instruments of scapegoating is to underestimate an important element of agency. By denying interventionists local legitimacy, rumors in post-2013 Mali do not just insinuate critique, they render it explicit. This moral critique via rumors increasingly intersects with political contestations of internationalized rule. Rather than hiding behind a veil of anonymity, as rumors normally do, some of these contestations are increasingly carried forward by actors such as urban-based social movements that have, on occasion, mobilized exceptionally large crowds of often youthful supporters. Even more influential actors are religious associations and leaders, chief among which is the former head of the HCI, Mahmoud Dicko. In their claim to defend the nation against the neocolonial designs of France and other Western powers these actors make ample use of rumors and conspiracy theories. They are probably the clearest evidence that unverified information greatly matters in Mali, but also that the relation between France and Mali, at least from the vantage point of citizens in Bamako, is in need of transformation.⁸¹

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⁸⁰ J.-F. Bayart, "L'Afrique dans le monde : une histoire d'extraversion", *art. cit.*, p. 98; G. A. Perice, "Rumors and Politics in Haiti", *art. cit.*, p. 9.

⁸¹ I thank Camille Evrard, Céline Marangé, Antonin Tisseron and the anonymous reviewers of *Critique Internationale* for their suggestions and comments.

Denis M. Tull, "Contesting France: Rumors, Intervention and the Politics of Truth in Mali", *Critique Internationale*, 90(1), 2021.