

A Welcome Intervention?

Malian media perspectives on Operation Serval

Thesis MA International Studies

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Date: 4 August 2014

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Word Count: 10477

Table of Content

Introduction	3
I. Theoretical Framework:	
Postcolonial theory and the politics of French interventionism	5
❖ <i>A Postcolonial Perspective on International Relations</i>	5
❖ <i>French Interventionism in the 21st Century</i>	6
II. Operation Serval 2013-2014:	
French involvement in a multidimensional conflict	10
❖ <i>Crisis in Mali: a Multidimensional Conflict</i>	10
❖ <i>Operation Serval</i>	12
III. Uncovering the African Perspective:	
Malian public opinion on the French intervention	15
❖ <i>The Malian Press</i>	15
❖ <i>“Merci Papa Hollande!”</i>	16
❖ <i>Rising Criticism</i>	18
❖ <i>“A Bas la France!”</i>	20
IV. Operation Serval in Perspective:	
Practical and theoretical implications	23
❖ <i>Historical Sensitivities and Postcolonial Ambivalence</i>	23
❖ <i>Furthering the Debate on French Interventionism</i>	25
Bibliography	28

Introduction

On 11 January 2013 France launched a military intervention in Mali at the request of the Malian interim president Dioncounda Traoré. Facing a crisis in the north of the country involving both Tuareg separatist movements and Islamist terrorist groups, the Malian government had lost control over this part of its territory. On 9 January Islamist rebels, who already controlled the northern cities of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu, captured the strategic town of Konna and headed further south for the regional capital Mopti. Fearing a spread of the crisis to the south of the country, president Traoré asked the French president François Hollande for military assistance to support the Malian army in stopping the jihadist rebels and safeguarding Mali's territorial integrity. In the afternoon of 11 January Operation Serval was launched to stop the Islamists from advancing to the south. Four days later approximately 4000 French troops were deployed on the ground and soon joined by a Chadian contingent, initiating the accelerated deployment of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) which was authorized by UNSC Resolution 2085, adopted three weeks earlier on 20 December 2012. The French military intervention was legitimized on the basis of the Malian request for help and within the legal framework of UNSC Resolution 2085.¹ Contrary to earlier French interventions on the African continent, Operation Serval was met with very little international criticism and appeared to have the general support of the international community.²

Operation Serval is one of a series of recent French military interventions in Africa (Côte d'Ivoire in 2011, Libya in 2011, the Central African Republic in 2013) and part of a longer history of military presence and involvement in sub-Saharan Africa ever since the independence of France's former colonies. An extensive body of literature exists on French African policy in general and French interventionism specifically. Ever since François-Xavier Verschave published his polemic work *La Françafrique: Le plus long scandale de la République* in 1998, denouncing France's exploitative policy in Africa based on obscure and corrupt Franco-African elite networks and close personal ties between French and African officials up to the highest levels of government³, accusations of neocolonialism are easily made and the question of the normalization of Franco-African relations has become a much debated topic. However, when considering the debates on French African policy and French

¹ Karine Bannelier and Theodore Christakis, "Under the UN Security Council's Watchful Eyes: Military Intervention by Invitation in the Malian Conflict," *Leiden Journal of International Law*, 26 (2013): 855.

² *Ibid.*, 857.

³ François-Xavier Verschave, *La Françafrique: Le Plus Long Scandale de la République*, (Paris: Stock, 1998).

interventionism, in general little attention is given to African perspectives on the debate. How are Franco-African relations perceived by African public opinion? What do African societies in what used to be French colonies consider to be France's role on the African continent in terms of conflict and (military) intervention? Generalizing 'the African voice' is dangerous and would lead to false conclusions. Perspectives on Franco-African relations naturally change across and within different countries and over time. This does not change the fact that considering these African perspectives might shed a different – less Western centric – light on French interventionism and bring new insights to the debate surrounding it.

This thesis considers the Malian perspective on Operation Serval. By asking how public opinion – as expressed in the Malian written press – perceived and continues to perceive the ongoing French military intervention it seeks to consider the question of French interventionism from a different angle and thus to press the debate a step further. In order to answer this question the first chapter of this thesis establishes a theoretical framework. Drawing on postcolonial theory, it considers the critical literature on French interventionism. Driven by a moral and emancipatory agenda, this academic literature challenges the French security strategy in sub-Saharan Africa and its corresponding official discourse. Subsequently, this critical framework is used as a lens to look at Malian public opinion on Operation Serval, granting insight in the perspective of those on the receiving end of French interventionism. To this end the second chapter gives an outline of the crisis in Mali and the extent of the French involvement. Subsequently, Malian public opinion on the French intervention is explored through the analysis of a number of selected sources from the written press. Finally, the last part of this thesis turns the findings of this research back on the critical literature on French interventionism, considering whether the Malian perspective on Operation Serval problematizes this academic debate.

I.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial theory and the politics of French interventionism

A Postcolonial Perspective on International Relations

The origins of postcolonial theory can be found in the field of literary critique, where Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) shed new light on questions of knowledge and power through the analysis of Western representations of the 'Orient' in textual discourses. These representations created a dichotomy between the oriental 'Other' and a European 'Self' that, according to Ania Loomba, 'was central to the creation of European culture as well as to the maintenance and extension of European hegemony over other lands.'⁴ Interdisciplinary by nature, the field of postcolonialism touches upon a wide range of scholarship across diverse academic disciplines.⁵ Two core themes that are present in *Orientalism*, can be considered to be at the heart of postcolonial theory: identity on the one hand, and relations of domination and subordination and their resulting structural inequalities on the other.⁶

In 1994 Philip Darby and A.J. Paolini published an article called 'Bridging International Relations and Postcolonialism' in which they suggest that a dialogue between these academic disciplines could lead to new insights on both sides.⁷ Problem solving by nature, traditional International Relations theory (IRT) – and particularly the realist school and its affiliated theories – is premised on the idea of anarchy and evolves around states, power and rational interests, and considers 'the colonial world and its successor states (...) as marginal to world politics.'⁸ Postcolonial studies focus on the structural effects of colonialism during and beyond the colonial period in terms of the marginalization of the peoples of what might be called the global South. Adopting a historical perspective, postcolonialism exposes the continuity of colonial and postcolonial times, thus challenging the limited perception of temporality in traditional IR theory. It is in this regard that Darby and Paolini argue that, focusing particularly on the 'North-South' encounter, the two disciplines might come to a fruitful dialogue whereby traditional IRT can benefit from postcolonialism's critical and interdisciplinary character to address structural inequalities in North-South relations and to

⁴ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998), 44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: The Penguin Press, 2003).

⁷ Philip Darby and A.J. Paolini, "Bridging International Relations and Postcolonialism," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 19 (1994): 372.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 373.

challenge Western hegemony, while offering to postcolonialism a solid framework build on a vast body of knowledge.⁹

In terms of the continuity of colonial and postcolonial times, the Ugandan scholar Yash Tandon speaks in this regard of a ‘recolonization of subject peoples.’¹⁰ He argues that the capitalist North is reasserting its control over the peoples of the global South in economic, political and military terms. Tandon then poses a fundamental question: when these interferences lead to the improved wellbeing of the populations concerned, ‘is recolonization necessarily a bad development for the colonized?’¹¹ His answer to this question is affirmative, as Tandon argues that the price paid for this (material) wellbeing – such as the loss of sovereignty, indigenous social structures or cultural diversity – is both unacceptable and amoral.¹² In light of this argument two questions arise with regard to the French intervention in Mali. Firstly, can France’s security policy in Africa in general and the French intervention in Mali specifically be considered an example of France asserting its control over African states and peoples by maintaining and reproducing unequal power structures? And if so, does the Malian public opinion on Operation Serval reflect this? A closer look to France’s security policy in sub-Saharan Africa and the politics of French interventionism will shed light on the first question.

French Interventionism in the 21st Century

After the decolonization of sub-Saharan Africa in the 1960s, a deliberate effort was made to preserve French influence on the continent. Tony Chafer argues that in this sense ‘decolonization did not mark an end, but rather a restructuring of the imperial relationship.’¹³ France consolidated its influence through the cultivation of elite networks and close personal ties between high officials on both sides.¹⁴ The French military traditionally has played a crucial role in the projection of power on the African continent and in ensuring the continuity of French influence in the postcolonial era.¹⁵ Upon independence, France signed a series of defense and military cooperation agreements with most of its former colonies that ‘have allowed France to maintain hegemony and regional stability by force if necessary.’¹⁶ In

⁹ Darby and Paolini 1994, 394-395.

¹⁰ Yash Tandon, “Recolonization of Subject Peoples,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 19 (1994): 173-183.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹² *Ibid.*, 182.

¹³ Tony Chafer, “French African Policy in Historical Perspective,” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 19 (2001): 167.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 167-168.

¹⁵ Shaun Gregory, “The French Military in Africa: Past and Present,” *African Affairs* 99 (2000): 437.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 437.

France and the New Imperialism Bruno Charbonneau offers a critical analysis of French security policy in sub-Saharan Africa. Rejecting the concept of the unitary state that is central to traditional IRT, Charbonneau refuses the perception that France, as a unitary and rational state actor, intervenes in Africa to project its power and pursue its well-defined interests. Instead he argues that the reality of Franco-African relations is far more complex as there are different dominant social forces at work that might compete, but also work together to reproduce the system they are embedded in. From this perspective, 'French security policy in sub-Saharan Africa becomes a mechanism to sustain and reproduce systems that are mutually beneficial for various Franco-African (but limited to elites) social forces.'¹⁷ Rather than a rationally constructed response to security threats to African states or the international system, it becomes 'a powerful strategy and ideological instrument to secure the existing forms of social domination and subordination.'¹⁸

When considering contemporary French security policy in the twenty-first century, these theoretical assumptions lead to a number of interesting observations. A reorientation of French African policy took place in the mid-1990s as a consequence of the French involvement in the Rwandan genocide and the resulting political pressure to modernize the dynamics of French military interventions. As an answer to these circumstances and to changing post-Cold War dynamics of global governance France launched RECAMP, the *Renforcement des capacités africaines de maintien de la paix* in 1997. This new African security approach was based on three objectives: to support and empower African capacities for peacekeeping and conflict resolution; to restrict French unilateral intervention; and to promote the multilateralization and regionalization of military intervention in Africa.¹⁹

Charbonneau argues that RECAMP transformed the discourse of French security policy in Africa but hardly challenged its underlying unequal power structures. The new military doctrine is premised on what he identifies as a 'theoretical divide between legitimate force and irrational violence'²⁰ that legitimizes military intervention and frames it in an ethical discourse. Charbonneau thus argues that what might be called 'new' military interventions in the twenty-first century are largely multilateral operations aimed at protecting with legitimate force certain parties (such as states or societies) from violent entities that use irrational violence (such as terrorists). He rightfully considers this a dangerous development

¹⁷ Bruno Charbonneau, *France and the New Imperialism: Security Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008): 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

as the use of force becomes neutralized and its political character concealed behind a ‘sanitized’ security discourse.²¹

What can be identified, then, is the working of ‘a new form of orientalism’ in a militarized French African policy whereby benevolent external forces are portrayed to intervene against violent actors in conflicts that are considered to be principally indigenous, thus ‘promoting and upholding French hegemony’ through the reinforcement of a binary opposition between a civilized West and an uncivilized Rest.²² Two case studies of French interventions in Rwanda (1994) and Côte d’Ivoire (2002) illustrate Charbonneau’s critical historical analysis of French military involvement in sub-Saharan Africa, revealing the continuity of practices that maintain unbalanced and unequal power relations and therefore unquestionably effect the African populations involved. Interestingly, however, these populations remain silent in Charbonneau’s analysis. In his case studies of both Rwanda and Côte d’Ivoire, the voice of the subaltern is not included, as in much of the literature on French African policy and interventions. Building on Charbonneau’s argument, this thesis seeks to fill this gap in the literature and to grant insight in the African perspective on French interventionism through a case study of Malian public opinion towards Operation Serval.

The case of the French intervention in Mali is interesting for several reasons. First of all, as Isaline Bergamaschi points out in a book chapter on the intervention in *Peace Operations in the Francophone World: Global governance meets post-colonialism* (2014), ‘the genesis of Serval is a good illustration of the French doctrine and practices towards the African francophone space’ as it combines assumptions about France’s right to unilateral intervention in sub-Saharan Africa with multilateralization and an emphasis on African peacekeeping capabilities.²³ Secondly, the intervention was not only met with very little international criticism but more importantly initially also received significant popular support in Mali.²⁴ In view of the critical literature on French interventionism this positive reaction from the Malian population merits attention. Thirdly, Mali has a dynamic media landscape and a written press that, despite the greater importance of radio broadcasting, allows for meaningful research to Malian media and public opinion.

Methodologically, this case study is performed in two sections. Based on primary sources, briefing papers and theoretical literature the next chapter will provide an account of

²¹ Charbonneau 2008, 118.

²² Ibid., 42.

²³ Isaline Bergamaschi with Mahamadou Diara, “The French military intervention in Mali: Not exactly *Franciafrique* but definitely postcolonial,” in *Peace Operations in the Francophone World: Global governance meets post-colonialism*, eds., Bruno Charbonneau and Tony Chafer (London: Routledge, 2014), 144.

²⁴ Ibid., 137.

the Malian crisis and the French intervention. The third chapter will consider Malian public opinion on Operation Serval as reflected in the written press.²⁵ For this purpose a number of online sources has been selected, ranging from daily newspapers such as *L'Essor* (state-owned), *Le Républicain* and *L'Indépendant* to smaller publications such as *Le 22 Septembre*, *L'Aube* or *Le Pouce*, seeking to cover a wide variety of media voices. A number of critical non-Malian publications (*Jeune Afrique*, *The Guardian*) have been consulted as well to compare perspectives. The case study focuses only limitedly on government actors as it seeks to render Malian public opinion towards the French intervention more broadly. Research has been performed chronologically, spanning the period of time between the launch of Operation Serval on 11 January 2013 and 1 July 2014. Before turning to the findings of this media research the next chapter will outline the context of the French military involvement in Mali.

²⁵ The chapter will start with an outline of the Malian media landscape and a discussion of the limitations of this research.

II.

Operation Serval 2013-2014

French involvement in a multidimensional conflict

Crisis in Mali: a Multidimensional Conflict

When French forces intervened in January 2013, Mali had been facing a complex conflict situation involving a wide variety of actors for over a year. On 22 March 2012 a military coup led by Captain Amadou Sanogo ousted president Amadou Toumani Touré, commonly nicknamed ATT, only five weeks before new presidential elections were to take place in April. The situation in the country had been increasingly tense at that point, with a military incapable of handling a Tuareg rebellion in the north of the country, the proliferation of Islamist groups in the same region, and a general discontent with ATT's regime and consequent eroding faith in democratic institutions from the Malian population.²⁶ After the fall of Moussa Traoré's dictatorial regime in 1991, Mali underwent a democratic transition with recurrent peaceful and democratic power transitions during the two decades that followed, giving it the reputation of a 'model democracy'.²⁷ However, as Susanna Wing points out, during this period and particularly under the presidency of ATT democracy was systematically undermined in several ways: the lack of a meaningful political opposition and an independent judiciary, widespread corruption and state officials' complicity in criminal activities were among the factors that contradicted Mali's democratic reputation and led to the weakening of the state.²⁸

In this political climate and against the background of a severe food crisis in the Sahel region, anti-state sentiments amongst Tuareg populations found their expression in armed rebellion. Mali has known a longer history of Tuareg rebellions of which the first occurred during the first post-independence years as a protest against the newly independent state.²⁹ Ethnically the Tuaregs are part of the larger Berber family and can be found in several countries across the Sahara and the Sahel, where they traditionally lead a nomadic life.³⁰ Upon independence Mali's Tuareg population felt grieved not to have been granted an independent Saharan state of itself. Over the years, difficult living conditions and extreme

²⁶ Susanna Wing, "Briefing Mali: Politics of a Crisis," *African Affairs* 112 (2013): 476.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 478.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 479-480.

²⁹ Alexander Thurston and Andrew Lebovich. *A Handbook on Mali's 2012-2013 Crisis*, Working Paper no. 13-001 of the Program of African Studies, (Northwestern University: 2013): 3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

poverty, perceived (political) marginalization and discrimination led to recurrent rebellions in 1990 and 2006.³¹ Being able to cross borders between the countries in the Sahel region relatively easily because of a lack of government control, the Tuareg nomads continued to move around between neighboring Sahel states.³² A large number of Sahelian Tuaregs migrated towards the economically more prosperous Libya where Muammar al-Qaddafi integrated a substantial number of them in his army, thus providing them with military training and experience.³³ When Qaddafi's regime fell in 2011 a large number of now military trained and heavily armed Tuareg fighters returned to their countries of origin, among which northern Mali. In October 2011 a part of these Tuareg fighters created the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), an armed separatist organization.³⁴ In January 2012 the MNLA started attacking several cities in northern Mali together with rebels belonging to the Tuareg Islamist organization Ansar al-Din. In the political vacuum that occurred after the military coup, the Tuareg rebels captured the three main northern cities of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu, and subsequently declared the independence of north Mali ('Azawad') on 6 April. The country thus faced a *de facto* split of its territory. A week later, on 12 April, under the pressure of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the military junta appointed the president of the National Assembly, Dioncounda Traoré, as Mali's interim president, thus handing over power to a transitional interim government.³⁵

In the meantime, however, the Tuareg rebels were not the only forces at work in north Mali. In December 2011 Ansar al-Din was created, an Islamist offshoot of the MNLA. Other key actors were the Islamist groups Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its splinter organization Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) established in December 2011. AQIM, a product of the Algerian civil war in 1992-2000, had been present in Mali for over a decade and was involved in various criminal activities such as smuggling and the kidnapping of Westerners, a very profitable activity that was soon picked up by the MUJAO as well. Whereas the MNLA was fighting for an independent secular Tuareg state, these extremist groups had Islamic aspirations, including the imposition of sharia law. In the spring of 2012 AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar al-Din, all with their own political agenda, soon took over the cities and regions initially captured by the MNLA, marginalizing the latter's position in the region, and thus creating a complex and violent interplay between Tuareg

³¹ Thurston and Lebovich 2013, 10.

³² Yehudit Ronen, "Libya, the Tuareg and Mali on the eve of the 'Arab Spring' and its aftermath: an anatomy of changed relations," *The Journal of North African Studies* 18 (2013): 547.

³³ *Ibid.*, 546.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 554-555.

³⁵ Thurston and Lebovich 2013, 38.

separatists and Muslim extremists, over which the interim government in Bamako lost any form of control.³⁶

As the crisis deepened during 2012, attempts were made by both the Malian interim administration, ECOWAS and the African Union (AU) to resolve the conflict and restore government control over the captured territories. ECOWAS made a diplomatic effort by conducting negotiations between the Malian government and the Tuareg rebels. Simultaneously ECOWAS and the AU saw the need for a military solution and called for the deployment of a regional stabilization force during a meeting with the UN Security Council on 15 June 2012. France immediately expressed its support for such a regional force and requested the Security Council to authorize its deployment.³⁷ In the following months France continued to make diplomatic efforts within both the UN and the EU to put the security situation in Mali and the Sahel on the political agenda and to lobby for African troops in Mali.³⁸ It was not before 20 December 2012 that the UNSC adopted Resolution 2085 authorizing the deployment of AFISMA. It soon became clear, however, that its deployment could not take place until September 2013 due to logistical difficulties.³⁹ So when the spread of the conflict towards south Mali seemed imminent, interim president Traoré turned to his French counterpart for immediate military assistance. On 11 January 2013 president Hollande announced that a military operation in Mali had been launched at the request of its government: Operation Serval was a fact.

Operation Serval

In his public statement on the launch of Operation Serval, Hollande announced that the objective of the intervention was to support Mali in its fight against terrorist elements that were threatening ‘the very existence of this friendly state (...), the security of its population, and that of our French nationals’ (own translation).⁴⁰ During a press conference on 14 January the French minister of foreign affairs Laurent Fabius defined the objectives of the intervention in more comprehensive terms, i.e. to stop the advancement of the terrorist fighters to South Mali, to prevent the collapse of the country, and to ‘allow the implementation of the international resolutions, whether those of the United Nations, the African Union, ECOWAS

³⁶ Thurston and Lebovich 2013, 26-29.

³⁷ Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations, “Mali: Complete Timeline,” <http://www.franceonu.org/france-at-the-united-nations/geographic-files/africa/mali-1202/article/timeline-6896>.

³⁸ Roland Marchal, “Briefing: Military (Mis)Adventures in Mali,” *African Affairs* 112 (2013): 488.

³⁹ Isaline Bergamaschi, “French Military Intervention in Mali: Inevitable, Consensual, yet Insufficient,” *International Journal of Security & Development* 2 (2013): 6.

⁴⁰ François Hollande, “Déclaration du Président de la République sur la situation au Mali,” January 11, 2013, <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/declaration-du-president-de-la-republique-sur-la-situation-au-mali-4/>

or the EU.⁴¹ As Karine Bannelier and Theodore Christakis point out in a legal analysis of the intervention, Operation Serval was legitimized on the basis of the Malian request for help and within the legal framework of UNSC Resolution 2085. As the latter provided a mandate for an African-led intervention, French Operation Serval officially had no formal UNSC authorization, but received its informal ‘blessing’, thus becoming ‘a blend of approved unilateralism and authorized multilateralism.’⁴² Contrary to numerous earlier French interventions on the African continent, Operation Serval was met with very little international criticism and appeared to have the general support of the international community.⁴³

The French military intervention was framed within a discourse of the fight against terrorism, denying any ulterior motivations other than the protection of the Malian state and the security of nearby Europe. In a critical analysis of the Malian conflict Caitriona Dowd and Clionadh Raleigh argue that the narrative of global Islamic terrorism fails to take into account the complexity of the conflict situation and the local circumstances in which Muslim extremist groups thrive.⁴⁴ Michel Galy takes this argument a step further and accuses the French discourse of being war propaganda aimed at ‘simplifying, if not disguising, the complexity of a Malian reality’ (own translation) where Islam holds an important role in society and the emergence of extremism is intrinsically linked to the failure of a corrupt political system.⁴⁵

In her above-mentioned chapter Bergamaschi questions the specificity of Operation Serval in relation to earlier military operations in view of both the international community’s support for the mission, the largely positive reaction of the Malian public opinion, and a general lack of accusations of neo-colonialism.⁴⁶ She argues that the French decision to intervene in Mali was based on several considerations. First, in terms of economic and strategic interests, the stability of Mali and the Sahel region is important to France as it relies significantly on uranium resources in Niger. Secondly, in view of the proliferation of terrorism genuine security concerns existed among French policy-makers and elites, both related to the stability of the Malian state and the larger Sahel region. Numerous African

⁴¹ Laurent Fabius, “Mali – Press Conference given by M. Laurent Fabius, Minister of Foreign Affairs,” January 14, 2013, <http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/mali-224/events-2627/article/mali-press-conference-given-by>.

⁴² Bannelier and Christakis 2013, 858.

⁴³ Ibid., 857.

⁴⁴ Caitriona Dowd and Clionadh Raleigh, “Briefing: The Myth of Global Islamic Terrorism and Local Conflict in Mali and the Sahel,” *African Affairs* 112 (2013): 505.

⁴⁵ Michel Galy, “Pourquoi la France est-elle intervenue au Mali?” in *La Guerre au Mali: Comprendre la crise au Sahel et au Sahara: Enjeux et zones d’ombre*, ed. Michel Galy (Paris: Éditions La Découverte 2013): 88.

⁴⁶ Bergamaschi 2014.

authorities such as ECOWAS, Niger and Mali itself, shared these security concerns and pressured France to intervene. Thirdly, Operation Serval provided France with an opportunity to assert itself as a global player on the world stage, assuming responsibility in that area of the world it historically feels close to. Finally, and related to the last argument, Operation Serval was a means to assure the French military its *raison d'être* in view of domestic economic challenges and defense budget cuts.⁴⁷

Based on these drivers for intervention, Bergamaschi argues that although Mali traditionally has not been part of the *Françafrique* network, the French intervention 'finds its roots in the post-colonial context of France-Mali relations.'⁴⁸ She demonstrates that the French intervention was deliberately framed within a post-colonial discourse from both the French and the Malian side, 'presenting the intervention as a repayment of France's historical debt towards Mali' and making it above all a question of historical responsibility.⁴⁹ The author argues that this discourse contributed to the general acceptance of Operation Serval by the Malian population, which initially reacted largely positively to the French intervention. However, Bergamaschi also points to critical voices that increasingly expressed worries about the neutrality of the French forces, fed by suspicions that they secretly supported the Tuareg separatists.

The chapter offers an interesting insight in Malian public opinion on Operation Serval and suggests that a shift might occur in light of rising criticism. However, if Bergamaschi questions the specificity of the intervention in Mali compared to previous ones, she fails to link her findings to the larger debate on French interventionism. This thesis agrees with her argument that the French intervention is 'definitely post-colonial' but seeks to take it a step further. Adopting a more critical perspective it will relate 'the Malian perspective' to the larger debate on French interventionism. For this purpose, the next chapter will elaborate further on Bergamaschi's research to Malian public opinion vis-à-vis Operation Serval that focused on the period up until September 2013. Covering a larger time span, it will offer a more comprehensive account of events.

⁴⁷ Bergamaschi 2014, 6-8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

III.

Uncovering the African Perspective

Malian public opinion on the French intervention

The Malian Press

Having outlined the roots and the course of the Malian crisis, the response of the international community and the subsequent French military intervention, this chapter addresses the public response in Mali to Operation Serval as reflected in the media. It is therefore important to briefly sketch the Malian media landscape and indicate this thesis' research limitations.

A 2011 report by the Media Map Project finds that despite challenges in terms of quality, professionalism, working conditions and journalistic practice, the media sector in Mali is generally considered 'an exemplar on the African continent' in view of its 'plurality, diversity and freedom.'⁵⁰ Up until 2012 this positive assessment of the Malian press was commonly shared. However, the conflict in north Mali and the military coup in 2012 both significantly affected press freedom in the country.⁵¹ With the transfer to civilian power after the putsch, the restoration of government control over the north through foreign military interference, and democratic elections held in July 2013, media conditions significantly ameliorated. A Media Foundation for West Africa monitoring report of the period 1 September-30 November 2013 finds that despite human rights violations in the north in view of recurrent terrorist attacks, media conditions during this period have steadily improved in terms of media development and quality, independence and freedom of expression.⁵² In light of this chapter's media research it is therefore plausible to assume that media expressions are relatively free and independent.

This thesis will predominantly focus on francophone Malian newspaper articles that were published online between the launch of Operation Serval on 11 January 2013 and 1 July 2014.⁵³ Mali knows relatively high media diversity, including television and radio

⁵⁰ Heather Gilberts, "The Media Map Project: Mali 1990-2010," November 2011, 5.

http://www.mediamapresource.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Mali_web-1.pdf.

⁵¹ Freedom House, "Freedom of the Press 2013: Mali," http://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2013/mali#.U8OqNY1_sxa.

⁵² Media Foundation for West Africa, "Mali: Steady improvements but rights violations persist," September-November 2013, 2. <http://www.i-m-s.dk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/mali-steady-improvement-but-rights-violations-persist-.pdf>.

⁵³ Mali is a multilingual country where a variety of local vernacular languages is spoken, of which Bambara is the most important. The official language, French, is only spoken by a relative elite minority. As I do not speak any of these local African languages, my research is limited to francophone publications. To ensure the readability of this chapter all quotes have been translated into English.

broadcasting, print media and the Internet. Due to high illiteracy rates, poverty and poor infrastructure, radio is the most significant medium in the country, with a high number of private and public radio stations, both on national and local community level.⁵⁴ However, the importance of the printed press should not be underestimated as ‘newspapers remain influential among Mali’s elites, and often set the agenda for local radio news.’⁵⁵ As circumstances have not allowed for local field research and radio stations generally do not hold archives that can be consulted, this thesis limits its research scope to the printed press. Only a number of newspapers have their own website, but several independent news websites exist that publish articles from a wide variety of print media.⁵⁶ In short, restrictions in terms of both language and accessibility set the research limitations of this thesis. Consequently, it principally offers an elite point of view while at the same time seeking to capture the more general public opinion. As such, it significantly contributes to the understanding of the Malian perspective on Operation Serval, while simultaneously opening up space for further research.

“*Merci Papa Hollande!*”

During the first days after the launch of Operation Serval positive reactions to the intervention were numerous across the Malian written press. An article in *Le 26 Mars* concludes that Operation Serval is in line with Hollande’s renewed African policy that promotes Franco-African relations based on equal and respectful partnership and his attitude is praised to be ‘realist and courageous.’⁵⁷ A piece in *L’Indépendant* describes how the members of the National Assembly have saluted the French willingness to intervene.⁵⁸ Popular support for the French intervention was widely expressed during an official visit from President Hollande to Mali on 2 February 2013. In the company of President Traoré he visited both Bamako and the recently liberated city of Timbuktu, where thousands of citizens welcomed him as a hero and the liberator of Mali.⁵⁹ It is important to note in this regard, however, that the stories and images of a grateful Malian population welcoming the French forces in the north of the

⁵⁴ Gilberds 2011, 5.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁶ In my research I have made frequent use of the websites www.maliweb.net and www.maliactu.net, which publish online articles from over thirty daily and weekly Malian newspapers, as well as their own news articles.

⁵⁷ *Le 26 Mars*, “Relations France-Mali: Vive le gouvernement ‘Hollandais!’” January 15, 2013, <http://www.maliweb.net/politique/rerelations-france-mali-vive-le-gouvernement-hollandais-2-118285.html>.

⁵⁸ *L’Indépendant*, “L’Assemblée Nationale sur la situation sécuritaire: Les députés saluent la prompte intervention de l’armée française,” January 18, 2013, <http://www.maliweb.net/politique/assemblee-nationale/lassemblee-nationale-sur-la-situation-securitaire-les-deputes-saluent-la-prompte-intervention-de-larmee-francaise-119795.html>.

⁵⁹ *Jeune Afrique*, “‘Papa Hollande’ au Mali,” February 2, 2013, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20130202235649/-France-Mali-Bamako-Dioncounda-Traor%C3%A9-papa-hollande-au-mali.html>.

country, were part of ‘carefully crafted communication strategies’ by the French military supported by the Malian authorities, that shaped public perceptions of the intervention.⁶⁰ Denying local and international journalists access to the combat zones was part of this control of information, which according to an article from *Think Africa Press* led to the creation of a ‘dominant narrative’ and a ‘lack of context in most reports’ even if the positive reaction to the French intervention from the Malian people was considered ‘accurate’.⁶¹

Bergamaschi agrees that the majority of the Malian people genuinely felt positive vis-à-vis the French intervention and explains this reaction as instigated by a sense of relief in view of the severity of the crisis and a lack of trust in the Malian authorities. She also argues that

(...) in a highly ambiguous and paradoxical way, the fact that the French led the operation facilitated its acceptance by Malian interim authorities and citizens. Indeed, the colonial past and post-colonial relationships between France and Mali were used as symbolic resources by the French to justify their intervention and for ordinary Malians to think of Serval in the best and most acceptable way possible.⁶²

Drawing on a shared colonial past and specifically on Mali’s contribution to the war effort in both World Wars, the intervention was framed ‘as a repayment of France’s historical debt towards Mali’ by both the French and the Malian authorities.⁶³ An article in *Mali Demain* indeed speaks of France’s debt with regard to the sacrifice of ‘les tirailleurs Sénégalais’ (as the African soldiers of the colonial infantry were called) during WWII.⁶⁴ As such, Malian public opinion generally interpreted the French intervention in the context of a shared past and historical partnership rather than as a neocolonial interference.

This does not mean that accusations of neocolonialism were absent at all. Far-left intellectuals such as professor Issa N’diaye (associated to the French organization *Survie*, founded by François-Xavier ‘Françafrique’ Verschave), ‘alter-globalist’ Animata Traoré and the political leader Oumar Dicko severely criticized the French intervention.⁶⁵ But their accusations of neocolonialism did not resonate more widely among the Malian political elite, nor did they find expression in public opinion. However, some more moderate critical voices were heard during the initial period of Operation Serval. A *Maliweb* journalist thinks

⁶⁰ Isaline Bergamaschi 2013, 7.

⁶¹ *Think Africa Press*, “Mali’s War, Unseen,” April 2, 2013, <http://thinkafricapress.com/mali/malis-war-unseen>.

⁶² Bergamaschi 2014, 12.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Mali Demain*, “Parlons-En: De la dette de la France,” January 15, 2013, <http://www.maliweb.net/politique/parlons-en-de-la-dette-de-la-france-118585.html>.

⁶⁵ Bergamaschi 2013, 7.

Hollande's visit on 2 February leaves 'military and political questions' regarding the intervention 'unanswered'.⁶⁶ He doubts whether the French forces can prevent the terrorist groups from resurging on the longer term, and judges the French military for having liberated Kidal without the assistance of the Malian army. An article in *Le 22 Septembre* equally denounces the French solo operation and warns President Hollande not to consider the 'armed bandits' of the MNLA as a possible negotiating party in the Malian conflict.⁶⁷ The next paragraph will demonstrate how the initial positive response gradually made way for a more critical attitude towards the intervention. It identifies three key issues that gave rise to increasing criticism and eventually led to the emergence of anti-French sentiments among the Malian population: the presidential elections in July 2013, the situation in Kidal, and a military cooperation agreement between France and Mali.

Rising Criticism

On 29 January 2013 the National Assembly adopted a roadmap for transition that would serve as a postwar guide for the restoration of territorial integrity and a return to democracy. For these purposes it opened the way to negotiations with the North and foresaw the organization of democratic elections. With the adoption of the roadmap President Traoré simultaneously announced that presidential elections were to be held in six months from then, on 31 July. Doubts about the feasibility of holding elections on such a short term soon appeared, concerning the precarious security situation in the North, the inability of hundreds of thousands of Malian refugees and displaced persons to vote and the practical implications of elections during the rainy season and Ramadan. However, France repeatedly insisted that elections be held as soon as possible and the chosen date be respected. A rather sharp article in *Le Pouce* on 11 March describes how resistance to this French pressure is building up among Malian civil society and the political class and blames the 'ex-colonizer' of interference in Mali's internal affairs.⁶⁸ An article in *The Guardian* agrees that 'Maliens feel that elections are being thrust on them – "governed by Paris", as one commentator puts it – by

⁶⁶ *Maliweb*, "Après la visite de François Hollande: Le plus dur commence maintenant," February 5, 2013, <http://www.maliweb.net/politique/apres-la-visite-de-francois-hollande-le-plus-dur-commence-maintenant-125181.html>.

⁶⁷ *Le 22 Septembre*, "Opération Serval au Mali: Hollande doit éviter de commettre les erreurs de Sarkozy," February 4, 2013, <http://www.maliweb.net/politique/operation-serval-au-mali-hollande-doit-eviter-de-commettre-les-erreurs-de-sarkozy-124555.html>.

⁶⁸ *Le Pouce*, "Présidentielles de juillet 2013: A qui profitera des élections bâclées?" March 11, 2013, <http://www.maliweb.net/politique/presidentielles-de-juillet-2013-a-qui-profitera-des-elections-baclees-133117.html>.

the colonial power that had a significant hand in creating the current national crisis in the first place.’⁶⁹

During a television interview on France 2 on 27 March President Hollande declared to be ‘intractable’ with regard to the election date. This remark caused severe indignation and suspicion among the Malian political class.⁷⁰ However, an article in *L’Indépendant* asserted that even if many consider the French attitude ‘an insult to Malian dignity’, it could also be read as a proof of France’s determination to assist the Malian authorities in the democratic process.⁷¹ An article in *L’Inter de Bamako* nonetheless accused France of ignoring the risks of premature elections, and of influencing the electoral process.⁷² Many of the criticisms concerning the elections were also related to the situation in Kidal where, in the months prior to the elections, the MNLA still refused to hand over authority to the Malian army and administration, thus threatening to prevent its citizens from voting. On 4 June an article in *L’Indicateur du Renouveau* argued that elections could only take place when Kidal was under the full authority of the Malian state, and reminded Hollande that his assistance in the conflict ‘does not give him *carte blanche* to decide everything on behalf of the Malians.’⁷³ Whereas the perceived French involvement in the presidential elections mainly generated criticism among the Malian (political) elite, the situation in Kidal created a shift in the attitude towards France among the wider Malian population.

Contrary to the other occupied northern cities, the French forces liberated Kidal without the assistance of the Malian military, and subsequently prevented the latter from taking over control immediately for fear of clashes between the Malian army and the Tuareg rebels, and the security of the civilian population. In a press conference on 5 April during a visit to Mali, minister Fabius assured that there were no connections between the French forces and the MNLA. Nonetheless, ‘the French negotiated directly with Tuareg leaders the conditions under which 150 Malian troops would enter Kidal (early July), but the delay created a great deal of suspicion throughout the country.’⁷⁴ Thus, an article in *Le Républicain*

⁶⁹ *The Guardian*, “Mali does not need this rush to elections,” July 24, 2013,

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/24/mali-does-not-need-rush-elections>.

⁷⁰ *Jeune Afrique*, “Mali: le dérapage de Hollande,” April 4, 2013,

<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/JA2725p008-009.xml7/>.

⁷¹ *L’Indépendant*, “Présidentielle au Mali: Comment comprendre François Hollande,” April 2, 2013,

<http://www.maliweb.net/politique/presidentielle-au-mali-comment-comprendre-francois-hollande-136827.htm>.

⁷² *L’Inter de Bamako*, “28 juillet 2013: La France désignera un président pour le Mali,” July 2, 2013,

<http://www.maliweb.net/politique/28-juillet-2013-la-france-designera-un-president-pour-le-mali-156150.html>.

⁷³ *L’Indicateur du Renouveau*, “Occupation de Kidal: Vers un cuisant échec de la transition?,” June 4, 2013,

<http://www.maliweb.net/politique/occupation-de-kidal-vers-un-cuisant-echec-de-la-transition-150367.html>.

⁷⁴ Bergamaschi 2014, 14.

of 16 April claimed that ‘Kidal (...) is now part of the Schengen Area.’⁷⁵ *Le Matin* reported how ex-Prime Minister Zoumana Sako blamed Hollande of acting as if he were the Malian president and placing Kidal ‘under his protectorate.’⁷⁶ The Ouagadougou Agreement, signed on 18 June 2013 between the Malian interim government and the rebels, did not sustainably alleviate the tensions. And as the national reconciliation process between Bamako and the north hardly progressed under the newly elected Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (nicknamed IBK), discontent with the French handling of Kidal and suspicions of French complicity with the Tuareg rebels deepened.

“*A Bas la France!*”

On 27 November 2013 a first public protest took place when about a thousand demonstrators took to the streets of Bamako, proclaiming ‘*A bas la France!*’ (‘France back down!’), reproaching the French forces of treating the MNLA as a potential negotiating partner in the conflict, whereas many Malians consider it a terrorist organization.⁷⁷ Shortly afterwards, during an interview with the French newspaper *Le Monde*, IBK wondered why France had blocked the Malians in Kidal, and reproached the international community of obliging Mali to negotiate with armed rebels, continuing to remind it that ‘we are an independent country.’⁷⁸ Even if earlier in the interview IBK assured that France had not displayed any form of paternalism or neocolonialism during its involvement in Mali, his sharp tone revealed an unmistakable discontent with the situation. Since his election in July, relations between Paris and Bamako had become increasingly tense. A few days before the one-year anniversary of Operation Serval, *Le Républicain* speaks of a problem of ‘mutual trust’ between the two countries.⁷⁹ The article finds that whereas France reproaches the Malian authorities the lack of tangible progress in the national reconciliation process, more and more Malians fear that the French have intentions beyond the securitization of Mali and secretly support the Tuareg separatists. In the months that followed anti-French sentiments kept growing, only to find

⁷⁵ *Le Républicain*, “De quoi je me mêle: Kidal désormais partie de l’espace Schengen?,” April 16, 2013, <http://www.maliweb.net/politique/chroniques/de-quoi-je-me-mele-kidal-desormais-partie-de-lespace-schengen-140112.html>.

⁷⁶ *Le Matin*, “Libération de Kidal: Zou propose un Front populaire de sursaut national,” June 6, 2013, <http://www.maliweb.net/politique/liberation-de-kidal-zou-propose-un-front-populaire-de-sursaut-national-150883.html>.

⁷⁷ *France Info*, “Au Mali, première manifestation anti-française,” November 27, 2013, <http://www.franceinfo.fr/monde/actu/article/au-mali-premiere-manifestation-anti-francaise-301683>.

⁷⁸ *Le Monde*, “Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta: “La communauté internationale oblige le Mali à négocier avec un groupe armé,” December 4, 2013, http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2013/12/04/ibrahim-boubacar-keita-a-kidal-la-france-a-bloque-les-maliens-pourquoi_3525285_3212.html?xtmc=ibk&xtr=8.

⁷⁹ *Le Républicain*, “Kidal: Le pari Paris-Bamako,” January 3, 2014, <http://lerepublicain-mali.com/node/668>.

their full expression after the events in Kidal on 17 May 2014 whereby Tuareg rebels attacked government forces during a visit of Prime minister Moussa Mara, resulting in several deaths on both sides. The counterattack launched by Malian forces led to defeat and the loss of control over several other northern cities, painfully exposing the weakness of the Malian military and the failure of the reconciliation process.

The international forces of MINUSMA and Operation Serval did not intervene during the violent clashes in Kidal. Their unwillingness to respond was badly received from the Malian side. On 21 May the National Assembly adopted a resolution denouncing ‘the unacceptable and incomprehensible attitude of the MINUSMA forces and SERVAL.’⁸⁰ In the days after the events demonstrations against France and MINUSMA took place in several places, including Bamako and the northern city Gao. Demonstrators called for a boycott against French products, accusing the French authorities of complicity with the rebels.⁸¹ An article in *L’Essor* stated that ‘the Malian public opinion does not follow the French policy on the issue of Kidal any longer.’⁸²

Suspicious of French complicity with the Tuareg rebels also fed existing worries over the signing of a renewed military agreement between France and Mali that had been delayed for months. The agreement was said to be necessary to provide a new legal framework to Operation Serval and to the continued French military presence in Mali and other countries in the Sahel region in the context of a wider counter-terrorism operation. If the signing of an agreement by itself was not perceived as a negative development, worries among the Malian population arose that it would allow France to establish a permanent military presence at the geostrategic important basis of Tessalit, which France had established during the colonial period and had been using during Operation Serval. An article in *L’Aube* accuses France of a hidden agenda and states that many Malians now believe Operation Serval was only launched as a pretext in order to establish the permanent basis.⁸³ Despite repeated denial from both the French and the Malian authorities, the suspicion persisted and gave rise to critical utterances across the written press.

⁸⁰ *L’Indépendant*, “L’Assemblée Nationale a adopté hier une résolution sur la situation à Kidal: Les députés déplorent “L’attitude inacceptable et incompréhensible des forces de la MINUSMA et de Serval”,” May 21, 2014, <http://maliactu.net/lassemblee-nationale-a-adopte-hier-une-resolution-sur-la-situation-a-kidal-les-deputes-deplorent-lattitude-inacceptable-et-incomprehensible-des-forces-de-la-minusma-et-de-serval/>.

⁸¹ *L’Indicateur du Renouveau*, “Occupation de Kidal par Serval: Vers le boycott des intérêts français au Mali,” May 20, 2014, <http://maliactu.net/occupation-de-kidal-par-serval-vers-le-boycott-des-interets-francais-au-mali/>.

⁸² *L’Essor*, “Situation à Kidal: La France est-elle comprise?,” May 20, 2014, <http://www.essor.ml/situation-a-kidal-la-france-est-elle-incomprise/>.

⁸³ *L’Aube*, “Serval: Objectif final: Une base française à Tessalit,” March 20, 2014, <http://maliactu.net/serval-objectif-final-une-base-francaise-a-tessalit/>.

In conclusion, a shift has occurred in Malian public opinion vis-à-vis the French military presence since Operation Serval was launched in January 2013. Whereas the majority of the Malian population initially welcomed the French forces as liberators and French flags colored the streets in many places, the positive attitude gradually made way for increasing criticism and anti-French sentiments. How can this shift be accounted for? What does it say about how the Malians perceive the French role in the conflict? And which conclusions can be drawn when it comes to the larger question of French interventionism in the twenty-first century? Adopting a critical and historical approach, the final chapter will address these questions.

IV.

Operation Serval in Perspective

Practical and theoretical implications

Historical Sensitivities and Postcolonial Ambivalence

Operation Serval was framed as a counterterrorism operation aimed at securitizing the territorial integrity of Mali. It also opened the way for the accelerated deployment of AFISMA that was subsequently replaced by MINUSMA troops on 1 July 2013. Contrary to earlier interventions such as in Côte d'Ivoire in 2011, Operation Serval did not intervene between conflicting parties, as it was aimed against 'external' terrorist groups. In this regard, it was portrayed to lack any political dimension, which significantly contributed to the general acceptance of the intervention by both the international community and the Malian population. Initially the French forces were seen to successfully realize their objective: providing assistance in fighting the terrorist groups and restoring government control in the liberated northern region. However, no military intervention can be detached from its physical and historical context. The complexity of the conflict and the historical sensitivities resulting from a colonial past, in combination with increased French involvement on a political level, proved to influence Malian public opinion.

The previous chapter has shown that the French position vis-à-vis the presidential elections caused a sense of indignation among Malian elites, who considered it inappropriate and paternalistic. Ibrahima Baba Sidibé's historical reading of Franco-Malian relations can shed light on this reaction:

Franco-Malian relations revolve around the question of emancipation. (...) Trapped between a genuine desire to emancipate and the constraints of the politics of the French *pré carré*, Malian actors only had limited room for maneuver, which resulted in a sovereigntist reading of the State, accompanied by a shady nationalism. This situation led to a distorted representation of France, considered an unyielding power to the African independence (own translation).⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Ibrahima Baba Sidibé, "Les relations franco-maliennes à la recherche d'un nouveau soufflé," in *Mali-France: Regards sur une histoire partagée*, ed. GEMDEV/Université du Mali (Editions Donniya et Karthala: Bamako 2005): 341.

After Mali's democratic transition in the 1990s, the dynamics between France and Mali changed, leading to renewed and appeased relations between the two countries.⁸⁵ France assumed an important role in Mali's democratic and economic development progress, and became its first economic partner. However, a certain ambivalence vis-à-vis the ex-colonial power has remained, as the relations between Mali and France have longtime been influenced by 'complexes and frustrations related to a neocolonial approach to Africa.'⁸⁶ The Malian reaction to the French position concerning the election date and the national reconciliation process demonstrate that these complexes and frustrations are still easily revived.

As Bergamaschi points out in her chapter, the suspicions concerning French complicity with the Tuareg rebels also stem from historical sensitivities that find their origins in the colonial past. She refers to a historical explanation by Pierre Boilley, who argues that the foundation of a Common Organization of the Saharan Regions (OCRS) by the French in 1957 caused feelings of mistrust among the Malian population. The short-lived OCRS, a colonial administrative body spanning several countries in the Sahel and which range largely overlapped with Tuareg territory, was by many perceived as a collaboration between the French and the Tuaregs, and resulted in conspiracy theories about French support to Tuareg autonomy that lasted throughout the postcolonial period.⁸⁷

According to the Malian journalist Aliou Hasseye the emergence of criticism and anti-French sentiments also stems from a sense of national pride.⁸⁸ He feels that whereas many Malians are still appreciative of the French assistance in the conflict, they expect to be treated respectfully and as equal partners. However, many Malians feel that the perceived French political interference in internal affairs, and the lack of transparency concerning the situation in Kidal do not reflect equal partnership. According to Hasseye the suspicions regarding a permanent military basis also plays on this feeling of national pride and can be related to the historical question of emancipation. In 1960 the newly independent Malian state refused to sign a defense agreement with France that would allow for permanent French troops in the country, thus taking an emancipating direction from its former colonizer. Granting France a permanent basis on Malian soil today would be perceived as a blemish of this legacy and a

⁸⁵ Sidibé 2005, 356.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 360.

⁸⁷ Pierre Boilley, "Un complot français au Sahara? Politiques françaises et représentations maliennes," in *Mali-France: Regards sur une histoire partagée*, ed. GEMDEV/Université du Mali (Editions Donniya et Karthala: Bamako 2005): 163.

⁸⁸ Mr. Hasseye works for the news website *Mali Actu* in Bamako and frequently writes about the ongoing conflict and the French military presence in Mali. On 14 July 2014 I spoke to him on Skype. During this conversation he was so kind to share his professional opinion with me regarding the Malian public opinion vis-à-vis the French intervention.

breach of the country's sovereignty. The shift in the Malian public opinion can thus be explained by perceptions and representations that find their origins in a shared colonial past. But how do these findings relate to the larger debate of French interventionism in the twenty-first century?

Furthering the Debate on French Interventionism

In her chapter on Franco-Malian relations Sidibé offers a perspective on present-day military cooperation that significantly differs from Charbonneau's vision as outlined in the first chapter. Whereas Charbonneau argues that France's security strategy in Africa in the twenty-first century, as illustrated by the RECAMP concept, still produces and maintains unequal power structures despite its changed discourse, Sidibé thinks the increasingly deepening military cooperation between France and Mali, chiefly focused on education and training, offers significant opportunities.⁸⁹ As their ideas on a collective security approach in the Sahel region correspond and the Malian army plays an important role in the RECAMP framework, Sidibé argues that 'this cooperation can be an axis of renewal of Franco-Malian relations (...) (own translation).'⁹⁰ Written in 2005, she particularly refers to the growing security challenge of (international) terrorism in the region. The fact that eight years later France intervened in Mali raises some questions about this perspective.

Four months after the launch of Operation Serval François Hollande presented France's new national defense and security strategy for the coming fifteen years as outlined in the White Paper 2013. It identifies the Sahel and parts of sub-Saharan Africa as 'regions of priority interest for France due to a common history, the presence of French nationals, the issues at stake and the threats confronting them.'⁹¹ The crisis in Mali is presented as an exemplary case where the French military, despite the budgetary constraints it is faced with today, was both willing and able to take its responsibility. The acceptance of the intervention by the international community and the generally positive initial reaction by the Malians themselves might have contributed to this perception of France's role in the Sahel and in Africa more widely. Focusing on the risks of international terrorism and emphasizing the importance of developing local military capacities within the framework of 'partnership' and 'technical cooperation' agreements,⁹² the White Paper succeeds in avoiding any associations

⁸⁹ Sidibé, 358.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Direction de l'information légale et administrative, *French White Paper on Defense and National Security* (Paris: 2013): 54-55.

⁹² Ibid., 54.

with past practices and offers a neutralized vision of French involvement in Africa. However, the rise of harsh criticism and anti-French sentiments in Mali demonstrate that the reality of the conflict soon affected this so-called ‘neutrality’. If the intervention was partly justified on the basis of a shared past and its associated historical responsibility, it was this same common history that soon complicated matters severely.

The coup d’état in 2012, the escalating crisis and the subsequent French intervention also painfully exposed the weakness of the Malian army and thus indirectly the failure of French efforts to reinforce its capacities and self-reliance. Charbonneau argues that ‘the French military (...) failed its own self-appointed minimal mission of forming independent African militaries.’⁹³ In view of this observation he points out the discrepancy between France’s official military discourse and the reality of its securitization process in Africa. He argues that this discourse does not reflect a given reality, but produces realities as it ‘opens spaces for legitimate intervention and new forms of domination, subordination, power projection, control and dependency.’⁹⁴ In this sense the French intervention can be seen to expose the continued Malian dependency on France.

Interestingly, Malian public opinion only partly reflects this perception. The French intervention by itself was generally welcomed as a gesture of international assistance. It was only in the confrontation with the complexity and historicity of a crisis that goes beyond ‘international terrorism’, that the French were perceived to act inadequately. Therefore, criticisms related not so much as to *why* the French intervened, but *how* they intervened. As a partner country, they were expected to assist the Malian forces in restoring the country’s territorial integrity. In this regard, the enduring situation in Kidal was incomprehensible for many Malians. The inactivity of the French and UN forces during the violent clashes in May was motivated by the fear of compromising their neutrality by intervening in what was perceived as an internal confrontation. Ironically, many Malians interpreted this inactivity as a sign of partiality and a performance failure of their actual task: assisting the Malian army in resolving the conflict and restoring the country’s territorial integrity.

The Malian reaction to Operation Serval thus offers an interesting angle on French interventionism. The military intervention itself was not perceived as a manner to uphold French hegemony on the African continent or as a way to maintain unequal relations *per se*. French assistance was and to a certain extent continued to be welcomed and justified in the context of a historical partnership. The Malian population expected the French forces to assist

⁹³ Charbonneau 2014, 93.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

the Malian army in diverting the terrorist threat and restoring government control in north Mali and, in the longer run, in strengthening the country's own military capacities and self-reliance. However, the reality of Operation Serval, complicated by the complexity and historical context of the conflict and characterized by an intensified political involvement from the French side, increasingly diverged from Malian expectations about the French involvement. Accusations of paternalism and widespread suspicions about French cooperation with Tuareg rebels and about the establishment of a permanent military basis illustrate this divergence. It is not to say that these suspicions correspond to a reality, but they reveal the complexities and sensitivities of a postcolonial intervention that are hidden behind a simplifying discourse of (international) terrorism. It remains to be seen what the structural effects of the intervention will be in the long run, but the Malian reaction vis-à-vis Operation Serval demonstrates that the (post)colonial experience continues to shape perceptions about France's role on the African continent.

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