

who were imprisoned in the Sahara under brutal conditions. The international human rights activists who protested these conditions eventually helped bring about Keita's release after ten years, at which point he returned to Guinea to recuperate. He lived for another twenty years, still committed to many of the ideas he had supported in government. Mann uses this life — tragic but also resilient in its later stages — as a kind of analogy for the larger issue of Sahelian statecraft's promise and disappointment, but also its persistent hopes for a better future.

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FROM SLAVERY TO AID IN THE NIGERIEN SAHEL

From Slavery to Aid: Politics, Labour, and Ecology in the Nigerien Sahel, 1800–2000.

By Benedetta Rossi.

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Key Words: development, labor, political ecology, Niger.

The Sahel has inspired a number of recent studies that, taken together, challenge long-standing and often unspoken paradigms that have long dominated the region's historiography. They do so by focussing on how mobility and risk-management strategies help maintain social and political relations, by analysing local structures of government from an internal point of view, and by questioning the exceptional nature of the colonial situation. Gregory Mann's *From Empires to NGOs* (2015) offers an example of this approach, as does Charles Grémont's *Les Touaregs Iwellemmedan (1647–1896)* (2010). Benedetta Rossi's *From Slavery to Aid*, a study of the Nigerien Ader, can be counted among these works, and will have a similarly lasting impact.

Rossi's guiding theme is relations of personal dependence. She explores their persistence in the region, despite important political changes on the ground, from precolonial to colonial times, through the Sahelian drought of the 1980s, and then to the current period of governmental and international disengagement. In the first half of the book, Rossi convincingly links relations of personal dependence to processes of migration and mobility in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The second half of the book offers a critical analysis of the impact of a large development project in the area, showing how 'development enabled political control on the cheap' (22). This argument is not in itself new, but Rossi makes it with much tact and thoughtfulness, in a way that renders the individual motivations of all involved — including the development workers — intelligible. She also carefully analyses the historical and socio-economic constraints that influence local responses to the project.

An introductory chapter contextualizes the study by touching on labour history, the shortcomings of environmental approaches, and the relationship between mobility and governance (introducing her own term, 'kinetocracy', or government through mobility). Chapter Two follows, drawing on oral histories to outline precolonial relations of

domination in the area. This chapter makes the most important theoretical contribution of the book, as Rossi argues convincingly that although environmental constraints mattered, social relations on the ground were in the last instance political. Chapter Three retraces the colonial conquest, not as a ‘tale of mission accomplished’, but as ‘a plethora of entangled histories’ (104). Chapter Four outlines the dynamics of colonial rule, once French military dominance had been established. This part of the book is most familiar, in terms of its general narrative and source materials, but Rossi succeeds in introducing uncertainties and contingencies to this story, underlining structurally incompatible viewpoints as well as pointing to possibilities for alternative outcomes. Chapter Five describes the almost seamless transition that took place from France’s ‘mission to civilise’ to independent Niger’s ‘mission to develop’, as administrators were replaced by technical experts (21). Chapter Six analyses in detail the functioning of a large-scale development project in Ader, contrasting the aims and ambitions of its designers with those of the people it employed locally. ‘Development’, as supposedly conducive to the common good, became a way of expecting people to work without a salary, or in exchange for small food rations. It hence only appealed to the most impoverished: to those who had no other options. Although development initiatives reinforced entrenched social distinctions, they allowed some individuals to escape former ties of dependence — until, that is, the project downsized, a result of a global context that now emphasises (much cheaper) projects that turn on ‘decentralisation’ instead of infrastructural investment and assistance.

In an area where outside observers — travelers and academics — have long been blinded by the romantic splendour associated with Tuareg nobility, or conversely by miserabilist accounts of suffering, *From Slavery to Aid* presents day-to-day realities of dominance, and the choices that those hierarchies produce for those people at their bottom ranks. Rossi avoids using falsely homogeneous categories and making seemingly obvious distinctions — between the colonial period and independence, between colonial *mise en valeur* and development. This nuanced approach enables Rossi to carefully demonstrate, for instance, how the ability to escape former relations of dominance varies among former slaves, according to their age, gender, and family. Her overall argument of structural continuity is convincing, and its two defining aspects — mobility and dependence — are brilliantly articulated throughout. Rossi knows the area she writes about well, as she has spent much time there since the 1990s and developed close personal connections to it. This perspective informs every page of her book, and, in addition to setting a productive tone of analysis, it also allows her to incorporate a variety of different and sometimes contradictory sources. Her aim, as she writes, is to start ‘from the experiences and perspectives of real people’, and she accomplishes that goal throughout, with great skill and sensitivity (318).

Given its strong historical, ethnographic, and theoretical contribution, it is a shame that translations from the French are sometimes a little approximate, and that the maps are difficult to read. The Conclusion and the Introduction seem to set up somewhat divergent theoretical frameworks or, to put it another way, they raise issues that could have been more strongly articulated with each other. Likewise, sometimes a little too much historical and ethnographic detail is presented, without the necessary analysis to make those specifics intelligible to those unfamiliar with the area; at times, too, Rossi quotes quite heavily from French colonial sources and uses them quite uncritically (such as with regards to the role played by the Islamic Sanûsiyya order, for instance). But these are minor and mostly

editorial points. Overall, *From Slavery to Aid* stands as a shining example of research on this region, for historians and social scientists alike. Laced with subtle humour throughout, this book is, moreover, a joy to read.

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KNOWLEDGE, POWER, AND PERFORMANCE IN IFÁ DIVINATION

Ifá Divination, Knowledge, Power, and Performance.

Edited by Jacob K. Olupona and Rowland O. Abiodun.

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Ifá is a system of knowledge accessed by diviners in Nigeria, Benin, Togo, and parts of the African diaspora in order to diagnose, explain, or predict elements of the present and the future. The *babalawo* (diviner) casts a chain, palm nuts, or cowry shells onto an ornate divination tray and interprets the binary code produced by their markings. Sixteen nuts or shells potentially can produce 256 different outcomes, each associated with a particular set of stories, poems, herbal remedies, and recommended sacrifices linked with an action and outcome in the deep past. The *babalawo* not only recites these, but also interprets the narratives for the present moment on behalf of the client, who may or may not take the proffered advice.

Ifá Divination, Knowledge, Power, and Performance offers an excellent introduction for readers new to this topic, as well as intriguing contributions for specialists. Twenty-four chapters plus an introduction by the editors, Jacob Olupona and Rowland Abiodun, together with Niyi Afolabi, explore the interpretation of *Ifá* orature, theoretical questions dealing with *Ifá* as knowledge, *Ifá*'s variations over time and space, and the system's sacred art. Significantly, the contributions consider *Ifá* in various parts of Yorubaland as well as its development in the Americas, where it spread through the slave trade.

Though the volume is intended for scholars in a range of disciplines as well as *Ifá* practitioners, historians will likely be most interested in contributions that refer to the past political and social contexts in which the *Ifá* corpus was produced and changed. Wándé Abimbólá's chapter, for instance, addresses historical transformations in *Ifá* oral texts and ritual practices in their African heartland as well as in the African diaspora, where fully qualified practitioners and some traditional materials were not available. Adélékè Adéèkò's valuable chapter treats the *Ifá odù* as a system of writing — which generates not phonemes but stories — and along the way offers a comprehensible explication of the divination process and the intellectual work of the *babalawo* as well as the agency of the client. In a fascinating methodological intervention, Andrew Apter describes how the *Ifá* verses invoked by the patterns in the divination tray themselves represent accounts of *Ifá* consultations from the past. A current consultation, then, tells the client how a