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MALI MODIBO for CETIM ENGLISH

The Malian Plan

My knowledge of the Sudanese Union was quite rudimentary, although its left wing (Madeira) welcomed me sincerely as a brother. I therefore considered it my first responsibility, and the first condition for anything positive on my part, to educate myself through long discussions with Madeira, Djim Sylla (principal private secretary in the planning department, who became a real friend), Idrissa Diarra (the Party's organization secretary) and, of course, many others. The conclusions I drew were probably quite banal, but they may throw some light on what followed.

The Sudanese Union (SU) had already established itself as the de facto single party in colonial times, when it succeeded in uniting all the anti-imperialist forces and isolating would-be collaborators. On 20 September 1960 it proclaimed itself the single party by law, 'guided by Marxism-Leninism', but in reality it was still a broad front of different social forces, shot through with contradictions.

Its right wing consisted of the class of retailers (the Dioulas), who had always had an influence on society and were major contributors to party funds. They were linked in turn to the peasantry (whose produce they collected), in an ambiguous relationship of exploitation and service. The SU's left wing recruited state-employed teachers, nurses and civil servants (there were no indigenous senior functionaries in colonial times), and these formed the cadre of their respective trade unions, which were united and quite strong organizations. The PCF had given considerable assistance in their training.

The solidly rooted Sudanese Union had raised the political level of the people, to a degree scarcely thought possible by most experts on African politics. One need only contrast the speeches on serious issues that SU leaders were making at public meetings in 1960 with the addresses that a colonial governor had given thirty years earlier to his Malian 'subjects' (a few sentences in 'pigeon French'; praise for the virtues of the motherland, especially its military strength; exhortations to celebrate the Quatorze Juillet with tom-toms, to drink a lot of wine, and to have many children and bring them up to be good soldiers).

The great mass of the population were small farmers living in tightly organized village communities. Local chieftaincies, sometimes inaccurately called 'feudal', retained a measure of influence that varied greatly from region to region. The colonial administration never succeeded in swallowing up all these chieftaincies, and many of them had been won over by the SU. The peasantry was not the passive mass that outsiders often imagine: it had real autonomy vis-à-vis the chieftains, the retailers and the SU's urban activists. But it did not have a leadership of its own, except for a few nuclei of ex-combatants (those known in the French army as 'Senegalese infantry-men' were in fact mostly from Mali or Upper Volta).

The villagers' practised their autonomy with the help of the komo, a term often badly translated as 'sorcery' but actually a secret society charged with making order prevail. Its masked members came out at night to punish troublemakers (adulterous wives, for example), handled poison and entered into relations with supernatural forces. In fact, it operated under the tight control of the council of elders,

the normal form of political management in societies that did not yet have a state, closely akin to the shura in pre-Islamic or post-Islamic Arabia. They did not have the right to introduce innovations but existed only to ensure respect for tribal (or, in the Arab case, tribal and Islamic) tradition. Democracy, however, is defined precisely by the right to innovate, by human rather than divine responsibility for the law, by an affirmation that individuals and society make their own history and do not merely endure it. There is therefore nothing either specific or democratic about the shura, and today's Islamists who argue the contrary are merely repeating the claim of 'African socialism', heard so often in those days, to base itself on some traditional village democracy. The komo had survived many systems of village rule, whether by precolonial military rulers or by the colonial administration. Indeed, it was said that, although French Sudan was 90 per cent Muslim (because 90 per cent of the population answered 'yes' when asked whether Muhammad had been Allah's Prophet), it was also 90 per cent animist (because 90 per cent of people believed in the supernatural powers of the komo). The Sudanese Union made considerable, and not unsuccessful, efforts to uproot the komo from people's minds and from reality, so as to create a firm basis for its activists and later its administration to govern the country. The reason it gave was the need to eradicate prejudices and superstitions (though, as we know, one superstition replaces another!), but its real aim was to dismantle the autonomy of the peasantry. In doing this, the SU helped to deepen the process of Islamization, and the price for this is perhaps today's rise of fundamentalist movements.

The Sudanese Union had its intellectuals (left-wing urban activists trained in the school of communism), but it scarcely counted any university graduates in its ranks, for the simple reason that in the late 1950s there had been only one lycée in the whole of French Sudan and secondary education was still minimal. The first generation of graduates, who began to return to the country only in 1962–65, had no record of political activity but reaped the benefits of their education by gaining immediate access to quite senior positions within the administration. This tended to favour opportunism, an extravagant verbal nationalism or 'socialism', and often arrogance or pretentiousness. The cadres in question bear a heavy responsibility for the later distortions that led to the debacle of the regime, but they were able to transfer their allegiances to the new regime without facing too many problems of conscience.

What could development and planning mean in these conditions? My opinion on this is the result of deep and constant discussions between the small group of foreign associates and a small group of leaders of the SU Left (the most active being Madeira, Idrissa Diarra and Djim Sylla). This Malian Left was not at all sectarian; it was quite aware that concessions were inevitable, that the chieftains and retailers had great weight in society, and that it was useful to enlist their professional skills behind a progressive social project, 'neutralizing' them (that is, not allowing them to take the leadership) but not treating them as enemies. The conditions really existed for things to move forward; the subsequent failure was not written in the cards from the outset.

We took seriously the declarations that the Party issued with conviction and honesty. Its objectives made eminent sense: to achieve the highest degree of secondary schooling; to carry out mass vaccinations and set up village health centres; to improve the road system and open up remote regions; to double agricultural output per family (leaving scope for discussion and experience to determine the precise role of irrigation, seed improvements, dry equipments, animal traction, etc., as well as of cooperation, pricing, harvest gathering, and so on); to refrain from excessive industrialization, concentrating on a few import-substitutionist light industries and consumption sectors (cement, bricks, textiles, timber, food processing, repair shops) instead of the World Bank's completely senseless preference for export industries; to reform public finances and introduce a fairer and more efficient tax system; to reduce bureaucracy in the civil service; to democratize the life of

society, and so on. At this stage, the Party left open the possibility of private–public partnership and various forms of management, and encouraged debate on the role of autonomous women’s organizations, trade unions, rural cooperatives and other mass organizations, as part of the process of democratization.

I had special responsibility for the drafting of programmes in these areas, including a quantification of the expected investment and return. It was necessary to ensure that these programmes were coherent at the level of both public and external funding, and to specify what they required by way of credit, wage and price policies (including subsidies, taxes and possible state controls). The idea was not to dream up some spectacular advance on the highway of progress, but to predict the dangers on the winding road ahead. That, in any case, is my definition of planning. Of course, the programmes in view would require our planning unit to be involved in ongoing consultation: both with the technical departments at the relevant ministries and with the National Planning Committee, a hybrid institution that brought together the principal ministers and departmental heads, on the one hand, and the SU political bureau and the leaderships of the mass organizations, on the other.

Instruments had to be devised for the measuring of coherence and efficiency, and it was here that my imagination was supposed to come into play. For there are no planning ‘manuals’ that provide such formulas. The many ‘experts’ who think otherwise have probably never really taken responsibility for the implementation of a Plan. The instruments have to be invented for each situation, which is always particular. Planning is not like assembly-line work; it is craft labour (or perhaps artistic labour) which has to deliver a made-to-measure suit, not something off the peg.

I therefore had to work out an ad hoc national accounting framework that built in the deficiencies of information and the nature of the fundamental objectives, in such a way as to highlight the salient effects of the various options. It took perhaps a half of my working time for nearly a full year, but my eventual proposal gained widespread acceptance and won me congratulations at the SEEF and elsewhere. There had been no question of making up for the deficiencies of information by conducting statistical surveys for which we had neither the time nor the money, nor a sufficient number of trained people. Instead, I drew systematically on the extraordinary fund of knowledge that I detected in two individuals. One was the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce (whose name I have unfortunately forgotten), a Frenchman and small employer who played the game honestly enough in the service of the new Malian state. He knew everything about the import trade: not only the statistics – which were rather shaky at the time, since French West Africa had just blown apart and border controls were virtually non-existent – but also the precise quantity of each product category, its price and its markets (public use, private consumption, etc.). The other man was Jean Molle, a former administrator (‘Circle Commander’) who was a veritable mine of information: he could tell you how many individuals and working days were needed to build a hut, how many years it would last, what quantities of millet and cotton a family could produce in each region of the country, how much fertilizer they would need, what was their food consumption, and so on. When I later started deciphering the Mali archives, I was able to gauge just how seriously certain administrators (the best ones, of course) compiled their reports. I even used them for a kind of economic history of French Sudan between 1920 and 1958.

On the basis of this information – which the three of us discussed again and again, and which I compared with anything I could glean from other sources – I came up with a set of indicators. Each of these was supposed to ‘sum up’ the situation in a sector corresponding to a possible development objective: for example, the primary education cost indicator per 10,000 inhabitants, the minimal health cost indicator for the same population, the 100-kilometre road cost indicator per 50,000 square kilometres for a population density X, the food consumption indicators (for a similar basket of

goods) per rural family, per working-class urban family and per middle-class urban family, the same indicators for housing and related facilities, the trading, transport and tax margin indicators corresponding to each of the foregoing.

By the end I had in my drawer an ad hoc set of tools that could clearly be used to good effect. The objectives of the Plan were immediately expressed in the growth rates specific to each indicator, and from the objective indicators I could deduce by simple rules of three the values of each of the main national accounting categories. By putting these figures in their allotted place in a General Economic Table (GET), I could immediately visualize the likely difficulties, dangers and inconsistencies. This enabled me to submit to the National Committee a 'revised plan' indicating anything problematic in its proposals.

The method made it possible to answer a number of key questions concerning the optimal level and rate of increase of incomes, the relative purchasing power of the main agricultural products, the consumer price index, rates of taxation, and so on. It therefore enabled us to build a social dimension into the Plan: greater or lesser inequality, especially between town and country, a particular hierarchy of wages, a certain level of private profit, and so on. In this way, we could also define which fiscal reforms were desirable, which kinds of import control or rationing, which export levels (and therefore which growth targets for certain key products).

I did not have a computer at my disposal – fortunately, because in my opinion they are not only unnecessary but actually dangerous for the kind of work I had to do. My only equipment was the engineer's slide rule I have used for all my professional and teaching activity. For I think that the great majority of economic calculations needed in Africa boil down to compound interest and rules of three. This does not mean that computers are unnecessary for other situations, as in the construction of SEEF's variable price model to which I alluded earlier.

Some years later, in 1965, I used the method I had developed in Mali to forecast the outcome of various options in Ivory Coast. As I had chosen a twenty-year time frame, this meant that catastrophe – that is, an external debt crisis – would strike in 1985. Ten years later, the World Bank tried to prove me wrong by commissioning a study for millions of dollars

– experts flying first class, staying in luxury hotels, and so on, to conclude that everything would be hunky-dory in Ivory Coast by the year 1985. The stupidity was amusing enough, but rather costly. Top civil servants in Ivory Coast who were impressed by the correctness of my forecasts – in fact, a worse crisis in 1985 than I had predicted – invited me to visit the country and eyed me rather in the way in which people consult cowries in Africa. I explained to them that I had not looked into a crystal ball but simply used my political common sense and the rule of three. I don't know if they were convinced.

My detractors will say that the planning method I developed in Mali laid the stress on coherence rather than efficiency. This is not altogether false. But I would say that the extreme emphasis on efficiency in neoliberal discourse is largely illusory and artificial. It is based on the circular argument that markets are self-regulating, which has nothing to do with the real world (where markets are governed by the exigencies of dominant capital) and precludes the placing of the economy at the service of social development. In the Malian case, efficiency consisted of finding ways to run enterprises and government departments in a correct manner. That is already something, quite a lot in fact, and it is not easy to translate into reality. But common sense requires that a start should be made there.

The more or less official Malian plan that resulted from this exercise – I say 'more or less' because it was hedged about with contradictory statements, especially by the main ministers – seemed to me

feasible and progressive. Although its implementation was somewhat chaotic, for reasons I shall consider later, it yielded results that were generally positive for Mali and could have provided a solid basis for further advance. The rot set in later. As I said, the Plan left scope for discussion of various options important both socially and politically and in terms of economic efficiency. It was here that the deformations began.

I have always liked to discuss my work; I have always believed that collective creativity is richer than the creativity of the isolated individual. In Cairo I had benefited from almost daily discussions with Ismail, and in Paris with Nataf and my other SEEF colleagues. I did the same in Bamako with everyone in our planning unit and, whenever the opportunity arose, with Bénard, Prou and a few others. I can no longer give a proper account of their positive criticisms and suggestions, so closely were they woven into my 'end product'. I owe them a lot, that's for sure.

In Bamako I received visits from a number of 'experts' in the Soviet world, the World Bank and the United Nations, but I must say, without false modesty, that I learned nothing at all from any of them. The Soviets kept churning out the same general 'principles': it's good when the state intervenes, bad when this is not planned – never anything more precise. So, I concluded that they were mediocre bureaucrats who had to stick to such insipid stuff to earn their living. But the World Bank people were, and are, of exactly the same type, and also speak a totally ideological language, even if their basic principle ('it's good whenever the private sector takes charge') is the diametrical opposite. One can easily see this underlying identity if one compares a Soviet propaganda booklet and a World Bank report: the title, in each case, gives away every last detail inside; anything at all proves that the basic idea upheld by the institution is correct and explains everything; facts are ignored or even falsified (the word is not too strong). Thus, for the World Bank, the past successes of South Korea were due to the virtues of the market, while its present difficulties (financial crisis) are due to statism. It's simple – only wrong on both counts. For state intervention played a decisive role in Korea's success, and not by chance the crisis hit when the country joined the OECD and was forced to liberalize the economy. But what does that matter? Neoliberalism is always right, just as 'Soviet Marxism' always used to be. The same dogmatism. Probably the same future.

If I learned many useful things in Bamako, I owe it to a few modest African experts in their fields – agronomists, doctors, veterinary surgeons and one man of genius (René Dumont) – as well as to a number of Chinese experts. With these and Dumont I did a few field trips, which I appreciated not only because I generally like to see the landscape (why not?) but because I think that you always learn most with your own eyes. Of course, you have to be wary of what, in some journalists, turns into straightforward arrogance – the claim to understand everything after a few days in a country whose culture and history are unfamiliar to you. But if you avoid this, the visual experience always adds a great deal. It certainly cannot take the place of hard work – in my case, the serious reading of history, culture, anthropology and economics. But it is an important complement that sometimes quickly increases its impact. With Dumont and the Chinese I came to appreciate the value of agronomists who, in addition to being competent, have a political and social sense. One day in the Delta Mort of the Niger, where we were talking of resettling 30,000 new farmers, I asked the Chinese whether this would really be possible. One of them looked somewhat wistfully at the horizon and the ground and answered: 'Three million with no problem, and it won't cost much.' Underpopulated Africa, I understood what he was saying.

There was virtually no other source for my reflections and my work. I had not heard of ECLA's incipient planning activity, and the French research societies that expanded in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s were still in their infancy. I shall return to these problems below.

From drift to debacle

It would not be appropriate here to repeat in detail what I wrote at the time about the vicissitudes of planning in Mali. I will simply mention the six main difficulties that it encountered.

First difficulty: the ‘technocrats’. Certain ministers – such as Mamadou at Public Works – had some technical competence but not always a feeling for economics. Their natural tendency was to insist that their projects should take priority, even when they could only be carried out over a long period of time. The ‘Kayes seaport’ project, for example, required the building of the Manantali dam, and although this has now been done (thirty-five years later) it still does not allow shipping to sail up the Senegal as far as Kayes. Other technocrats were fanatical about breakneck modernization, but did not think that it had to be adapted to the conditions of the country. To take just one example, at the Office du Niger, Lamine Traoré supported immediate heavy mechanization along American or Soviet lines.

Second difficulty: the attraction of expensive prestige projects (sports stadium, presidential palace, grand hotel, an oversized national airline, etc.), which always tickle the fancy of politicians.

Third difficulty: the absolute prioritization of ‘politics’ over economic calculation. The president certainly had this weakness, which some dignitaries encouraged out of sheer sycophancy. I do believe that politics should be ‘in command’, but it should be real politics – the kind that defines the social content of a project for the country, not a set of rhetorical flourishes and theatrical gestures. Modibo was in the habit of calling officials together in the early morning (the day began at 7.00 in Bamako, to avoid the midday heat), and on one occasion I was asked to attend. The president said to me: ‘Comrade Samir, I’ve been thinking that it would be a good idea to shut down our rail link with Dakar.’ I saw from his face that the idea had probably come to him in a dream. After reflection, wishing both to be deferential and to employ customary usage, I came up with an earthy simile: ‘Comrade president, don’t you think that would be like a husband cutting off his testicles to spite his wife.’ ‘Why?’ ‘Because Mali will bear the brunt of the closure. Senegal will lose some of the profit it gets from through-traffic, but we’ll be forced to import goods by road, via Abidjan, and end up paying five times more.’ However, I realized that my image had been too strong. I heard later that he had immediately consulted some sycophantic young executives, who had doubtless told him that his idea was a stroke of political genius. The rail link was therefore closed down and replaced with a fleet of three hundred lorries.

Fourth difficulty: retailers who could not easily be integrated into the new ‘socialist’ environment. This was a real, objective difficulty, and many Malian executives were well aware of it. But it was (or should have been) evident that, if budgetary and trade deficits led to repeated stock shortages and inflation, a space would inevitably appear for retailers to notch up black-market superprofits. The struggle to neutralize this inevitable tendency among retailers demanded strict public management of the economy. This was not always understood, and for some repression was the answer to all problems.

Fifth difficulty: the lack of lower-level operatives, another real, objective difficulty. For example, when the national currency was introduced in July 1962, we drew up a circular explaining in detail, in clear and simple language, what customs inspectors were supposed to do. ‘It’s a disaster,’ Djim Sylla said to me one day, ‘they haven’t understood anything.’ Apparently a patriotic Malian trader in Sikasso had declared wads of CFA francs on returning from a trip to Ivory Coast, and the customs man had seized them, denounced our patriot for using ‘imperialist money’ and set light to it. There were many similar episodes, which all told us that it was necessary to train operatives with great care

at every level of the public service. Many senior executives did not see the point, or did not care two hoots about such matters.

Sixth difficulty: the expectation of students returning from abroad that they would immediately be given the highest possible jobs. The harmful effects of the 'diploma rent' did not take long to make themselves felt. For they refused to admit their lack of experience – a quite normal lack, since an apprenticeship is always necessary – and substituted pompous phrases for serious thought and hard work. Not having had a militant past – again, not their fault – they were inclined to toady to state dignitaries. There were some exceptions, of course, but not many. And, on the whole, the new intake of executives played a very negative role and accelerated the downward drift.

The upshot was that, within the space of a few months, the Plan disintegrated into a collection of disparate, poorly designed projects, adding every day to the jumble of ad hoc decisions and fait accomplis. I tried to sound the alarm whenever Bénard dropped by. I drew up one projection after another, especially for public and external finances, so that people would understand that the problems would be insoluble in two or three years'time. But I don't think these notes were ever read in high places. They were given to 'young patriotic cadres', who must have dismissed them as reactionary twaddle and passed on to something else.

The drift was becoming a headlong flight. Our prediction of worsening deficits in the state budget and the balance of trade inevitably came true, but the authorities thought they could use the printing press to solve the former and foreign loans to address the latter. I had not been opposed in principle to the creation of a national currency and the nationalization of the banking system. But I had not foreseen the uses to which they would be put – on the contrary, I had suggested that they become the instruments of a stricter, more tightly controlled management of the economy.

The fuite en avant spurred the degeneration of the Party. The planning ministry had asked Party leaders to organize great debates about a few clearly defined basic issues, such as rural cooperation, ways of modernizing agriculture, the structuring of the retail trade and enterprise management. However, none of the debates was seriously organized, and ordinary Party members were kept on the sidelines. Instead, ad hoc commissions – in which young cadres fought hard to outshine one another – packaged a number of ill-conceived proposals in hastily written reports, full of flattery for the leaders for whom 'nothing is impossible'.

The Sudanese Union thus changed from a real people's party into the collective organization of the new class. Its social base shrank, despite the almost obligatory distribution of membership cards and the holding of national conferences at which debate was replaced with orchestrated applause. Thus, as with other parties of this ilk, it just quietly disappeared when a new dictator came along and banned it by decree (in November 1967), absorbing the core of the class that had been in control. It is true that the Sudanese Union made a comeback, as one of the forces opposed to the dictatorship, but that happened only later, thanks to the steadfastness of a few historical leaders of the left wing of the party, including Madeira and Gologo. Meanwhile, Modibo was murdered in prison by a doctor whom he had asked for an injection. (The doctor later committed suicide, out of remorse for his cowardly compliance with orders.) Modibo's death transformed his historical figure into an emblem for resistance to the dictatorship, while his share of responsibility for the disaster was forgotten. That is a common phenomenon in history.

The degeneration of the Party brought with it a compensatory stepping up of rhetoric and gestures. Instead of being offered debates and education, the young were dragooned into 'militias' whose task it was to check the movement of cars at night. This was supposed to give them a way of ex-pressing

their revolt against ‘the rich’, but the whole operation was objectively grotesque. Police commissioners soon tired of being woken up every night by the haul of imaginary spies and saboteurs. Once, even Isabelle and I found ourselves under arrest because we had left our papers at home. We gave them a choice: either we go together to our house and you check our papers, or we go to the police station and wake up the authorities. I also mentioned the name ‘Madeira’, thinking that I would be able to make him see the absurdity of the whole thing. Anyway, the young militiamen became hesitant and frightened and eventually let us go on our way.

It seemed impossible to halt the slide. Seydou Badian Kouyaté, the first planning minister (until September 1962), bears a heavy responsibility for this. He was one of the few Malians – they could probably have been counted on the fingers of one hand – who had completed a university education before independence. As a doctor, he immediately qualified as a candidate for high office, even though he did not have a record of political activity; this made him particularly prone to make up for political shortcomings by turning up the rhetoric, which in turn pushed him closer to the ‘young wolves’ among whom he drew his clientele. The minister was not interested in planning and never seemed to grasp what it meant. His attention was focused on various hobby horses, mostly absurd little projects of one kind or another. For example, he wanted to set up a pasta factory, although there was no way in which that should have been a priority in a country that produced no wheat. My functions allowed me to hear many such stories, not all of them connected with Kouyaté’s hobby horses. Ministers in Africa (and elsewhere, I suppose) are visited by hordes of small businessmen (and big sharks), smooth talkers who try to sell them anything.

None of this would have mattered if Kouyaté had done what Bénard and our think-tank in Bamako expected of him: that is, to present and defend the Plan before the highest decision-making bodies, and to report back on their criticisms and suggestions. But he did neither. The explanation I heard a thousand times, from people at the top as well as further down, was that Kouyaté, being from the caste of griots, behaved ‘naturally’ as a professional flatterer. (Another griot – Diabaté, the richest trader in African objets d’art, a pleasant man without complexes, whose shop we often visited – once said to me: ‘There are two griots who’ve made it in this country: Kouyaté the minister, and me the rich merchant.’) I did not accept this explanation, however, nor do I today. Castes are a taboo subject in African societies where they exist: one is not supposed to discuss the issue, but only repeat a few clichés or display one’s encyclopaedic knowledge without discrimination. Of course, virtues and defects are not passed on in the blood but only through education, which can (or could) transform the relations in question, or even do away with them altogether. In any event, caste/class relations change as they adapt to modern economies and societies; they no longer have anything in common with what they represented in the original village society. Nevertheless, for a number of reasons, caste prejudices continue to operate in many societies, where it is hard to imagine that the president or chief of staff does not belong to a noble caste, whereas the information or police minister may well come from a ‘lower’ caste. Is this because such ministers perform the services of a domestic servant or someone specialized in inferior tasks: propaganda, espionage, torture? The planning ministry is therefore often entrusted to people who are expected to behave according to the schema, thereby confirming the idea of the Plan as a propaganda document that should not be taken too seriously. This, I believe, was the case in Mali.

On the positive side of the balance, Kouyaté paid dear for his devotion to the ruling group in the Sudanese Union; he was not one of those who turned coat on the day of its downfall. He spent long years in Kidal prison, in appalling conditions, together with Modibo, Madeira, Ousmane Ba and other leaders of the Sudanese Union left, even though he was not really on

the same wavelength as them despite his period of leftist rhetoric. This needs to be said, to give honour where honour is due.

My hopes rose a little in September 1962, when a government reshuffle placed the planning ministry in the hands of Jean Marie Koné. I interpreted this as a recognition that the planning ministry had to regain its authority if the downward drift was to be halted. Koné did not belong to the left of the Sudanese Union, but to the group of moderates. But I did not think it an unfortunate choice in the circumstances, as it was necessary to bend the stick a little in the other direction, and Koné had a certain authority as a historical leader of the movement. For me, the year of his reign was most agreeable. He asked questions – the real ones – and listened attentively to our analyses, comments and even proposals. But I think it was all too late; the die was already cast. None of the positions that he probably defended was followed through in practice.

My analysis of the degeneration placed a lot of the blame on the Malian leaders, but also, behind them, on the objective conditions of Malian society. Those conditions should not, however, be reduced to the historical legacy of colonization and the national liberation struggle. The international conjuncture of the 1960s, the main features of which I outlined above, also played a role that should not be underestimated.

At the time there was a political dispute between Mali and France, which was settled through low-key talks or unilateral decisions on Mali's part that Paris and neighbouring African countries appeared to accept – though not without reservations, manoeuvres and stratagems that created additional problems for the Malian project.

France had a military base at Kati, some 20 kilometres from Bamako, but Mali's support for the non-aligned cause led it to terminate the agreement under which the base existed. This caused some gnashing of teeth in Paris, as the Algerian war was only just nearing its end and there was perhaps still some idea of splitting the Sahara from Algeria to form an oil-producing client state. It is hardly necessary to add that Mali and Niger – which shared with Algeria that part of the Sahara and its basically Tuareg population – had every reason to feel uncomfortable about France's intentions.

Mali's decision to create a national currency in July 1962 was not regarded well in Paris, nor, for different reasons, in Dakar and Abidjan. Paris was eager to promote a single currency within the Franc Zone, and the 'pro-French' demonstration of retailers in Bamako against exchange controls had clearly been manipulated from outside. France stuck to its guns until 1962, when the IMF (that is, the United States) imposed without preparation a devaluation that opened a period of uncertainty in relations between France (and the post-Maastricht EU) and the associated African countries. In these countries, the alternative model proposed by Mali – first monetary independence, to create an African payments system or even monetary and economic integration – could find a positive echo. This vision, which the Guinea–Ghana–Mali union theoretically embraced, was not only the property of extreme nationalists; the ECA (the UN Economic Commission for Africa) developed similar themes, which English-speaking countries in Africa supported, at least in theory. To be sure, the appalling management of the Malian franc soon wiped out this potential and paved the way for the capitulation of 1967, when the Modibo regime itself begged to be readmitted to the Franc Zone. But that was a long way off in 1962, and the well-known position we advocated at the planning ministry – using the currency not to encourage sloppiness but to impose tighter discipline – could still have won through.

As early as 1961 we were discussing the creation of a national university in Bamako. The French voluntary workers proposed the classical model then in force everywhere, in France as in French-

speaking Africa, and rejected any other framework for cooperation. But Bamako rejected this approach, quite rightly in my view. Mali – and the planning ministry played a role in the business – suggested creating a number of grandes écoles: one for public administration and economic management (with departments specializing in law and justice, the civil service, public finances and economics, and enterprise management); one for the training of middle-level agricultural managers (first academic cycle) and agronomists (second cycle); a polytechnic (civil engineering, construction, mechanical engineering); a medical school (with a short first cycle); and a college for the training of secondary-school teachers. This was a far superior approach, which, if properly implemented, would have made it possible to avoid the shortcomings of the classical university. This is more or less what happened, and the weaknesses observable today do not reduce the strength of the arguments in its favour. The weaknesses have to do with other factors. Besides, classical-style universities suffer from the same problems and have by no means shown themselves to be better.

France was not the only external partner to have certain attitudes capable of hindering a positive outcome for the Malian project. The eastern bloc countries also bore some responsibility by bending the stick too far in the other direction. My view is that these countries, headed by the USSR, were only really interested in the diplomatic side of the choices made by Mali and like-minded regimes in Africa. It is true that they made a significant contribution to development, funding major projects and helping to correct balance-of-payments deficits. But their representatives were never prepared to discuss this contribution, only to negotiate the technical details of how it should be carried out. Their argument was that – unlike the EEC and the West in general, or the IMF with its restrictive conditions – they fully respected the independence of the countries they supported. Whether honest or specious, this justification encouraged the downward slide in Mali and other countries.

The slide was heading towards a full-scale disaster. I therefore saw less and less point in remaining in Bamako and finally left in October 1963. But my heart was (and is) still sufficiently attached to Mali for me to contemplate further missions there, in the hope that in the end they might help to put things back on an even keel.

There were three such missions between 1963 and 1966, each with the aim of analysing the chaotic Treasury accounts and proposing some short- to medium-term solutions. I had already had some experience of this in Cairo. In Mali we were facing a classical situation: an incredible interweaving of debts and claims between the Treasury and public enterprises, between different public enterprises, between public enterprises and the local private sector, and between all these and foreign debtors and creditors. The central bank was supposed to take responsibility for such matters, but it was failing to do so. I don't know whether this was because its president – Louis Nègre – was more an administrator than an economist, or whether other reasons were involved. In any event, they called on me to sort things out, and I did it willingly. Once the Treasury and public sector accounts were legible again, my recommendations were little more than common sense: to cancel mutual debts immediately and to consolidate outstanding balances on the best possible terms, with a view to taking the minimum steps in the next few years to wipe out non-structural deficits, and effecting a more basic reorientation that would allow Mali to correct its structural imbalances.

In the course of these missions, it became quite clear to me that the slide was turning into a debacle. All the deficits had grown worse by the year, and the headlong dash at the political level had accentuated a purely repressive response to the problems. I remember one painful evening that threw a sharp light on the reality of the situation. At a dinner organized by some friends of his, Louis Nègre, president of the central bank, complained of an orderly who had failed to greet him, and whom he had put in 'the clink' for his lack of politeness. Isabelle immediately remarked that the man's behaviour

had perhaps indicated the people's attitude towards the dignitaries of the regime, and that it was up to them – the leaders – to ask themselves whether this was so. The answer from everyone, including Macalou (whose slide to the right I had already had cause to regret), was: 'No, the whip, the whip: these people are worth nothing, they've got to be beaten for them to do things right.' Shortly afterwards the coup d'état put an end to the regime. And what did we see? Nearly every top cadre of the old regime, with the exception of the real left, changed sides in the twinkling of an eye and placed itself at the service of Moussa Traoré. Not only does that say a lot about the sincerity of their personal convictions; it also testifies to the objective fact that, despite a few demagogic gestures commonplace after a coup, the new regime inherited the legacy of the old and rested on the same shrivelled social base. It therefore continued to use the whip.

The rebirth of a popular movement, though difficult, was predictable. This has sometimes been attributed to the intrinsic qualities of the Malian people – combativeness, courage, and so on. But the reborn movement, which waged a glorious struggle in the face of mounting repression and eventually brought down the dictatorship, was largely a result of the history of the left: both that of the old Sudanese Union and that of the new generation that we had seen beginning to take shape. This may be the best aspect of the conditions that Modibism created, intentionally or otherwise.

Marxism–Leninism as such is certainly not responsible for the degeneration in Mali. Its teachings, though scholastic and somewhat fundamentalist, actually helped young people to become aware of the distance between theoretical principles and the reality of the regime. It therefore made a contribution to the rebirth of the Malian left. Its fundamentalism, at least in Mali, proved incomparably less negative than the neoliberal or Islamic fundamentalism that is today being offered to young people in distress.

The agrarian question

In intertropical Africa, the apparent survival of "customary" systems is certainly more visible because here the model of colonisation took a different and unique direction, known in French (the term has no translation in English) as "économie de traite". The administration of access to land was left to the so-called "customary" authorities, however, controlled by the colonial state (through traditional clan leaders, legitimate or otherwise, created by the administration). The purpose of this control was to force peasants to produce a quota of specific products for export (peanuts, cotton, coffee, cocoa) over and above what they required for their own subsistence. Maintaining a system of land tenure that did not rely on private property suited colonisation since no land rent entered into composition of the prices of the designated products. This resulted in land being wasted, destroyed by the expansion of crops, sometimes permanently (as illustrated by the desertification of peanut producing areas of Senegal). Yet again capitalism showed that its "short term rationale", an integral part of its dominant rationale, was in fact the cause of an ecological disaster. The combination of subsistence farming and the production of products for export also meant that the peasants were paid almost nothing for their work. To talk in these circumstances of a "customary land tenure system" is going far too far. It is a new regime that preserves only the appearance of "traditions" and often the least valuable of these.

In Mali following independence in September 1961, the Sudanese Union began what has very wrongly been described as "collectivisation". In fact, the cooperatives that were set up were not productive cooperatives, production remained the exclusive responsibility of family farms. It was a form of modernised collective authority that replaced the so-called "custom" on which colonial authority had depended. The party that took over this new modern power was clearly aware of the challenge and set the objective of abolishing customary forms of power that were deemed to be "reactionary" even

"feudal". It is true that this new peasant authority which was formally democratic (those in charge were elected) was in actual fact only as democratic as the state and the party. However, it had "modern" responsibilities, namely, to ensure that access to land was administered "correctly", that is to say, without "discrimination", to manage loans, the distribution of subsidies (supplied by state trade) and product marketing (also partly the responsibility of state trade). In practice, nepotism and extortion have certainly never been stamped out. The only response to these abuses should have been the progressive democratisation of the state and not its "retreat" as liberalism then imposed (by means of an extremely violent military dictatorship) to the benefit of the traders ("dioulas").