


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Dead-End Scandal in M'Pésoba: Local Politics and Colonial Justice in French West Africa, 1913–18

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Abstract

This article scrutinizes recent histories of colonial and international law that use metropolitan reactions to the ‘scandals of empire’ to project a reform-oriented version of European colonialism. In French West Africa, most scandals never reached the level of metropolitan debate; they hit dead ends in colonial bureaucracies. Analyzing one dead-end scandal, the M'Pésoba Affair, this article argues that colonial justice on the ground often adhered to a politics of expediency, not a reformist rule of law. To maintain their precarious grip on power, colonial administrators had to simultaneously appease their superiors, economic interests, and powerful African actors. Resolving the M'Pésoba Affair, for one, entailed navigating the complex entanglements of cotton production, chiefly disputes, Islamic policy, and interracial sexual relationships in a backwater of empire marked by anticolonial revolt and world war. Especially in moments of crisis, political constraints shaped the application of justice.

Keywords: Mali; West Africa; colonialism; law; politics

A defrocked priest, his three African wives, a village chief, and a series of ‘despotic’ French colonial administrators stand at the center of the M'Pésoba Affair, named for the small village in the French Soudan (Mali) where its events unfolded between 1913 and 1918.¹ Unlike the infamous ‘scandals of empire’, the M'Pésoba Affair never left the correspondence of the colonial administration of French West Africa (AOF).² Although scholars tend to fixate on major scandals — episodes involving conspicuous abuses perpetrated by colonial officials that escalated into metropolitan debate and legal reform — this trajectory hardly ever played out. Most scandals were triggered by events more banal than the egregious corruption and violence of Warren Hastings and Edward John Eyre: white men sleeping with African women, siphoning money from colonial coffers, or perpetrating petty crimes were far more common culprits.³ Scandals only rarely rose to the metropole’s scrutiny, typically hitting dead ends in colonial bureaucracies dedicated to quashing, not meaningfully addressing, tales of Europeans’ wrongdoings.

In AOF, dead-end scandals were the rule, not the exception. The initial French conquest of West Africa generated a series of well-publicized scandals, including the Voulet and Chanoine and Albert

¹M'Pésoba, today M'pessoba, is in Koutiala *cercle* in southeastern Mali. ‘Despotic’ alludes to Mahmood Mamdani’s term ‘decentralized despotism’: *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, 2018), 37–61.

²Nicholas Dirks’s term ‘scandal of empire’ refers to colonial crises that percolated up the metropole, were debated by metropolitan audiences, and, ultimately, led to legal reform: *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, 2006).

³This definition is similar to that of Kristen McKenzie, although she links significant scandal to ‘reform’: *Scandal in the Colonies: Sydney and Cape Town* (Melbourne, 2004). On Hastings, see Dirks, *Scandal*; J. Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, 2005), ch. 3; J. Pitts, *Boundaries of the International: Law and Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), ch. 4. On Eyre, see C. Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination* (Chicago, 2002); R. W. Kostal, *A Jurisprudence of Power: Victorian Empire and the Rule of Law* (Oxford, 2008); Pitts, *Liberalism*, 150–60.

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Jeandet Affairs.⁴ Chance encounters with rogue journalists produced a handful more in subsequent decades, detailing only the most extreme cases of administrative abuse: assault, torture, and murder.⁵ In general, the bureaucratic structure of AOF blocked the escalation of scandals. ‘Direct rule’ placed responsibility for investigating criminal incidents onto local colonial administrators, the *commandants de cercle* and their auxiliaries, who operated with little oversight.⁶ British-style metropolitan-ordered inquiries were extraordinary.⁷ And superior officers seldom questioned commandants’ reports, especially during frequent crises when attention was diverted elsewhere. Consequently, archives in former French colonial capitals are today littered with heaps of so-called ‘*affaires contentieuses*’, the remains of scandals that lived and died in the backwaters of empire.⁸

Dead-end scandals help illuminate the chasm between metropolitan legal discourse and colonial justice on the ground. Scholars of empire have pointed to major scandals as turning points in the development of colonial and international law.⁹ Following the popular refrain that the colonial encounter shaped Europe as much as it did the colonies, a growing number of historians suggest that scandals caused European publics and legislators to grapple with the monster within, promulgating reforms to better ‘order’ relations with the colonial other and restrain despotic power.¹⁰ Many argue the legally-defined boundaries between ‘colonial categories’ constituted the very center of European authority in the colonies, slowly ensnaring the world in an ‘empire of law’.¹¹ There is certainly truth to these narratives. The ‘scandals of empire’ did expose European publics — albeit

⁴On Jeandet, see D. Robinson, *Sociétés musulmanes et pouvoir colonial français au Sénégal et en Mauritanie* (Paris, 2004), 108–15; Y. Samp, ‘Affaire Albert Jeandet: la peine de mort sans procès’, *Révue malienne des sciences juridiques, politiques et économiques de Bamako*, 5 (2018), 221–64. On Voulet and Chanoine, see B. Taithe, *The Killer Trail: A Colonial Scandal in the Heart of Africa* (Oxford, 2009).

⁵These included the Pacha and Ouguiédoumé Affairs. J. P. Daughton, ‘The “Pacha affair” reconsidered: violence and colonial rule in interwar French Equatorial Africa’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 92 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1086/704569>; Y. Slobodkin, ‘State of violence: administration and reform in French West Africa’, *French Historical Studies*, 41:1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1215/00161071-4254607>.

⁶For the classic formulation of ‘direct rule’, see M. Crowder, *West Africa Under Colonial Rule* (London, 1968). On the role of the commandant, see R. Delavignette, *Freedom and Authority in French West Africa* (Oxford, 1950).

⁷British metropolitan-initiated inquiries form the base of the ‘scandals of empire’ literature; similar inquiries (*enquêtes*) occurred in the French Empire but were generally conducted by the commandant, not an external party.

⁸‘*Affaires contentieuses*’ is a series held by the Archives nationales du Sénégal, Dakar (ANS), treating administrative abuse. B. Ndiaye and M. Touré, *Repertoire du fonds affaires contentieuses* (Dakar, 2001). Many scandals are, moreover, buried in dossiers treating general political or judicial affairs. The M’Pésoba Affair’s primary documentation, for example, is found in Archives nationales du Mali, Bamako (ANM) 2M20, a folder containing correspondence from Koutiala cercle concerning ‘native justice’. Preliminary research suggests series 1E and 2M at ANM and series EE and MM at the Archives nationales de Côte d’Ivoire, Abidjan (ANCI), contain more undetected *affaires*.

⁹Most notable is L. Benton and L. Ford, *Rage for Order: The British Empire and the Origins of International Law* (Cambridge, MA, 2016). See also J. Epstein, *Scandal of Colonial Rule: Power and Subversion in the British Atlantic during the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge, 2012); A. Fitzmaurice, ‘Liberalism and empire in nineteenth-century international law’, *American Historical Review*, 117:1 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.117.1.122>; E. Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge, 2010); E. Kolsky, ‘The colonial rule of law and the legal regime of exception: frontier “fanaticism” and state violence in British India’, *American Historical Review*, 120:4 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/120.4.1218>; Kostal, *Jurisprudence*; Pitts, *Boundaries*.

¹⁰This dictum was made famous by F. Cooper and A. Stoler, ‘Between metropole and colony: rethinking a research agenda’, in F. Cooper and A. Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Culture in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, 1997). See also Hall, *Civilising*, esp. 8–12; A. Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, 2002).

¹¹See Benton and Ford, *Rage*, ch. 1. This term also refers to a debate between Emmanuelle Saada and Gregory Mann. Saada proposes that the French Empire is best understood as an ‘empire of law’ because legal segregation furthered domination; force was never enough, and laws buttressed ‘colonial categories’ to ensure rule. Mann suggests that arbitrary violence, not the elaboration of legal concepts, was at the heart of French authority in AOF. E. Saada, ‘The empire of law: dignity, prestige, and domination in the “colonial situation”’, *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 20:2 (2002), <https://doi.org/10.3167/153763702782369795>; G. Mann, ‘What was the *indigénat*? The “empire of law” in French West Africa’, *The Journal of African History*, 50:3 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853709990090>. On ‘colonial categories’, see Stoler, *Carnal*, esp. ch. 2.

briefly — to the horrors of imperialism, normalizing socially, politically, and legally the violence inherent to the colonial project.¹² European legal fantasies, in turn, doubtlessly blueprinted the moral and social politics that undergirded colonial rule.¹³ However, historians of Africa have countered that emphasizing the pursuit of legal reform draws attention away from the arbitrary surveillance, extrajudicial sanctions, and categorical violence that maintained everyday colonial domination.¹⁴ On the ground, colonial policies were filtered through the needs of the local administration with pushback from African actors, generating myriad ‘unintended consequences’.¹⁵ There was no even rule of law. Dead-end scandals add to these insights. They demonstrate that officers ‘on the spot’ derived their authority from the disorder and ambiguity tolerated — even encouraged — by institutions of colonial justice.

On the local level, diverse political factors, largely outside Europeans’ control, dictated the shape of this justice.¹⁶ Contrary to popular stereotypes of AOF’s commandants as ‘*rois de la brousse*’, colonial administrators were far from omnipotent.¹⁷ Beyond the ‘circle of iron’, Africans regularly forced colonial officials to accede to their political demands.¹⁸ For without appeasement to some extent, it would have been impossible to maintain their tenuous grasp on power.¹⁹ In their application of justice, commandants did not rely predominately on an ‘imperial constitution’ but on a politics of expediency.²⁰ This politics sought to balance administrative priorities with the demands of Africans and other economic and social concerns in a complex cost-benefit analysis that revealed itself most clearly in moments of crisis.²¹ During the initial conquest, the World Wars, and periodic rebellions, administrative oversight in AOF was either nonexistent or directed elsewhere.²² Zones distant from

¹²This central argument of Dirks, *Scandal*, is echoed notably in Pitts, *Liberalism*.

¹³Judith Surkis argues convincingly that legal ‘fantasies’ surrounding Algerian women shaped legal policy in that colony, albeit incoherently. *Sex, Law, and Sovereignty in French Algeria, 1830–1930* (Ithaca, NY, 2019).

¹⁴See, notably, E. Burrill, *States of Marriage: Gender, Justice, and Rights in Colonial Mali* (Athens, OH, 2015), esp. 10–12; J. P. Daughton, *In the Forest of No Joy: The Congo-Océan Railroad and the Tragedy of French Colonialism* (New York, 2021); K. Keller, *Colonial Suspects: Suspicion, Imperial Rule, and Colonial Society in Interwar French Africa* (Lincoln, NE, 2018); Mann, ‘Indigénat’.

¹⁵R. L. Roberts, ‘Africa and empire: the unintended consequences’, in T. Falola and E. Brownell (eds.), *Africa, Globalization, and Empire: Essays in Honor of A.G. Hopkins* (Durham, NC, 2011), 399–416.

¹⁶Here, ‘colonial justice’ refers to the adjudication of criminal matters beyond the *indigénat*. Civil adjudication, although not impervious to the colonial administration’s interference, was generally viewed as less politically sensitive. R. L. Roberts, *Litigants and Households: African Disputes and the Colonial Courts in the French Soudan* (Portsmouth, NH, 2005), ch. 2.

¹⁷The phrase ‘kings of the bush’, invented by historian Henri Brunshwig, describes the unbridled authority of the commandant. *Noirs et blancs dans l’Afrique noire française, ou comment le colonisé devient le colonisateur* (Paris, 1983), 143. On the commandant, see Delavignette, *Freedom*. Mann’s interpretation of the commandant assumes relative ‘despotism’ in matters of ‘justice’. ‘Indigénat’, esp. 339–40.

¹⁸Circle of iron’ is Emily Osborn’s term to describe the network of African intermediaries surrounding the commandant and limiting his authority. “‘Circle of iron’”: African colonial employees and the interpretation of colonial rule in French West Africa’, *The Journal of African History*, 44:1 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853702008307>. See also B. N. Lawrance, E. L. Osborn, and R. L. Roberts (eds.), *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (Madison, 2006).

¹⁹On the weakness of the colonial state in Africa and ‘appeasement’ or ‘collaboration’, see S. Berry, *No Condition is Permanent: The Social Dynamics of Agrarian Change in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Madison, 1993), ch. 2; R. Robinson, ‘Non-European foundations of European imperialism: sketch for a theory of collaboration’, in R. Owen and R. B. Sutcliffe (eds.), *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism* (London, 1972), 117–42; and Slobodkin, ‘Violence’, 35.

²⁰On ‘imperial constitutions’, see Benton and Ford, *Rage*, 13–18; and L. Benton, ‘From international law to imperial constitutions: the problem of quasi-sovereignty, 1870–1900’, *Law & Society Review*, 26:3 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0738248000002583>.

²¹This argument parallels that of Thomas Spear on the limitations of colonial power in the ‘invention’ of customary law. Colonial authorities could not unilaterally determine legal ‘custom’ because of push-back from African elites. ‘Neo-traditionalism and the limits of invention in British colonial Africa’, *The Journal of African History*, 44:1 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853702008320>.

²²This builds on Megan Vaughan’s idea of ‘revealing crises’, upheavals that unveil underlying social and political tensions: *The Story of an African Famine: Gender and Famine in Twentieth-Century Malawi* (Cambridge, 1987).

colonial capitals were particularly susceptible to the vagaries of local political conditions as commandants there possessed few resources to ‘broadcast’ their power.²³ Concessions had to be made to ensure domination.

This article examines one dead-end scandal, the M’Pésoba Affair, to demonstrate how colonial justice on the local level was often determined by the politics of expediency. The extraordinary cast of characters at the scandal’s center, its remote location, and its timeframe during the upheaval of the First World War help reveal the political machinations of colonial justice, generally hidden behind layer upon layer of ‘colonial common sense’.²⁴ Reading archival records of dead-end scandals ‘along the grain’ uncovers the oft-unstated anxieties and preoccupations of colonial rule; it also helps articulate the shape of a local social and political world, full of contradictions and complexity, generally concealed from view. An analysis of the M’Pésoba Affair not only helps uncover the priorities of colonial justice in AOF, it also unveils the fluctuations of a complex political landscape reeling from the early effects of French colonization.

French conquest dramatically undermined precolonial forms of political authority in the Soudan. Before colonization, M’Pésoba was situated in a no man’s land of Minianka-speaking villages nestled between the powerful Ségou and KénéDougou empires.²⁵ Political power was diffuse there: villages comprised of patrilineal kin groups, and inter-village alliances were temporary and tenuous at best. Community authority was divided evenly between ‘political’ and ‘spiritual’ leaders, intimately entangled with *bamanaya* religious practice.²⁶ When the French arrived, they ignored the political authority of spiritual leaders, narrowly defining the role of village chief. This action granted select men and their lineages newfound authority, exacerbating political, social, and religious tensions within villages. The wave of Islamic conversion that swept the French Soudan in the early twentieth century further aggravated these tensions.²⁷ As some chiefs and villagers abandoned *bamanaya* and converted to Islam, conflicts over authority reached a boiling point.

Cotton exploitation and World War magnified local political conflict. Koutiala *cercle*, the region surrounding M’Pésoba, produced much of the Soudan’s cotton. Before colonization, this cotton went to African craftsmen, who wove textiles for local consumption.²⁸ But by 1910, the cotton went instead to the colonial administration which, partnering with the private Colonial Cotton Association (ACC), sold it to trading firms in Bamako and Kayes. Maintaining the lucrative cotton trade entailed navigating delicate conflicts over authority within African communities. Cotton had to be grown by villagers, ginned in local factories, and transported by African porters. This process demanded a close collaboration between African notables, colonial administrators, and private enterprise. When the First World War broke out, political conflicts exacerbated the difficulties facing an already weakened colonial administration. Koutiala’s inhabitants vigorously opposed

²³On ‘broadcasting power’, see J. Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton, 2000), ch. 3. See also Richard Roberts’s fog metaphor for the uneven distribution of colonial power: *Two Worlds of Cotton: Colonialism and the Regional Economy in the French Soudan* (Stanford, 1996), 16.

²⁴This term refers to the political priorities and local context that often went unwritten in accounts of scandal because they were assumed by colonial authors. A. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, 2008), 3–4 and ch. 2, esp. 53. See also Sean Hanretta’s parallel discussion of the ‘ghosts of the archive’: *Islam and Social Change in French West Africa* (Cambridge, 2009), ch. 4.

²⁵Étienne Péroz notes M’Pésoba was ‘nominally’ part of the Ségou Empire: *Au Niger: récits de campagnes* (Paris, 1895), 365. See also D. Jonckers, *La société minyanaka du Mali: traditions communautaires et développement cotonnier* (Paris, 1987), 122–34.

²⁶Jonckers, *Minyanaka*, ch. 6; D. Jonckers, ‘La sacralisation du pouvoir chez les Minyanaka du Mali’, *Systèmes de pensée en Afrique noire*, 10 (1990), <https://doi.org/10.4000/span.919>.

²⁷On this wave of conversion, see B. Peterson, *Islamization from Below: The Making of Muslim Communities in the Rural French Soudan* (New Haven, 2011), esp. 3–6, 111–15.; J.-L. Triaud, ‘Introduction’, in D. Robinson and J.-L. Triaud (eds.), *Le temps des marabouts: itinéraires et stratégies islamiques en Afrique occidentale française* (Paris, 1997), 11–31; R. Launay and B. Soares, ‘The formation of an “Islamic sphere” in French colonial West Africa’, *Economy and Society*, 28 (1999), <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085149900000015>.

²⁸Roberts, *Cotton*, esp. ch. 2.

French recruitment efforts, sparking military scuffles in every corner of the cercle. In 1916, aversion to conscription sparked the largest revolt AOF ever saw: the Volta-Bani War.²⁹ The region's administrators desperately attempted to contain the rebellion, while still exporting their cotton quotas. The M'Pésoba Affair cannot be understood outside this wartime context. Armed rebellion laid bare the politics of expediency at the heart of French colonial justice.

A dead-end scandal in two parts

Naba Kamara fell violently ill. So, too, did her co-wives. The three African women lived together with their French husband, a man named Hilarion Fau, in the small village of M'Pésoba. In the ensuing court case, Kamara described what happened that night in January 1913:

It was dinnertime, and I was seated with three women, like me living with Monsieur Fau, in a room joining the dining room and serving as an office, when, like usual, Massa, young boy of Mr. Fau, brought us the leftover dessert, that day some pieces of papaya. We bit into them in complete confidence, but while we were still on the first mouthful my neighbors and I, we noticed simultaneously that the fruit betrayed a strong bitter taste. No suspicion occurred to us, to the point that we still ate a few more mouthfuls of the papaya; but soon enough we all began vomiting and suffering from violent headaches. This state extended throughout the night until my stomach began to swell, worsening my pain.³⁰

In the morning, Kamara told her white husband that she had been poisoned and proposed the bold claim that Sigoua Coulibaly, M'Pésoba's village chief, was behind it. Hearing his wife's allegations, Fau summoned his young servant, Massa, for questioning: Massa admitted he had put powder on the slices of papaya, believing it to be a 'love potion'. Fau then invited Sigoua to his compound and, when he offered the village chief some of the poisoned papaya, Sigoua 'energetically refused it, protesting that the fruit could be poisoned'.³¹ This was all the evidence Fau needed. He jumped on his horse and rode to Koutiala, the cercle's capital. There, he met his close friend, Commandant Ernest Augustin Bleu, who agreed to investigate the matter. Political poisonings — real and imagined — were common in the region, lending credence to Kamara's claims.³² As the wife of a European trader and a powerful political actor in her own right, Kamara was a real target. Bleu's willingness to investigate Sigoua also stemmed from the closeness of his relationship with Fau; the men were two of only seven Europeans in a three-thousand square mile region inhabited by nearly 220,000 Africans.³³ Not to mention the ACC, Fau's employer, was central to the economic development of Koutiala.

²⁹M. Saul and P. Royer, *West African Challenge to Empire: Culture and History in the Volta-Bani Anticolonial War* (Athens, OH, 2001); P. Royer, 'La guerre coloniale du Bani-Volta, 1915–1916', *Autrepart*, 26:2 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.3917/autr.026.0035>. For a fictional interpretation, see N. Boni, *Crépuscule des temps anciens* (Paris, 1962).

³⁰ANM 2M20, Tribunal du Cercle de Koutiala, 'Extraits du jugement', 13 Feb. 1913. The incident occurred on 27 Jan. 1913. All documents cited from ANM are located in the *fonds anciens*. All translations from French are my own unless noted otherwise.

³¹Sigoua is alternatively spelled 'Sigo' in the records; I have chosen the former for consistency. I refer to Sigoua Coulibaly, N'Golopé Coulibaly, and Massa Coulibaly by their first names because they share a common surname (no relation). I refer to all other actors, barring direct quotations, by their surnames.

³²Similar political poisonings occurred in northern Côte d'Ivoire. ANCI 2MM76, Commandant du Cercle de Kong, 'Affaire Tuson Tiono', Sept. 1924. On French knowledge of poison in the region, see C. Barrière, 'Techniques d'agression magique en pays bamana: emprunts réciproques entre islam et religion traditionnelle', *Journal des africanistes*, 69:1 (1999), <https://doi.org/10.3406/jafr.1999.1192>; E. Dupouy, 'Le korté, poison d'épreuve au Soudan', *Archives de médecine navale*, 43:153 (1885), 153–4; H. Labouret, 'La sorcellerie au Soudan occidental', *Africa*, 8:4 (1935), <https://doi.org/10.2307/3180593>.

³³*Annuaire du Gouvernement Général de l'AOF, 1913–1914* (Paris, 1914), 761.

Bleu's investigation revealed a love scandal. In his initial report, Bleu claimed that Massa, Fau's servant boy, was in love with Naba Kamara and that he had enlisted N'Golopé Coulibaly, Fau's stable boy, to help him seduce her.³⁴ N'Golopé was 17 years old; Massa only 12.³⁵ But hearing of Massa's passion for the Frenchman's wife, N'Golopé agreed to help him 'possess her'. Together, they approached 'a village thaumaturge', a leper named Ouara Diallo, who agreed to make them a 'love potion'.³⁶ After receiving the potion from Diallo, Massa sprinkled it on Kamara and her co-wives' food. Only after the three women began vomiting did Massa realize he had inadvertently poisoned the object of his affection.

A remarkably different narrative emerged when the trial convened in Koutiala two weeks later. The matter was heard before the *tribunal de cercle* on which sat two African judges — one Muslim and one non-Muslim — and Bleu's European assistant, Adjoint-Administrator Féron. From the start, Naba Kamara attempted to pin the poisoning on Sigoua Coulibaly. She claimed the chief had threatened her in the past, yelling at her: 'You! I'll play a dirty trick on you!' Other than Sigoua, Kamara maintained, she had 'nothing but friends in M'Pésoba'. Suspiciously, Massa radically changed his story, testifying that N'Golopé had handed him a sachet with directions to 'take it and pour the powder in it over the food of Naba and her companions whom Sigoua has decided must die'. N'Golopé admitted giving the sachet to Massa but he denied knowing it was poison. He swore that when he went to see Ouara Diallo to get the powder the night before the incident, Diallo told him the powder 'brought about well-being' and was 'completely inoffensive'. The testimony was entirely contradictory.

The remaining witnesses did little to clarify the matter. The judges solicited the testimony of a man named Baba who claimed he overheard N'Golopé and Diallo discussing the poison the day of the attempted murder. N'Golopé reversed course: 'It's Sigoua, [Diallo] told me; he wants to end the days of Mr. Fau's *moussos* [wives]'.³⁷ Nonetheless, Ouara Diallo attested that he only gave N'Golopé and Massa a 'medication to go look for a woman', knowing nothing of the plot. Similarly, Sigoua maintained his innocence, although conceding he 'was not on very good terms with Naba' because of 'the damages caused by her sheep to [his] fields'. The village chief decried the antipodal nature of the evidence against him, accusing the witnesses of being 'nothing but the instrument' of those who wanted to see him 'removed from [his] duties as chief'. Despite the vast discrepancies in the testimony, the judges were convinced of Sigoua's guilt. Sigoua and Diallo were sentenced to a year in prison and N'Golopé to six months.³⁸ Because of his youth, Massa was let off with a warning, so long as he worked as the unpaid servant of the commandant. Sigoua Coulibaly was further banished from M'Pésoba and stripped of his duties as village chief.

But the M'Pésoba Affair was far from over. During the Volta-Bani War, Sigoua interfered repeatedly in M'Pésoba's internal politics from exile. Bleu was largely successful in circumventing his influence but was replaced in 1918 by a new commandant: François-Joseph Cornet. This was the chance Sigoua had been waiting for. He petitioned Cornet, accusing Naba Kamara and Hilarion Fau of lying five years prior to have him exiled. Sigoua claimed the couple had framed him in 1913. Cornet agreed. Sensing irregularities in Massa's testimony, he called in Fau's young servant for questioning. Fau, who had rehired Massa a mere month after the 1913 incident, came, too,

³⁴ANM 2M20, Commandant du Cercle of Koutiala (CCK) to Lieutenant-Governor of Haut-Sénégal-Niger (LtG), Letter 16C, 24 Nov. 1918.

³⁵ANM 2M75, CCK, 'Rapport sur la justice indigène', 1 Apr. 1913.

³⁶ANM 2M20, CCK to LtG, Letter 16C, 24 Nov. 1918.

³⁷Here, *moussos* refers to Fau's 'wives', to whom he was married 'à la mode du pays'. On this practice, see R. Jean-Baptiste, 'A black girl should not be with a white man': sex, race, and African women's social and legal status in colonial Gabon', *Journal of Women's History*, 22:2 (2010), 66, 74, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.0.0140>; O. White, *Children of the French Empire: Miscegenation and Colonial Society in French West Africa* (Oxford, 1999), ch. 1.

³⁸ANM 2M75, CCK, 'Rapport sur la justice indigène', 1 Apr. 1913. The *Chambre d'homologation* increased these penalties to 18 months for Sigoua and Diallo and one year for N'Golopé. ANM 2M20, CCK to LtG, Letter 16C, 24 Nov. 1918.

whispering in Bamanankan in the young man's ear.³⁹ During the first interview, Massa said nothing. But in the weeks that followed, Massa's father and then brother came to inform the commandant that Massa had lied under threat.⁴⁰ In a second interrogation, Cornet came to a startling realization:

- Q: Why did you accuse Sigoua before the judges?
 A: Because I was pushed to do it by Naba and her lover Baba. I was very young; I let myself be influenced; I obeyed Naba's commands.
 Q: Did Mr. Fau push you to accuse Sigoua?
 A: No, but he knew that Naba was pushing me to do it.

The interrogation continued:

- Q: Didn't you tell Mr. Fau that Sigoua was innocent?
 A: Yes. The day after the one where I poured the powder on the food, Mr. Fau called for Sigoua. Before those two, I declared that he was not involved at all in the matter.
 Q: Why, then, did you give false testimony to the court?
 A: I didn't do anything other than obey the suggestions of Mr. Fau and Naba.⁴¹

Not only had Massa lied to the court, so had the eyewitness Baba, whose testimony implicated N'Golopé and Diallo. According to Massa's new attestation, there had been no poisoning. Naba Kamara, her French husband, and — apparently — her lover had fabricated the incident to force out the village chief. Their exact motive was unclear, but Cornet decided that Sigoua Coulibaly was indeed innocent.

Cornet had trouble gauging how to react to the scandal. Fau and the ACC were important to the economic health of the cercle; the man had been a close friend of his predecessor. What good would it do to arrest him for crimes including perjury, witness tampering, and filing a false claim? Naba Kamara, on the other hand, was a perfect scapegoat. Cornet penned three letters to the lieutenant-governor in Bamako, vamping on tropes of the hypersexualized African woman to present Kamara as the 'personage of primary culpability' in the scandal. He depicted Fau as a 'Jesuitic and cautious spirit' corrupted by a seductress who 'bullies him, cheats on him, publicly ridicules him, steals from him, and makes him do as she pleases, like a puppet'.⁴² Cornet assured his superior that 'Mr. Fau will not fail to adopt a more correct attitude towards French authorities' if and when Kamara were punished with 'severe judicial sanctions'.⁴³ A failure to reprimand her, he warned, would severely diminish 'the prestige of our justice in the eyes of those we administer'.⁴⁴

Although no evidence in the archive supported it, Cornet claimed that Kamara had incited revolt during the Volta-Bani War.⁴⁵ He asserted that she had hosted a 'mutilated *tirailleur* who made anti-French propaganda in M'Pésoba, imploring families not to give up their children' to French recruiters. She even contributed to the armed revolt, Cornet protested, encouraging villagers to

³⁹ANM 2M20, CCK, 'Procès-verbal d'interrogatoire', 28 Oct. 1918.

⁴⁰ANM 2M20, CCK to LtG, Letter 16C, 24 Nov. 1918.

⁴¹ANM 2M20, CCK, 'Procès-verbal d'interrogatoire', 27 Nov. 1918.

⁴²ANM 2M20, CCK to LtG, Letter 16C, 24 Nov. 1918. On stereotypes of African women's sexuality, see R. Jean-Baptiste, 'Miss Eurafrica': men, women's sexuality, and métis identity in late-colonial French Africa', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 20:3 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1353/sex.2011.0053>; T. D. Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham, NC, 1999); White, *Children*.

⁴³ANM 2M20, LtG to CCK, Letter, Dec. 1918.

⁴⁴ANM 1E50, CCK to LtG, Letter 17C, 27 Dec. 1918.

⁴⁵None of Bleu's reports corroborate Cornet's allegations. It is possible further records exist in inaccessible local archives. On Koutiala archives, see G. Mann, 'Dust to dust: a user's guide to local archives in Mali', *History in Africa*, 26 (1999), <https://doi.org/10.2307/3172151>.

make ‘thousands of arrows’ while inviting marabouts who ‘preached resistance’. Cornet also alleged that his predecessor, Commandant Bleu, had improperly wielded his authority by acquitting Kamara of slave trading in 1917 and entirely ignored the brothel she established in a few huts owned by her husband. Fau had used his friendship with Bleu to ensure his wife’s freedom. These blatant violations of the law, Cornet argued, necessitated Naba’s permanent banishment from the cercle. It would be best for all involved, even Fau, who would ‘gain peace in not finding his name mixed up in these big scandals’.

The lieutenant-governor seemed unconvinced that the case was worthy of reevaluation. He noted that Naba Kamara could not be banished without the approval of the governor-general of AOF, and he expressed reluctance to elevate the matter. He wrote Cornet: ‘I approve of the attitude you have adopted regarding Mr. Fau, which is informed by the worry of hindering the intensification of cotton production in your cercle. I appreciate the tact and consideration you have brought to the exercise of your functions, and I do not doubt that you will come to solve the questions that occupy you in a way that will ensure the political and economic stability of your region’.⁴⁶ The scandal hit a dead end; Fau and Kamara got away scot-free. The need to maintain ‘the political and economic stability’ of Koutiala cercle outranked the imperative to punish lawbreakers. The only one who benefited from Cornet’s investigation was Sigoua Coulibaly, who returned to his post as village chief of M’Pésoba, where he served until his death in 1923.⁴⁷

Local politics and colonial justice

There is no easy truth to the M’Pésoba Affair. Unlike the ‘scandals of empire’, which attracted media speculation, public curiosity, and reform-minded parliamentarians, this dead-end scandal was settled, like most, within the confines of the colonial administration. Its two contradictory resolutions reflect the ever-shifting political priorities of colonial rule in the region. In 1913, Sigoua Coulibaly was banished from M’Pésoba on scant evidence and, in 1918, was reinstated to his role on little more than conjecture. The fall and rise of Sigoua suggests that colonial justice in AOF, especially during moments of crisis, relied heavily on the politics of expediency, a complex balancing act between the political priorities of the administration and the reality of what could be accomplished on the ground. While removing Sigoua in 1913 was politically expedient, regardless of whether the accusations made against him were true, by 1918 his banishment became a political liability.

Sigoua Coulibaly’s 1913 banishment can only be understood in the context of Koutiala cercle’s complex political landscape. Conquered by French colonial forces under the command of Faama Mademba Sèye in 1893, M’Pésoba was considered a backwater.⁴⁸ Political organization in the region depended on village associations (*tonw*) and inter-village alliances.⁴⁹ The power of these organizations and the laughably ‘thin white line’ in the region caused one early Koutiala administrator to lament that region’s inhabitants did not ‘see the whites as anything but a fictitious authority’.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ ANM 1E50, LtG to CCK, Letter, 11 Jan. 1919.

⁴⁷ *Journal officiel du Soudan français*, 17:383 (15 May 1922), 156; and 18:409 (15 June 1923), 149.

⁴⁸ ‘Renseignements coloniaux et documents publiés’, supp. to *Bulletin du Comité de l’Afrique française* (Paris, Jan. 1896), 8, 35. On Mademba Sèye, see R. L. Roberts, *Conflicts of Colonialism: The Rule of Law, French Soudan, and Faama Mademba Sèye* (Cambridge, 2022).

⁴⁹ On the *tonw*, see Jonckers, *Minyanka*, 110–12; R. L. Roberts, ‘Production and reproduction of warrior states: Segou Bambara and Segou Tukolor, c. 1712–1890’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 13:3 (1980), 403–6, <https://doi.org/10.2307/218950>.

⁵⁰ ANM 1E50, CCK, ‘Rapport politique annuel’, 1900; and ‘Rapport politique annuel’, 1901. On the minute size of colonial administrations in Africa, see A. H. M. Kirk-Greene, ‘Thin white line: the size of the British colonial service in Africa’, *African Affairs*, 79 (1980), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.afraf.a097197>. One Koutiala commandant remarked that most Africans there had ‘not seen a European in a long time’. ANM 1E50, CCK, ‘Rapport politique’, Apr. 1905; and ‘Rapport politique’, 1 May 1906.

Tax collection exposed the truth behind his observation. In 1903, an African intermediary collecting taxes in M'Pésoba was 'threatened and even hit', which led to the trial of several villagers in the native court.⁵¹ A year later, the commandant ordered soldiers to raid a neighboring village and kidnap six notables, imprisoning them until taxes were paid as ransom.⁵² Violence was so normalized in the region that, in the midst of his kidnap and ransom scheme, the commandant calmly reported to his superiors that 'from the point of view of tax collection, pacification has made some progress'.⁵³

Infighting presented constant dilemmas for Koutiala's colonial administrators as African leaders refused to play by French rules. Following the conquest, the colonial administration attempted to delineate clear boundaries between villages and cantons, confining chiefs' power to legible zones of influence. But this did not suit African politicians, whose authority depended on expanding their access to land and labor. In 1908, two villages neighboring M'Pésoba came to blows over access to hunting grounds. Demonstrating 'a peccant spirit of independence' from the commandant's authority, the village chiefs urged their followers to 'exchange arrows and gunfire' to seize the territory.⁵⁴ Beyond outright warfare, supernatural poisons (*kòròtiw*) — deployed by animists and Muslims alike — provided means to attain political ends. Not all *kòròtiw* were literal poisons; they included multifarious methods for toppling one's enemies, from secret incantations to amulets and charms. African elites relied on practitioners of *kòròtiw* to both protect them and defeat their opponents.⁵⁵ Indigenous methods of political dispute alarmed colonial officials, who could not grasp how to regulate these alternate arenas of combat.

Women, too, played active roles in local political conflicts. Although they were excluded from most formal positions of power, women did form and manage their own *tonw*.⁵⁶ Like many women's societies in West Africa, the relative power of these associations declined with the onset of patriarchal colonial politics.⁵⁷ As men unanimously filled roles as village chiefs, women became progressively marginalized. In 1903, the Koutiala commandant noted that women were 'rowdy' in many areas of the cercle, protesting the reorganization of village political structures.⁵⁸ Such accounts disappear within the decade. This background suggests that Naba Kamara's distaste for Sigoua Coulibaly may have gone beyond personal animosity: her attempts to usurp the village chief reflected the frustrations of many African women who found themselves increasingly sidelined by male politicians.

In Koutiala's fraught political landscape, Sigoua Coulibaly proved to be an exceptionally large thorn in the local administration's side. As the ACC, Hilarion Fau's employer, began construction of its cotton ginning factory in M'Pésoba in 1909, Sigoua started stirring up trouble. During the mass Muslim conversion that swept the French Soudan in the early twentieth century, M'Pésoba divided into two factions: one animist, led by a man named Niara, the other Muslim, steered by Sigoua Coulibaly. Things came to a head when Sigoua accused Niara's faction of 'not participating in paying taxes' and 'preparing [poison] powder and arrows to attack them'.⁵⁹ The commandant

⁵¹ANM 1E50, CCK, 'Rapport politique', 30 June 1903; 'Rapport politique', 21 Aug. 1903; 'Rapport politique', 28 Aug. 1903; and 'Rapport politique, année 1903', 31 Dec. 1903.

⁵²ANM 1E50, CCK, 'Rapport politique', 31 Mar. 1904; and 'Rapport politique', 1 Sep. 1904.

⁵³ANM 1E50, CCK, 'Rapport politique annuel', 31 Dec. 1904. For other examples of violence during tax collection, see ANM 1E50, CCK, 'Rapport annuel, 1906', n.d.; and ANM 1E205, CCK to LtG, Letter 141, 8 Apr. 1905.

⁵⁴ANM 1E50, CCK, 'Rapport politique', 1 June 1908.

⁵⁵On *kòròtiw*, see P. R. McNaughton, 'Language, art, secrecy, and power: the semantics of dalilu', *Anthropological Linguistics*, 24:4 (1982), 487–505. See also n32 above.

⁵⁶D. Jonckers, 'Chez les Minyanka: Mali', *Cahiers du GRIF*, 29 (1984), <https://doi.org/10.3406/grif.1984.1630>.

⁵⁷On this pattern elsewhere, see J. Van Allen, "'Sitting on a man": colonialism and the lost political institutions of Igbo women', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 6:2 (1972), <https://doi.org/10.2307/484197>.

⁵⁸ANM 1E50, CCK, 'Rapport politique', 3 Mar. 1903.

⁵⁹ANM 1E50, CCK, 'Rapport politique', 1 May 1909. Poison arrows were well documented in the region and gave legitimacy to Naba Kamara's claims. J. B. A. Chevalier, *Exploration botanique de l'Afrique occidentale française, Volume I* (Paris, 1920), 548–9; P. Dornan, *Âmes soudanaises* (Paris, 1906), 57, 128.

intervened, ultimately imprisoning both men after Sigoua marched on Koutiala with 300 villagers to demand his appointment as sole chief of M'Pésoba. Sigoua was troublesome, but the weakness of the regional administration demanded concessions be made. Estimating that 2,300 of 2,700 villagers supported him, the commandant freed Sigoua and installed him as village chief in return for the promise of peace.

The conflict between Sigoua and Niara indicated broader political cleavages in Koutiala cercle. It is likely Niara came from a lineage that led the *bamanaya* initiation society (*yapèrè folo*) whereas Sigoua descended from a family that managed land tenure (*ninge folo*) or administrative affairs (*kulu folo*) for the village.⁶⁰ Indeed, before the French conquest, there was no single 'village chief'; rather, a diverse mélange of *tonw* (men's and women's), family heads, neighborhood chiefs, and a handful of specialized spiritual and political leaders jointly managed village affairs. Islam and colonial rule threatened this delicate balance.⁶¹ The conversion of Sigoua and the majority of M'Pésoba to Islam undermined Niara's authority as *yapèrè folo*. The new religion disparaged *bamanaya* initiation societies, diminishing the influence of elders over newly initiated youths. Sigoua's designation as the sole village chief, likewise, reduced Niara's stature by excluding him from a formal political position.

The *politique des races*, an expression of French paranoia about 'Islamic fanaticism', threatened Sigoua's hold on power shortly after his appointment. The policy, launched around 1911, instructed administrators to grant preference to animists over Muslims in governing local populations to discourage the spread of Islam.⁶² On *tournee* in early January 1913, Commandant Bleu discovered Sigoua hosting a 'marabout from Sansanding' and ordered him imprisoned for 15 days for insubordination.⁶³ During the same trip, Bleu noted 'numerous complaints against Sigoua'. Villagers alleged that he had 'asked for higher taxes than they ought to pay' and improperly kept 'the money given to him by Europeans passing through to pay for food, eggs, chickens, and millet'. Many wanted to elevate Niara, Sigoua's animist rival, as chief. 'They now regret having abandoned their fetishes and their sacred snakes and would like to return to Niara', Bleu claimed.⁶⁴ Although the administrator could find 'no solid proof' of the allegations, Sigoua lost the reluctant backing of the administrator only weeks before the poisoning of Hilarion Fau's wives.⁶⁵

While Sigoua's troublesome past doubtlessly played a role in his 1913 conviction, so, too, did Fau's presence at the center of the case. Fau was one of only a handful of Europeans living in Koutiala cercle and, as agent of the ACC, he held great sway over local politics. This position blurred the boundary between private trader and public official. Despite the fact the ACC was 'very weak' with financial resources of a 'very marked precariousness', the colonial administration lent the organization unconditional support.⁶⁶ Ernest Roume, the Governor-General of AOF, declared cotton cultivation an economic priority that had to be met with 'the most complete and close collaboration'.⁶⁷ In this spirit, the government footed the bill for the construction of the cotton ginning

⁶⁰Jonckers, *Minyanka*, 105–10.

⁶¹On Muslim conversion in Koutiala, see D. Jonckers, "'Le temps de prier est venu": islamisation et pluralité religieuse dans le sud du Mali', *Journal des africanistes*, 68:1 (1998), <https://doi.org/10.3406/jafr.1998.1160>.

⁶²On the *politique des races*, see A. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa* (Stanford, 1997), 109–19; H. Diallo, 'Pouvoir colonial, islam et première guerre mondiale en AOF', in C. Becker, S. M'baye, and I. Thioub (eds.), *AOF, réalités et héritages: sociétés ouest-africaines et ordre coloniale, 1895–1960* (Dakar, 1997), 410–11; C. Harrison, *France and Islam in West Africa* (Cambridge, 1988), 49–56.

⁶³ANM 1E50, CCK, 'Rapport politique', 31 Jan. 1913. The *tournee* was the administrative act of going on tour, see Mann, 'Indigénat', 340n47.

⁶⁴M'Pésoba is still famous for its snakes, which 'represent the founding ancestor' of the village. J. P. Colleyn, 'Notes sur la pensée religieuse des Minyanka du Mali', *Systèmes de pensée en Afrique noire*, 1:1 (1975), <https://doi.org/10.4000/span.112>.

⁶⁵ANM 1E50, 'Rapport politique', 1 Mar. 1913.

⁶⁶ANM 1R118, Y. Henri, 'Note sur l'ACC', 1907.

⁶⁷ACC, *Bulletin*, 19 (Paris, 1906), 261–2.

factory in M'Pésoba and an office in Ségou, some fifty miles away.⁶⁸ While the ACC was in part an 'organ of propaganda' meant to encourage commercial investment in colonial cotton projects, it also held a tangible role in the cotton trade.⁶⁹ The association purchased cotton from African producers, ginned it locally, and sold it to European trading firms in Kayes and Bamako.⁷⁰ In their mission, the company's agents worked in hand with colonial administrators. Although the ACC did not hold a role analogous to that of the concessionary companies of Central Africa or the old empire 'company states', some agents found themselves partaking in administrative duties.⁷¹ Fau periodically helped negotiate and collect taxes.⁷² He also distributed currency in times of shortage and even occasionally received a stipend from the administration for this work.⁷³ Many Africans, who rarely saw Europeans, assumed Fau held a position equal to that of the commandant.⁷⁴

Koutiala's administrators enthusiastically supported Fau, relying on him to inject industry into the region. After construction of the M'Pésoba factory finished in 1909, Louis Coliaux, the commandant preceding Bleu, wrote in the ACC's *Bulletin*:

Is the time of charter companies so far from us, and do we forget the services that these state-sponsored companies rendered to colonization? Of course, the Cotton Association mustn't have similar privileges. The objective it pursues pertains above all to the future of the colony, as it does our national industry. Come commercial competition, the price of cotton will set itself naturally. What is needed now is the creation of trade flow.⁷⁵

Koutiala cercle faced difficulty attracting commercial investment and 'trade flow' proved Coliaux's continual preoccupation. Although trading companies occasionally sent African agents to the region to purchase cotton or rubber from local producers, most business remained in the neighboring cercles of Ségou and San, hindering the administration's attempts at *mise en valeur*.⁷⁶ In the years following the ACC's arrival, Coliaux noted an increased presence of major trading firms.⁷⁷ When Ernest Bleu replaced Coliaux in 1911, he noted, 'The importance taken on by the development of cotton cultivation has been considerable and marks a very real progress since the Cotton Association set up in M'Pésoba'.⁷⁸ 'For cotton', he declared, 'it's a fait accompli'.⁷⁹ Hilarion Fau's role in this economic victory worked against an already unpopular Sigoua Coulibaly.

Beyond his role in the ACC, Fau had close personal relationships with several local administrators. The fact that he fathered at least seven métis children with no fewer than three African women

⁶⁸ACC, *Bulletin*, 27 (Paris, 1907), 605; and 32 (Paris, 1907), 198.

⁶⁹ANM 1R118, Governor-General of AOF (GG) to Minister of Colonies, 'Rapport sur les travaux de l'ACC', 27 Feb. 1913.

⁷⁰Roberts, *Cotton*, 80–102.

⁷¹On the concessionary companies, see C. Coquéry-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo au temps des grandes compagnies concessionnaires* (Paris, 1972). On the 'company-state', see P. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (Oxford, 2011).

⁷²ANM 1R118, CCK to LtG, Letter 550, 30 Nov. 1914.

⁷³ANM 1Q67, CCK, 'Rapport commercial', 31 Dec. 1911; ANM 1R118, LtG to CCK, Telegram C1342, 9 Mar. 1917; ANM 1Q172, Adjoint-CCK, Letter 1342, 8 Mar. 1917.

⁷⁴Cornet included these claims in his investigative report. ANM 2M20, CCK to LtG, Letter 16C, 24 Nov. 1918.

⁷⁵ACC, *Bulletin*, 48 (Paris, 1911), 736.

⁷⁶For some commercial statistics, see ANM 1Q67, CCK, 'Rapport commerciale', 1 July 1908; 'Rapport commerciale', 1 Oct. 1910; and 'Rapport commercial', 31 Mar. 1911. On *mise en valeur*, see Conklin, *Mission*, 38–44. On public spending on cotton, see R. Levrat, *Le coton en Afrique occidentale et centrale avant 1950: un exemple de la politique coloniale de la France* (Paris, 2008), ch. 3; and Roberts, *Cotton*, ch. 5.

⁷⁷ANM 1Q67, CCK, 'Rapport commercial', 1 July 1913; and 'Rapport commercial', 31 Dec. 1913.

⁷⁸ANM 1E50, CCK, 'Rapport sur la politique générale', 1912

⁷⁹ANM 1E50, CCK, 'Rapport politique', 31 Dec. 1913.

did not diminish this mutual affection.⁸⁰ In fact, Fau named one of his children Louis Hubert after his employer, ACC general agent Louis Level, and adjoint-administrator Hubert Georges.⁸¹ Because AOF had such a miniscule white residential population, especially in its backwaters, enforcing the boundaries between ‘colonial categories’ hardly constituted an administrative priority. It is probable that many, if not most, Frenchmen in Koutiala had African mistresses.⁸² Indeed, before the First World War, interracial sexual unions were not only accepted but encouraged as a tool of the *mission civilisatrice*.⁸³ In many ways, Fau resembled his contemporary, fellow erstwhile priest, and likely friend August Dupuis-Yakouba: the ‘white monk of Timbuktu’.⁸⁴ Like Fau, Dupuis abandoned the White Fathers and married an African woman, scandalizing the missionaries. Both men doubtlessly met the stereotype of the ‘*décivilisé*’, a colonist who had ‘gone native’; but this status did not diminish the respect colonial officials accorded them.⁸⁵

Fau’s status as a former Catholic missionary only increased his worth in the eyes of many administrators.⁸⁶ After arriving in the Soudan in 1900 as a White Father, Fau helped establish ‘liberty villages’ for newly emancipated slaves in coordination with the colonial administration in Ségou.⁸⁷ The missionaries served as intermediaries between the freed slaves and colonial officials, going so far as to help negotiate tax burdens.⁸⁸ Although some administrators expressed concern that the fathers would incite interreligious conflict by converting the former slaves to Catholicism, many accepted the society’s platform that ‘the anti-slavery mission [was] not necessarily a work of proselytization but above all humanitarian’.⁸⁹ This humanitarian work included crude ‘aid’ during the famines that swept the Soudan in the early twentieth century.⁹⁰ During famine, men would often pawn their wives and children to earn money for food or taxes; a practice the French interpreted as slavery.⁹¹ In response, the Fathers engaged in ‘preventative repurchases’, buying slaves and pawned family

⁸⁰The three mothers listed in the *état civil* do not include Naba Kamara. Archives nationales d’outre-mer, Instruments de recherche en ligne, Aix-en-Provence, France (ANOM iREL), ‘État civil du cercle de Koutiala’, 1912, 1914, 1916, 1917; and ‘État civil du cercle de Ségou’, 1912, 1917.

⁸¹Both men signed the birth record as witnesses. ANOM iREL, ‘État civil du cercle de Ségou’, 1912.

⁸²For instance, Pierre Badoit, an adjoint-administrator, registered his daughter with his African mistress in the *état civil*. ANOM iREL, ‘État civil du cercle de Koutiala’, 1909. Most administrators probably did not register their children.

⁸³Conklin, *Mission*, 164–71; White, *Children*, 15–27.

⁸⁴This moniker comes from W. Seabrook, *The White Monk of Timbuktu* (New York, 1934). See also O. White, ‘The decivilizing mission: Auguste Dupuis-Yakouba and French Timbuktu’, *French Historical Studies*, 27:3 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1215/00161071-27-3-541>.

⁸⁵On the ‘*décivilisé*’, see E. Saada, ‘Entre “assimilation” et “décivilisation”: l’imitation et le projet colonial républicain’, *Terrain*, 44 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.4000/terrain.261>; and Saada, ‘Empire’, 99–100, 113–14. Dupuis was given a job in the colonial administration: White, ‘Decivilizing’, 552.

⁸⁶This contrasts with the literature, which often highlights conflict between missionaries and colonial officers in AOF. J. R. de Benoist, *Église et pouvoir colonial au Soudan Français: administrateurs et missionnaires dans la boucle du Niger* (Paris, 1987), esp. ch. 4; L. Harding, ‘Les écoles des Pères Blancs au Soudan Français, 1895–1920’, *Cahiers d’études africaines*, 11:41 (1971), <https://doi.org/10.3406/cea.1971.2813>; F. Simonis, ‘Administrateurs et missionnaires à Ségou à l’heure de la séparation des églises et de l’état’, *Outre-Mers*, 93:348–349 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.3406/outre.2005.4159>.

⁸⁷Fau’s first posting was to Banankourou, a liberty village north of Ségou. The administration often sent emancipated slaves to that village. Archives générales des Missionnaires d’Afrique, Rome, Italy (AGMAfr.Rome) D.Dr64, Mission de Ségou, ‘Diaire’, 8 Sept. 1900 and 28 July 1904; GEN74, H. Bazin, ‘Rapport sur les œuvres antiesclavagistes du Vicariat apostolique du Soudan Français’, n.d. On ‘liberty villages’, see D. Bouche, *Les villages de liberté en Afrique noire française* (Paris, 1968).

⁸⁸AGMAfr.Rome D.Dr65, Mission de Patjana, ‘Diaire’, 2 Jan. 1902.

⁸⁹AGMAfr.Rome GEN71, Bazin to Livinhac, Letter, 10 Apr. 1901. On secularism and anti-clericalism in AOF, see J. P. Daughton and O. White, ‘Introduction: placing French missionaries in the modern world’, in J. P. Daughton and O. White (eds.), *In God’s Empire: French Missionaries and the Modern World* (Oxford, 2012), 8–10; E. Foster, *Faith in Empire: Religion, Politics, and Colonial Rule in French Senegal* (Stanford, 2013), ch. 3; Simonis, ‘Ségou’.

⁹⁰AGMAfr.Rome D.Dr64, Mission de Ségou, ‘Diaire’, 16 June 1902; and D.Dr63, Mission de Banankourou, ‘Diaire’, 15 Jan. 1903; *Missions Catholiques*, 32 (Lyon, 1900), 459.

⁹¹AGMAfr.Rome GEN71, Bazin to the Director of Sainte-Enfance, Letter, Sept. 1903. On colonial reactions to pawning, see Burrill, *States*, ch. 2.

members to prevent them from ‘falling into the hands of Muslims’.⁹² While these maneuvers benefited the missionaries, who gained converts, they were also viewed positively by the administration, whose international legitimacy, in part, rested on promises of eradicating slavery.⁹³

In 1913, the evidence against Sigoua Coulibaly for the attempted murder of Hilarion Fau’s wives was dubious, but the politics were transparent. Sigoua was a nuisance, danger, and liability; Fau was an essential economic player and a close friend of the administration despite his ‘décivilisé’ lifestyle. Naba Kamara’s allegations of poisoning, furthermore, carried legitimacy based on French understandings of African internal politics. Whether Sigoua was guilty beyond doubt was irrelevant because ‘colonial justice’ was utterly entangled in local politics. Commandant Bleu — or in this case his assistant — sat on the court that heard ‘felony’ charges.⁹⁴ While a project for reforming the courts in 1912 promised to extend the rule of law throughout AOF, it made little difference on the ground.⁹⁵ The criminal courts remained under the direct control of the commandant, evidentiary standards were practically non-existent, and African judges were chosen for their loyalty to the administration.⁹⁶ Even if Bleu intended to give Sigoua a fair shake, the structures of colonial justice made it all but impossible to separate political priorities from the rule of law; nor was it practical for the commandant to make such distinctions. With French rule in Koutiala cercle so tenuous, it would have been foolhardy not to make the expedient decision to convict Sigoua.

A shifting political landscape

In the midst of the First World War, what first appeared as an isolated rebellion against military recruitment in what is today Burkina Faso quickly spiraled into the largest anticolonial revolt the French ever faced in AOF. The Volta-Bani War spread in early 1916 to eastern regions of Koutiala cercle, where Commandant Bleu and his successor, Joseph-François Cornet, engaged in a scorched-earth campaign against African rebels.⁹⁷ The brutal conflict further accentuated the vulnerability of the colonial administration, which barely managed to subdue the uprising. The war pressured commandants throughout the region to adopt a ‘politics of appeasement’, making concessions to African actors to retain a precarious control.⁹⁸ The politics of appeasement accompanied a precipitous decline in the reputation of the ACC as the war hindered cotton production.⁹⁹ Sigoua Coulibaly did not bring any new evidence when he approached Cornet in 1918 to request reinstatement as village chief, but the political landscape, embroiled in evolving crisis, had shifted markedly in his favor.

The Volta-Bani War rattled the colonial administration across the Soudan. The rebellion began in Bona, 150 miles east of Koutiala, in reaction to highly unpopular wartime recruitment efforts. Yisu Kote, the chief of that village, called an assembly of elders from surrounding areas in November 1915 and the men, fearful they would never see their sons again, decided to take up

⁹²AGMAfr.Rome GEN71, A. Hacquard, Letter, 8 Nov. 1900.

⁹³R. L. Roberts, ‘The end of slavery, “crises” over trafficking, and the colonial state in the French Soudan’, in B. N. Lawrance and R. L. Roberts (eds.), *Trafficking in Slavery’s Wake: Law and the Experience of Women and Children* (Athens, OH, 2012), 65–85.

⁹⁴On court structure, see Roberts, *Litigants*, ch. 2; Mann, ‘Indigénat’, 342, 347–8.

⁹⁵ANS M100, E. Beurdeley, ‘La justice indigène en AOF: mission d’études’, n.d. See also E. Beurdeley, *La justice indigène en AOF* (Paris, 1916); Conklin, *Mission*, 119–30.

⁹⁶ANS M86, Monteillet, ‘Justice indigène: avant-projet d’instructions générales sur l’application du décret du 16 août’, n.d., 150–67.

⁹⁷At the time, Cornet was commandant of Bandiagara. On his, and Bleu’s, involvement, see Saul and Royer, *Challenge*, 245–70. See also ANM 1N79, CCK, ‘Révolte dans le cercle de Koutiala’, n.d.

⁹⁸A. Hubbell, ‘Patronage and predation: a social history of colonial chieftaincies in a chiefless region’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Stanford University, 1997), 269–88.

⁹⁹Roberts, *Cotton*, 118–19.

arms against the French.¹⁰⁰ The news of the incipient revolt spread quickly to villages further afield, disseminating through inter-village social networks and the remnants of precolonial 'defensive leagues'.¹⁰¹ Astonished by the scale and brisk onset of the revolt, the French faltered in their response. Emboldened by these early victories, the rebels rapidly multiplied in number as more villages joined the fight. It was only after an infusion of thousands of African *tirailleurs* and a protracted year-long conflict that the French quelled the revolt. To the administration, the ferocity of the anticolonial campaign demonstrated the resilience of village leagues and the threatening power of African political leaders.

Unrest in M'Pésoba during the Volta-Bani War proved banishing Sigoua had been a grave miscalculation. While Bleu was distracted by the revolt, Sigoua began plotting a coup from exile.¹⁰² After his banishment in 1913, Sigoua's rival, the animist Niara, had been appointed chief of M'Pésoba. When Niara died in June 1915, Sigoua pushed his 'brothers and cousins' to protest the ascension of Niara's heir, Niangolo. Sigoua's Muslim supporters refused to pay the head tax or carry cotton for the ACC unless Sigoua was reinstated to his former position. It was only under threat of permanent exile from the cercle that Bleu managed to rein in Sigoua, forcing his faction to recognize Niangolo as the rightful chief.¹⁰³ But a month later, Niangolo suddenly died and M'Pésoba fell into 'poor spirits'.¹⁰⁴ Niangolo's cousin, N'Ki, was reluctantly 'accepted by most of the population' as the new chief although the administration found him to be 'without influence or energy'.¹⁰⁵ The expansion of Koutiala's Muslim population during the war only further undermined N'Ki's authority: Sigoua Coulibaly, a Muslim notable with a loyal following, seemed a natural solution to the instability plaguing the village.

The ACC's influence in Koutiala declined during the First World War as the M'Pésoba ginnery faltered. Before the war, several trading companies complained that the ACC held an unfair monopoly on the cotton industry as it barred other companies from purchasing cotton directly from African producers.¹⁰⁶ In response, the lieutenant-governor banned commandants from advancing money to the ACC's agents for purchasing raw cotton, as they had done in the past.¹⁰⁷ For Fau, this was a disaster. M'Pésoba's remoteness made it difficult to communicate with ACC headquarters in Paris to request funds.¹⁰⁸ Although at one time considered 'the most important ginnery' in the Soudan, M'Pésoba's significance declined rapidly as the war progressed.¹⁰⁹ Its remote location was its downfall. One administrator remarked that the factory 'did not seem to [him] to meet at all the desired goal, given that M'Pésoba is located around 100 kilometers from the center of cotton production' and another 60 kilometers from the Niger River, making the evacuation of the ginned cotton extremely laborious.¹¹⁰ What was challenging before became impossible during the chaos of the Volta-Bani War. In 1913, the M'Pésoba ginnery processed 260 metric tons of cotton; by 1917, it was down to 30.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁰Saul and Royer, *Challenge*, 120–7.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.* 40–6.

¹⁰²ANM 1E50, CCK, 'Rapport politique', 30 June 1915.

¹⁰³ANM 1E50, CCK, 'Rapport politique', July 1915; and Telegram 194, n.d.

¹⁰⁴ANM 1E50, CCK, 'Rapport politique', 31 Aug. 1915.

¹⁰⁵ANM 1E50, CCK, 'Rapport politique', 31 Oct. 1915. N'Ki was replaced by Fatogoma Coulibaly before 1919 but the date is uncertain. ANM 1E50, CCK to LtG, Letter 17C, 27 Dec. 1918.

¹⁰⁶ANM 1R113, LtG to CCK, Telegram 5267, 30 Dec. 1912.

¹⁰⁷ANM 1R118, CCK to LtG, Letter 550, 30 Nov. 1914.

¹⁰⁸On prior issues of communication, see ANM 1R113, CCK, 'Rapport sur l'ACC', 12 May 1912. On periodic currency shortages in Koutiala, see ACC, *Bulletin*, 50 (Paris, 1911), 852.

¹⁰⁹ANM 1R118, G. Roy to GG, Letter, 13 Feb. 1918; 'La protection cotonnière au Haut-Sénégal-Niger', *Le Temps* (Paris), 10 Aug. 1913.

¹¹⁰ANM 1Q67, CCK, 'Rapport commercial, 4^e trimestre', 1919.

¹¹¹See, respectively, ANM 1R88, CCK to Chef du Service d'agriculture, Letter 529, 29 Oct. 1913; and ANM 1Q172, CCK to LtG, Telegram 117, 27 Sept. 1917. See also J. Vuillet, 'Historique des essais cotonnières dans la vallée du Niger de 1902 à 1925', *Revue de botanique appliquée et d'agriculture coloniale*, 19:210 (1939), <https://doi.org/10.3406/jatba.1939.5951>.

Sigoua's 1918 accusation that Naba Kamara had manufactured the evidence that convicted him five years prior presented Cornet with an opportunity. M'Pésoba was in turmoil and Sigoua, who retained a loyal following in the village, could bring peace by returning as chief. After the crisis of the Volta-Bani War, Cornet recognized that appeasing powerful political actors like Sigoua was a necessity; the administration could not withstand another rebellion. Cornet's ensuing 'investigation' focused more on smearing Kamara than uncovering the truth. Only one witness in the 1913 trial — 17-year-old Massa — recanted his testimony.¹¹² Naba Kamara maintained her innocence. Then, Cornet dredged up her slave-trading charge and accused her on the word of one anonymous witness of running a brothel and fermenting armed rebellion against the French.¹¹³ The history of women's protest in Koutiala and colonial stereotypes of the 'African seductress' made his claims tenable. Nonetheless, lacking firm evidence, Cornet did not submit the charges to the native court; instead, he wrote discretely to his superiors, asking for approval to banish Kamara from the cercle. Although he very well may have believed them to be true, Cornet's indictments were more speculation than fact. The declining influence of the ACC opened Kamara up to scrutiny as a 'corrupting' influence on Fau, but she was ultimately shielded by her husband's race and status. Husband and wife both escaped the commandant's justice unscathed.

Conclusion

Did Sigoua Coulibaly poison Naba Kamara that night in January 1913? The evidence is utterly inconclusive. That mattered little, however, to the two commandants who examined the case, each coming to a markedly different conclusion. The 'scandals of empire' show how 'truth' bent politics: the recognition of wrongs encouraged introspection and promulgated reform, for better or worse. Dead-end scandals demonstrate how politics often twisted 'truth' to further domination. As such, these events provide invaluable opportunities for historians to elaborate the gap between metropolitan legal fantasies and their implementation on the ground. These incidents illustrate the consistent and persistent vagaries of justice in the colonial situation, challenging the impression left by scholarship that emphasizes an ever-encroaching reformist rule of law.

Dead-end scandals also write Africans into colonial legal history. They reveal that colonial officials did not apply law to indifferent populations; rather, African actors, guided by personal ambitions, helped contour local legal landscapes. From village to village, Africans' divergent aspirations generated myriad conflicts, seldom understood by European observers. The enormous social, political, and religious changes brought on by colonial conquest only exacerbated these tensions. In M'Pésoba, Islamic conversion, the removal of religious actors from political power, the decline of women's organizing, and the rapid growth of cotton exploitation put Africans under unprecedented pressure. As Sigoua Coulibaly struggled to retain his respectability in this new world, Naba Kamara took advantage of the moment to bolster her authority. Poorly prepared to navigate internal conflicts, colonial administrators walked a tightrope that strained to bridge the letter of the law with the political needs of the moment.

Analyzing moments of 'revealing crisis', the politics of expediency that underwrote colonial justice floats to the surface. Local politics restricted the decisions of colonial officials, especially on the fringes of empire. There, an even rule of law could never be enforced because the colonial administration simply did not possess the means to unilaterally broadcast its power. Negotiated collaboration was essential to maintaining colonial rule. Commandant Bleu could not have declared Sigoua Coulibaly innocent in 1913 without jeopardizing his relationship with Hilarion Fau and the ACC. Cornet could not have dismissed Sigoua's claims in 1918 without risking another anti-colonial

¹¹²Cornet did not reinterview Fau, his other wives, N'Golopé Coulibaly, Ouara Diallo, or Baba. ANM 2M20, CCK to LtG, Letter 16C, 24 Nov. 1918.

¹¹³Cornet's letter reveals nothing of this witness's identity. ANM 1E50, CCK to LtG, Letter 17C, 27 Dec. 1918.

rebellion; he could not banish Naba Kamara because of her husband's status. Ultimately, the M'Pésoba Affair demonstrates that colonial authority in AOF derived not from the certitude law provided but the ambiguous space between truth and fiction it tolerated in the pursuit of domination.

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