The Mali of the Mind

By Theodore Dalrymple

When recently I learned that the Russian mercenaries who prop up the military regime in Mali had been driven out of the town of Kidal, I was very pleased, for defeat could not have been inflicted on people more deserving of it. The only fly in the ointment was that the victors were allies of the Islamists who are quite likely to overrun the Sahel and even some of the coastal countries of West Africa.

Of course, Mali will not mean much to most readers, even if they have heard of Timbuktu. But Mali has played a small part in my life and, if this is not too grand a word, my development.

Forty years ago, I arrived at the border of Mali with Niger: one of those lines drawn on a map by a colonial administrator.

I was on my way across Africa from Zanzibar by public transport, a journey far too dangerous to carry out now. The very fact that I was able to do it 40 years ago without feeling in the slightest endangered (except, perhaps, in Equatorial Guinea, where I was told that if the authorities learned I was a journalist, they might kill me and I would never be heard of again, a possibility that I found quite bracing), but could not do it now, even were I 40 years younger, suggests to me that progress in history is not like time's arrow, which flies in one direction only. There can be regress as well as progress.

Both Mali and Niger were about twice as large in area as the former colonial power, France, each with a sparse population of around 7 million, which 40 years later have increased to more than 26 million each, with a growth rate today of between 3 and 4 per cent annually. Here, if anywhere, was a location for a Malthusian crisis, given that two-thirds of both countries are desert and they were deeply impoverished to start with, but it has not happened. Malthus, then, was wrong, at least up to now—albeit that one of the controls of overpopulation that he suggested were inevitable, namely war, is now well implanted in both.

It wasn't implanted then, however, when I arrived at the border in a small bus that was overburdened with passengers, chickens, a goat, and items of impoverished commerce piled precariously on the roof, to which a passenger or two also precariously hung. In those days, China was still the purveyor of items such as cheap printed cottons and plastic and enamelled tin bowls to the Third World, which I wrongly, and ignorantly, supposed it would remain. It is a constant source of human error to suppose that the present moment is the final destination of mankind, and I have partaken of this error as much as anyone.

Under its burden, the bus seemed to go forward under protest, a little crabwise, making noises like a wounded ox.

All was, or at least seemed, peaceful in the two countries, where the governments, far from ideal from any possible point of view, were still in control. To sleep under the stars, as I did, near the banks of the River Niger and a mud-built village, having heard the low murmurings of night-time conversations, with the odd glimmer of a candle somewhere, lent an impression of peaceability that I have rarely encountered elsewhere.

Though the two neighbouring countries were not at war, passing between them was not easy. On the Malian side, the passengers were examined by the police, the army, and the customs officials. This took three days and three nights.

Perhaps "examination" was not quite the word. "Shakedown" would be more appropriate. On each occasion, I was asked politely to step aside, for the corruption was an internal matter, so to speak, and did not concern me. (At the time, there was a saying in Africa that the death of one white man will give you more trouble than the death of a thousand black men.)

Payment was demanded of the passengers by each of the three forces before they were granted permission to continue their journey. The more recalcitrant among the passengers were held overnight in a mud prison to encourage their co-operation. I had with me a copy of *Moby-Dick* (I possess it still, and it bears the stigmata of passage through the Sahel), and I think being held up like this was the only way I could have read through it.

I was much struck by the good humour, the lack of protest, of the passengers. Even the overnight imprisonment seemed more a formality or a game than a cruel punishment. It was not just that the situation was a re-run by different people of that described by Hilaire Belloc in 1898, at the high tide of European colonialism in Africa-

Whatever happens, we have got

The Maxim gun, and they have not.

—and that therefore any protest would have been dangerous for the passengers. Rather, I had the impression that they regarded the situation as perfectly normal, only to be expected, and that, had the boot been on any other foot, it would have kicked in precisely the same way. Corruption was as inevitable as the weather.

For a long time, I took my cue from the other passengers and remained patient, reading *Moby-Dick* in the sand (it was lucky that it was so long). But after the third night on the border, I suddenly lost my temper, despite the fact that I had no schedule to keep. Seized by sudden outrage, I strode down the unrepaired road shouting "*Pots de vin! Pots de vin! Pots de vin!*" ("Bribes! Bribes! Bribes!)

A soldier approached me and took me aside gently.

"What you have to remember, *monsieur*," he said, "is that we haven't been paid for three months."

I at once felt very foolish, not to say priggish. What he said was obviously true. Bribes for them were wages, and bribery was a form of taxation. It was all very informal, of course, and it was impossible to say whether the amount raised by bribery was greater or less than a proper, regular wage would have been—and, indeed, whether a proper, regular wage would have reduced the scope of bribery.

My attitude to bribery changed thereafter. I realized that bribery is often the oil of a creaking machine that would seize up completely without it. It was in the construction of the machine that the true corruption lay: corruption not merely financial, but moral, organizational, and often, at root, philosophical. It is far more insidious, for it is far

removed from overt acts.

But this was not the only lesson that Mali was to teach me.

It was while waiting for three days and nights at the border between Niger and Mali that something happened so strange that, even at the time, I wondered whether I might not be imagining it. But it was real enough.

A man in the indigo-blue robes worn by the Tuareg appeared on the horizon and seemed to make a beeline for me. Great was my surprise, to put it mildly, when he addressed me in pure Oxonian English. Indeed, he claimed to have studied philosophy at Oxford, and judging by his command of the language I had no reason to doubt him.

He had returned to his native Mali and had formed an idea to develop its tourist industry—but not for the kind of idle tourists who gawp at the sights *en masse* just so that they can say back home that they have seen them, proving it with photographs, but tourists of a more intellectual bent.

Indeed, his idea was to accompany and guide a small group of philosophical tourists on camels into the heart of the desert for, say, 10 days, where they would camp for the night and discuss the meaning of life round the fire. They would be relieved of all extraneous distractions and thus concentrate on the heart of the matter. Disagreement there would no doubt be, but not antagonism, and perhaps even clarification: Socrates in the Sahara. And, after all, why do we do anything without prior knowledge or understanding of what it—life—is all about or for?

It would all be quite expensive, because there would have to be camel drivers and cooks, etc., so that philosophy could be untrammelled by the practical exigencies of life, but he, the Tuareg philosopher, was not thinking of the *hoi polloi* as clients.

His was an idea that appealed immediately to me. It is part of my character to be taken by gusts of enthusiasm that I know from experience will not last. But I immediately imagined myself, after a day on a camel, eating rice and mutton with my fingers and discussing with eminent philosophers whether or not there was a transcendent purpose to existence and, if not, what the implications were for our life.

In a state of temporary excitation, I gave him my address—but of course heard no more, much to my regret. My fantasy of dialogue in the desert persisted for years, until it became obvious that the meaning of life for such a party would be the avoidance of being taken hostage and killed.

Some years later, I returned to Mali. I think I may safely claim that I am one of the few people ever to have flown in a Malian Air Force DC3 aircraft in the company (or, perhaps more accurately, the presence) of a Nobel Prize winner for literature.

It came about this way. Because I had written quite a lot about Africa, I was invited to take part (at my own expense) in a conference in Bamako, the capital of Mali, organised by the United Nations Development Programme, about improving the image of Africa in the world's press. There was to be no discussion of improving Africa, of course, only of improving its image, which was thought to be the easier task. In any case, I had always taken the view that Africa was not the slough of despond that it was often taken to be.

There were eminent persons at the conference, the most eminent being Nadine Gordimer, the South African writer who had won the Nobel Prize. An excursion was arranged to Timbuktu, which I was now visiting for the second time in my life, and which was how I came to fly with her in the DC3—not that she ever addressed a word to so lowly a person as I.

She was of impeccably left-wing views. She was slight

and *soignée* and had a penetrating voice that might etch glass. She would have been very rich even without the income from her writings, and it was obvious that she was used to command and did not expect to have to move any of her astonishingly capacious luggage for herself. The South African satirist, Pieter-Dirk Uys, characterized her brilliantly in two words when he called her *Comrade Madam*.

One scene from the conference sticks out in my mind. It was she who was speaking at a round table. Sitting next to her was a Ghanaian woman, a journalist. Referring to her, Nadine Gordimer remarked, "As my sister, Susan, has said—"

Sister Susan interrupted: "Actually, my name is Gloria."

This impertinence was not deemed worthy of riposte, and Nadine sailed on, as it were, as if nothing had been said.

The use of the word "Sister" in this context acted on me in any case as squeaky chalk on the school blackboard acted on me in my childhood: It sent a shiver up my spine. It struck me as political kitsch, deeply insincere, false, a straining after a feeling of equality rather than a feeling of equality itself. It contrasted with an episode which I shall later recount.

But I should not like to leave readers with the impression that Gordimer was a complete humbug or a negligible person, or that I think that she was such. She was, after all, a woman with a very considerable gift, especially for the short story. which she used to the full. Her powers of description were very great. An old friend of mine, who knew her well before she achieved world renown, admired her utter devotion to her work when she might easily have been a bored wealthy South African housewife, wallowing in physical comfort, along the lines of Evita Bezuidenhout, Pieter-Dirk Uys's famous Afrikaner housewife who sits for hours before the mirror at a dressing table making herself up to the nines—so that she is ready for bed.

It is hardly surprising that the main subject of Gordimer’s work was apartheid, racial prejudice, and its effects on individuals: Living in South Africa, how could it have been otherwise? She was brave in her opposition to apartheid, and even if, thanks to her growing fame, she did not face physical retribution, it required moral courage to oppose so publicly and from within a system so deeply entrenched not only in the state, but in people’s minds.

But I cannot help but wonder whether, deep in some place in her heart, she regretted the passing of apartheid, not because she was insincere in her opposition to it, but because its disappearance cheated her of a ready-made subject of such significance. Writers in particular come to love what they hate and are bereft without it.

For several years before she died, a close relative of mine in Paris required care 24 hours a day, and all of the carers were African, except for one who was Haitian. Perhaps this was just as well, for Africans have a respect for aged persons that is not universal among us.

One of the carers was a Malian, sent to France by her father to complete her education, but also to marry her much older uncle. She was fortunate that her father did not believe in genital mutilation, unlike many others in his milieu. She managed to evade her arranged marriage, but only to marry a man of Malian origin who turned out to be unreliable, to put it no higher, and very violent into the bargain.

At the height of the Covid pandemic, I was in Paris. Regulations were very strict. You were allowed out of where you were living for one hour a day, but you were not to go more than one kilometer from your front door. You had to carry a downloaded form with you, giving your address, and the date and time at which you left your domicile. If you were caught breaking the rules in some way, you were subject to an immediate and summary fine of €135.

The rules seemed illogical even in their own terms. For example, all large open spaces—parks, cemeteries, etc.—were closed off, forcing you (if you went out at all) into potentially crowded narrow streets. The wearing of masks went rapidly from being considered useless (because there weren't any available) to being compulsory (because there were now billions of them).

I learnt something about the prejudices of the police during the lockdown—the *confinement*. A policeman stopped me in the street to look at my form. I had not filled it in 100 per cent correctly, but he let me off. I spoke to a young man who had made a similar mistake in his form, but he was fined. The difference was that I was dressed in a tweed jacket while he was dressed in international slum costume. No really bad man dresses in tweed.

Of course, the police loved this work, or rather this simulacrum of work, for it made them feel important without either effort or danger. Many people, not only the police, prefer the simulacrum or appearance of work to work itself.

One morning during the *confinement*, during my hour's release from domestic imprisonment (which in truth I did not find at all onerous; I am by nature unsociable), I sat on a bench a few hundred yards from my domicile. A black man came to sit at the other end of the bench—we were enjoined to keep a "safe" distance, two meters, between us.

"*Bonjour, mon frère*," he said—hello, my brother. For some reason, I found his *mon frère* as charming and sincere as I had found Nadine Gordimer's "my sister" bogus and grating.

We started to talk. He was a Malian who had lived in France for 10 years, nine of them illegally until he had been regularized and obtained his resident permit—which he showed me, not without pride. Evidently, it had been an achievement to obtain it, all the more remarkable because he was, he told

me, illiterate.

“You can still learn to read,” I said.

“No,” he said. “It is too late.” He said he was 46.

I felt an immense sorrow for him. What must it be like to live in the modern world unable to read? If I were not so peripatetic, I would have offered to teach him—not that I had ever taught anyone to read or knew how to do it.

He wanted to go home to Mali to see his aged mother—actually, younger than I, I was alarmed to reflect—before she died; but now that he was legally in France, he could find no work, so could not pay for the necessary fare. For the nine years that he had been clandestine, he had never been out of work; legalized, he at once joined the ranks of the unemployed.

There was some kind of lesson in this, though I am no economist. Entitled as he was at last to some kind of state subvention, it was no longer worth his while to work for the wages that he had received as an illegal immigrant; but unfortunately, his labor was not worth what an employer would now have to pay him (plus payroll taxes) as a *bona fide* resident.

As long as even the pittance he had received when he worked as an illegal immigrant, however, gave Malians a better life, at least economically, than they would have in Mali, there would be willing replacements for such as he from what Marx would no doubt have called the reserve army of labor. Thus, on the one hand France would continue to pay large numbers of people to do nothing, while on the other it would continue to suck in equivalent or even greater numbers of people to work illegally. Paying people to do nothing is very expensive and can only be paid for by borrowing. This is an expensive way to change society.

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