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Sahel, Sahara and Savannah (Sahvara) Responses to Uneven Development in West Africa

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Abstract

A systematic and comprehensive study of Sahel, Sahara and Savannah (“Sahvara”) responses to uneven development in West Africa since the colonial period has not been undertaken. This paper attempts to begin to close this gap. Drawing largely on the secondary literature, it outlines the north-south tensions that existed in several West African territories under colonial rule, which persisted during the period of decolonization. During the postcolonial period, economically lagging northern regions increasingly asserted centralised power in different countries through military coups and/or electoral victories, although this was not an option for demographically and politically weak lagging regions such as northern Mali and northern Ghana. The high level of military coups in West Africa, Mano River Region crisis and expansion of terrorism in the Sahara, Sahel, Lake Chad Basin and, potentially, northern regions of Gulf of Guinea countries, should be interpreted in light of this long-term tension associated with uneven development in West Africa.

Keywords: *Spatial inequality, West Africa, Sahelian thought, Developmentalism, Sahara, Sudanic thought*

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1. Introduction

The pan-Africanism of early West African nationalists was often based on a focus of an external reversal of fortune and economic divergence from the West. This is understandably due to the greater salience of colonial powers and Europeans in global affairs and their rule over Africa, as well as their postcolonial influence. This external reversal of fortune, a view held by pan-Africanists such as James Horton, Martin Delany, Caseley Hayford, Solanke Ladipo, Kwame Nkrumah, Mamadou Dia, Caseley Hayford, Léopold Senghor and Cheikh Anta Diop, claimed that Africans were materially at par or perhaps even superior to the Europeans, but fortunes reversed with the Atlantic slave trade.¹

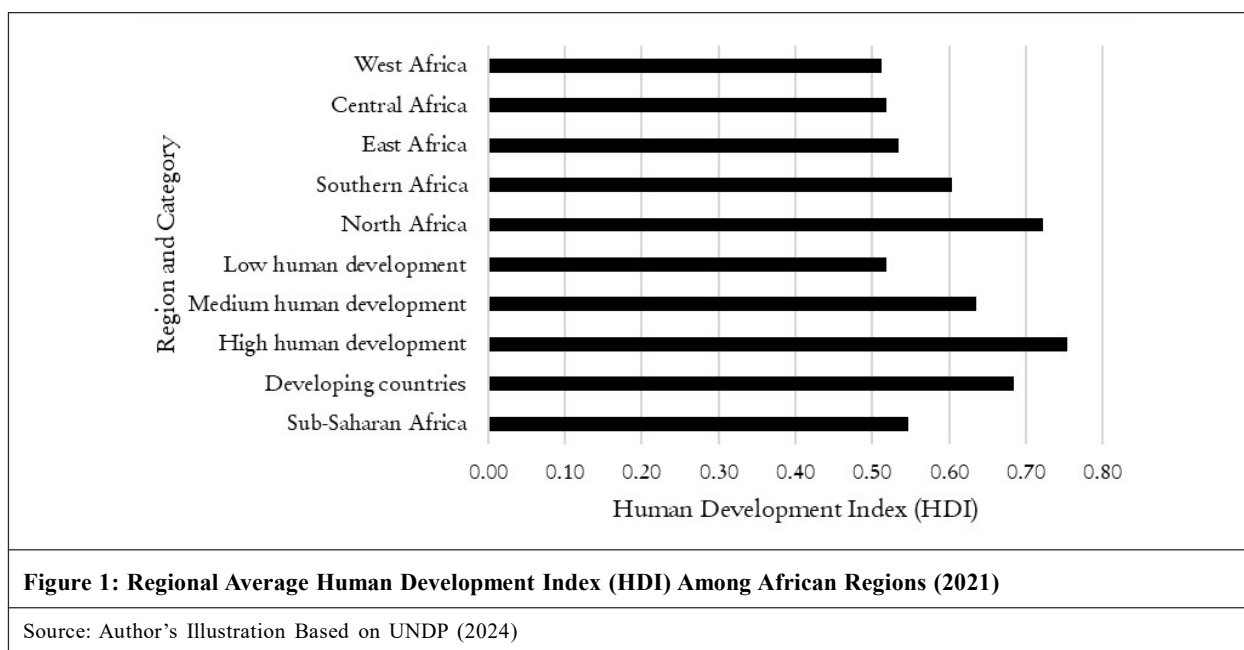
¹ Among the West African coastal elites up to the mid-twentieth century, there were four approaches to African history: those, like James Payne (former president of Liberia), who believed in the perennial stagnation of the interior (or who, like Abbé Boilat – a catholic priest who was part of the Creole communities in Saint Louis and Gorée – may have believed in stagnation since the pre-Atlantic spread of Islam in the region); those, like Edward Blyden, who believed in moderate material achievements which were not more spectacular compared to Eurasia for reasons of climate or geographical distance from Western and Eastern civilizations; those, like Kwame Nkrumah, Mamadou Dia and Caseley Hayford, who believed in spectacular medieval achievements disrupted by the Atlantic slave trade and/or colonial rule; or those, like James Horton, Martin Delany, Solanke Ladipo and Cheikh Anta Diop who believed that Africans were even materially superior to the Europeans, but fortunes reversed with the Atlantic slave trade. Some, such as Abayomi Cole, believed in a cyclical theory of history, where Africa had been the birthplace of civilization, which then shifted (by divine design) to Greece, Rome and then Britain (Spitzer, 1972).

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This reversal and divergence then had to be countered either first by gaining political independence and then by economic policymaking and nation building. Many also believed in the need for regional or continental restructuring to achieve collective strengthening. They considered various forms of regional and/or continental re-ordering of statehood and federation in response to the salient threat of neo-colonialism and continental “balkanization” (Cooper, 2014; Getachew, 2019). The examination of thoughts and praxis of Kwame Nkrumah, Léopold Senghor, Félix Houphouët-Boigny and other nationalists have often been geared towards this external focus – the battle against colonialism and neo-colonialism in order to achieve counter-reversal of material fortunes.

Yet, for West Africa, scholars have neglected an internal reversal of fortune and material divergence, with roots steeped in the same Atlantic factor responsible for the external reversal of fortune. On one hand, the Western Sudan hosted the largest empires in West Africa including the Sokoto Caliphate, Ghana, Mali and Songhai; the bulk of urbanization, communications, agriculture, military, industry, and transportation technologies (Weil, 2014); the lucrative trans-Saharan trade routes (Austen, 2010), crafts industries (Iliffe, 1983; Inikori, 2014) and elite literacy (Baten and Alexopoulou, 2021) in the pre-Atlantic period. On the other hand, the colonial and postcolonial era has seen the same area being the poorest in West Africa.

West Africa in general already has the lowest average Human Development Index (HDI) in Africa (based on 2021 figures), with a cross-country HDI average that is lower than both the developing country and sub-Saharan African averages (Figure 1). This implies that West Africa could be classified as a ‘low human development’ region. In addition, West African countries make up 36% of the 33 African countries designated by the United Nations as the least developed countries (LDCs), thereby making the region ‘the foremost LDC region in Africa and the world’ (ECOWAS, 2010).



Against this backdrop, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso rank among the ten countries in the world with the lowest Human Development Indicator scores. Using the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), which captures acute deprivations in health, education, and living standards (Alkire et al., 2023), it is observed that average MPI is significantly higher among Core Sahel countries (Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso) relative to Gulf of Guinea countries. MPI is also higher among Core Sahel countries and the northern regions of Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire (‘Sahvara’ region) than the rest of the regions in these countries and all regions in the remaining Gulf of Guinea countries (coastal regions) (Figure 2). In fact, globally, out of 1,287 regions in 100 countries, Sahvara regions in West Africa account for 22 (44%) of the 50 regions with the worst MPI, across Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Benin, Mali and Mauritania (Alkire et al., 2023).

This reversal between the precolonial Western Sudan and the colonial and postcolonial Gulf of Guinea coastal spaces was most prominently first systematically recognized by purveyors of the neo-Marxist dependency theory in the 1970s and 1980s such as Amin (1972) and Wallerstein (1976). It has also featured, with varying degrees of importance, in country political histories but without regional synthesis, such as with Olufemi Ekundare for Nigeria, John Heilbrunn for Benin, Samuel Decalo for Togo, N.J.K Brukum for Ghana, Aristide Zolberg and Francis Akindès for Côte d’Ivoire, Bruce Hall for Mali, John Cartwright for Sierra Leone and others.

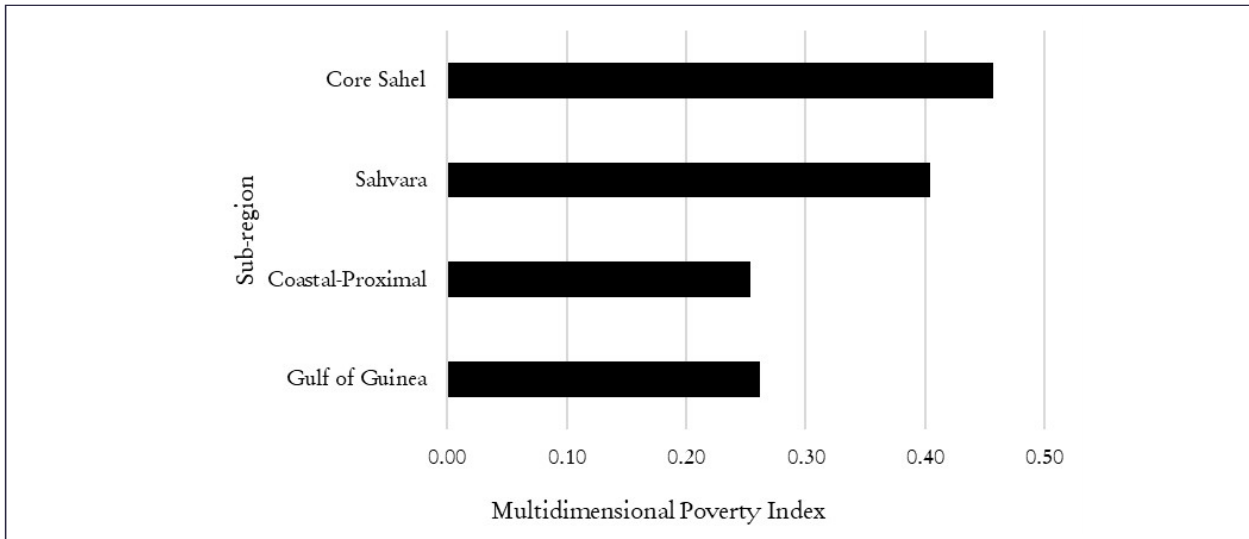


Figure 2: Multidimensional Poverty Index Across Different West African Sub-regions

Source: Author’s Illustration Based on Alkire *et al.* (2023)

In this story, the key analysts are not Nkrumah, Senghor and other statesmen from the coastal spaces of West Africa. They are instead less well-known names, such as Yakubu Tali, Joseph H. Allassani and J.A. Braimah in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, Abubakar Imam, Ahmadu Bello and Tafawa Balewa in Northern Nigeria, Muhammad-Ali ag Attaher and Mohammed Mahmoud Ould Cheikh in northern French Soudan, Hubert Maga in northern Dahomey, Maurice Yaméogo of Upper Volta, Moktar Ould Daddah of Mauritania, Modibo Keita of the French Soudan and Djibo Bakary and Hamani Diori of Niger. While many coastal-proximal elites such as Kwame Nkrumah, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Léopold Senghor, and Sékou Touré focused on achieving self-government and national development during the late colonial period, many non-coastal elites sought for their regions to catch up with coastal regions in educational attainment, wealth and infrastructure (Staniland, 1975; Imam 1989).

Explorations of “Sahelian thought” (Idrissa, 2021) have not really systematized this strand of thinking. This paper attempts to demonstrate that there exists a common thread in “Sahvaran” economic and political thought. “Sahvara” here is a portmanteau of Sahel, savannah and Sahara, referring to the band of societies encompassing the Core Sahel countries (Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso) and the northern regions of the eastern Gulf of Guinea states of West Africa (Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria). It traces the origins of this strand to the colonial period, especially after the Second World War, and highlights the multiple implications of the north-south tensions that the material divergence in West Africa entailed for the region’s politics, geopolitics, development and security.

The next section begins with the north-south tensions within colonies as recorded in the literature. This is followed by an outline of the late colonial north-south political struggles which, as the succeeding section shows, carried on to the postcolonial period.

2. North-South Tensions Under Colonial Rule

The Scramble for Africa, which intensified by the 1870s led to some 10,000 African polities being merged into 40 colonies by European powers (Meredith, 2014). The large colonial states formed is explained by Green (2012): “pre-colonial population density and trade patterns between them explain the majority of variation in African state size, inasmuch as colonists constructed larger states in low-density and low-trade areas to save costs”. For example, the British Northern Protectorate of Nigeria was subsidized by the Southern Protectorate following their amalgamation in 1914; the Northern Territories were annexed to the Gold Coast in 1900, and Sierra Leone Colony and Protectorate were brought together. Britain and France decided at the beginning of the 20th century that the federated territories should become economically self-sufficient.

While the British largely administered their territories as individual units, France, which had colonized over 73% of the entire area of West Africa (Debrrie, 2010), created *Afrique Occidentale Française* (A.O.F. – French West Africa) in 1899 and centralized in 1904. This colonial federation formed a single market area, with free movement of goods, capital and labor, with common tariffs, currency and fiscal policies (Kurtz, 1970). It was created for “integrating richer coastal territories with vast hinterland areas through fiscal redistribution” (Frankema and van Waijenburg, 2014), requiring that

“each territory paid a certain percentage of its revenues into a general budget which was later redistributed according to the needs of each territory” (Wolters, 1966).

For West Africa, these series of territorial restructurings brought various societies together that previously had either limited contact or tensile relations. In Nigeria, the Sokoto Caliphate had ambitions to take the conquest further south, but “even the most excellent horse training or equipment could not prevent the failure of the Jihadist calvary in the mountain areas and thick forests beyond the Hausa savannah region” (Zehnle, 2016). The Ashanti Empire in Ghana conquered several northern kingdoms, including the Dagomba and Gonja who celebrated “liberation from the Asante yoke” following the British defeat of the Ashanti in 1874 (Digbun, 2021). In general, however, Hagberg and Tengan (2000) report that “many peoples who resided in northern Ghana and southern Burkina Faso did not pay allegiance to the Asante. These peoples lived in between the Mossi kingdoms in the north and the Asante in the south.” In Togo, northern Kabres were systematically enslaved by southern Ewes for sale during the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Montgomery, 2020).

Compared to these tensile relations in Nigeria, Ghana and Togo (as well as Liberia and Sierra Leone where creoles and hinterland populations also had tensile relationships since the early 19th century due to perceptions of civilizational superiority held by the former), in pre-colonial Benin, the northern region had “little contact with the southern tribes (Abomey’s ambitions had traditionally been to the east and southeast)” (Decalo, 1973). In Côte d’Ivoire, southern peoples were politically fragmented and lived in villages or clusters of villages whose contacts with the outside world were filtered through long-distance traders (Handloff, 1991). The traders from the south, however, rarely ever crossed the Comoe River and usually stopped at Bondoukou, while Dyula traders from Kong in the north hardly ever went further than Bondoukou (Terray, 1978) which lies at the southern edges of northern Côte d’Ivoire.

The Sudanic empires already had difficulties defending their territories from internal and external enemies and could not reasonably have thought about a conquest of the Atlantic coast. Until the late 18th century, “the European presence in North and West Africa consisted only of coastal trading posts that did not threaten the sovereignty of local states, the prosperity of cross-desert caravans, or the Islamic and Islamicate culture that followed them.” (Austen, 2010). Hence for the Sudanic states, “European practices were largely congruent with existing precolonial politics that did not stress the control of territory”, and as a result, in the mid-nineteenth century, the Tukolor ruler Al Hajj ‘Umar Tal noted that the Europeans were only traders (Herbst, 2000). Likewise, Lt Dixon Denham, part of the British government-funded Bornu Mission of 1821–25, quoted the effective ruler of Bornu, Shaikh Muhammad al-Amin al-Kanemi, as asking why he would not send his country’s merchants to Bornu to compete with Arab merchants and promote non-slave trade (Wright, 2007). When the British emissary Hugh Clapperton visited Sokoto, the capital of the nineteenth century’s largest Saharan empire in 1823, he failed to lure the Caliph with promises for people from the caliphate to be sent to English settlements on the Atlantic coast to be taught ship-building in order for the Sultan to transport pilgrims to Mecca through a safer sea route with its own ships (Umar, 2002).

The Sahelian emperor who most sought southern expansion was Samori Toure. Yet his large-scale *jihad* in the last decades of the nineteenth century was aimed at French colonialists, and did not attack the Liberian Christian republic (Gershoni, 2008). In fact, having appointed a governor of his territories in northern Sierra Leone, Samori saw this area as being of great importance not for conquest but because the trade routes to Freetown, his main source of arms, passed through them (Fyle, 2006). In the 1890s he also sought to use the trade routes of Bondoukou in northern Côte d’Ivoire to merely to gain access to the French and British ports for the acquisition of arms (Muhammad, 1977). Even if Sudanic empire-builders had developed imperial ambitions towards coastal areas, European presence and hegemony along the coasts would have prevented such ambitions from being translated into efforts of coastward expansion.

On one hand, there was a very small minority of coastal West African thinkers, most prominent of whom was Edward Blyden, who called for closer relations with interior West Africans on an equitable basis.² On the other hand, there was

² Many coastal West Africans held derogatory views of the natives and Muslims of the interior, calling for “Christianity, Commerce and Civilization” to be taken to them. Even for those coastal West Africans and Africa-allied Afro-Americans who favoured building political units with them, there was always a latent tension of viewing themselves or coastal spaces as the center of any such unit. For instance, Paul Cuffe envisioned Sierra Leone as “the foundation for strong, black-led commercial ventures that would contribute to the economic uplift of black people on both sides of the Atlantic.” (Abbott, 2021). The visions of a United States of Africa advocated by Hilary Teague (1802-1853) – one-time Liberian Secretary of State – and others, or a Pan-African Empire, saw Liberia as its base. Martin Delany saw Lagos as the base of a great African metropolis. And at the turn of the century, the Gold Coast Lawyer, Caseley Hayford, who would eventually co-found the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA) in 1918, argued for an “Imperial West Africa, with federal Fanti and Ashanti as a basis” (Hayford, 1903). He argued that “the Gold Coast and Ashanti will lead the way” was because “their sons were richly endowed by Nature with the qualities of leadership and guidance” (Hayford, 1903).

“not one Muslim thinker or spokesman who envisioned a ‘modern trans-tribal West African nation’” (Gershoni, 2008).

Moreover, in the nineteenth century, by the time European conquest became stark, the Sahvaran approach of war (*jihād*), migration (*hijra*) or dissimulation (*sulce*) was couched in religious terms. There are no known arguments for cooperating with coastal-proximal peoples, many of whom had already been co-opted or conquered by European powers, to repel European imperialism. In fact, they scoffed at those coastal peoples who cooperated with the European imperialists. From the late 1850s, the ruler of the Tukulor Empire, Al Haj Umar Tal, for instance, called for a boycott of trade with the French and highlighted “the bankruptcy of the once Muslim societies of Senegambia, which were guilty of mortgaging their moral and economic independence to a European official in St Louis” (Robinson, 1985). Indeed, whereas Sudanic kingdoms abhorred having to fall under European rule, the latent tension between coastal and Sudanic West Africa is reflected in the fact that many coastal West Africans advocated for the British establishment of protectorates across West Africa with the aim of putting the region under tutelage for future self-governance.

The calls for *hijra*, which prominent Sahvaran empire-builders such as Al-hajj Umar Tal and Usman dan Fodio advocated for were even more geographically dissociative, as they called for a move eastward to Mecca. Al-hajj Umar b. Abi Bakr b. Uthmān Krachi (1858-1934) was the Sahvaran who seems to have expressed the widest interest in the fate of West Africa, from coast to Sahara, and eventually became probably “one of the most highly recognized Muslim scholars in West Africa in Europe from the beginning of the twentieth century” (Gibrill, 2015). While he expressed concern that the Europeans had conquered the whole of the south of West Africa up to the Guinea Coast in the West, and in the east up to Cameroon (Gibrill, 2015), having considered both coastal and northern West Africa, he adopted a theological approach to the assessment of the situation (Gibrill, 2015) and expressed resignation at the might of the imperialists.

Therefore, during the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries, the primacy of horizontal contact prevailed – except in the Senegalo-Mauritanian zone (Robinson, 2000) –, whereby the Sahel and northern regions of Gulf of Guinea territories had closer historical, cultural and diplomatic contact with other parts of the Sahel and Western Sudan than they did with forest and coastal peoples. Even the lengthy 16-year period of resistance of the Mandinka Empire – the third largest in West Africa at the time (Singh, 2020) – was largely due to Samori Toure’s ability to make effective strategic retreats to areas uncontrolled by the French, mostly through horizontal shifts, such as his eastward re-orientation towards northeastern Côte d’Ivoire (Legassick, 1966) after being blocked in northern Sierra Leone. Likewise, there were closer relations among West African coastal spaces than between coastal spaces and hinterlands within the same colonial territory. As Jones (2014) explains:

“New opportunities for fast and comfortable travel helped develop existing connections across the West African coast, so that coastal towns in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria and the Gold Coast were often tied politically and intellectually more closely to each other than to their respective hinterlands. Newspaper editors and writers from across the West African coast met, circulated each other’s newspapers, reprinted and quoted one another and reported each other’s travels.”

Among the Muslims of coastal West Africa, living in colonial territories such as Senegal, Gambia and Guinea, no modernist pan-Islamic movement arose that could spread inland. By the mid to late 1890s, more news on West African Muslims could be found in the weekly newspaper the *Crescent*, published by the Liverpool Moslem Institute based in Liverpool, than in any of the major regional newspapers of Freetown and Lagos (Singleton, 2009). However, despite the use of the newspaper by West African Muslims to communicate with each other, engagement was largely limited to the Muslims of coastal West Africa, “including Bathurst, Gambia; St. Louis, Senegal; Porto Novo, Benin; Accra, Gold Coast, Freetown and Sherbro, Sierra Leone; and Lagos and Epe, Nigeria” (Singleton, 2009).³

The predominance of rural habitation, subsistence agriculture and deliberate colonial efforts to limit cross-cultural interaction between northern and southern regions of their Gulf of Guinea territories, as well as between coastal and Sahel territories beyond what was necessary for cash crop production (merchant trade facilitation and migration from labor reserves) and transportation (railway traffic) all limited substantive north-south contact.⁴ Thus, for the biggest inter-territorial movement in British West Africa, the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA) – founded Caseley Hayford, in 1918 –, “Congress membership consisted mostly, if not entirely, of coast dwellers in the capital cities

³ Thus, for example, Alimami Mahomed Gheirawani, the headman of the Fourah Bay Aku community in Sierra Leone, travelled to England in 1902 at the invitation of Colonel King-Harman, Governor of Sierra Leone, “to represent the Muslims of West Africa” at the coronation of King Edward VII (Singleton, 2009).

⁴ An example of deliberate colonial anti-collaboration activities are the measures taken by Sierra Leonean colonial authorities against the efforts made by the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA) to extend its membership and struggle to the Sierra Leone Protectorate (Akintola, 1985).

of Accra, Lagos and Banjul” (Akintola, 1985).

However, coastal-biased western education enabled coastal residents to be employed in the colonial bureaucracy and European corporate subsidiaries as clerks, translators and other low- to mid-level positions. These were often posted to interior spaces given the deficits in western educated residents there. There is systematic documentation by political scientists and historians of the disdain and sometimes oppressive attitudes held by these coastal elites towards interior peoples. Decalo (1973) observes how the Fon from the south of Dahomey staffed the northern bureaucracy, and “frequently acted with typical expatriate arrogance, disdain, and displeasure at their posting to the ‘savage north’”. Bierschenk (1993) even argues that the origins of the north-south division of the Beninese political class can be identified in this initial tension. Similarly in Togo, there was “northern mistrust and fear of domination by the south stoked by the arrogant and contemptful attitude of Ewe administrators posted to hinterland localities” (Decalo, 1979). This has also been documented for the Gold Coast (Brukum, 1998; Saaka, 1987), Sierra Leone (Kandeh, 1992), and Nigeria (Bello, 1962; Mason, 1993). The situation was worst in Liberia, where the relationship between Americo-Liberians – descendants of black settlers from the United States and recaptives who settled in Monrovia and surrounding coastal areas – and indigenous Liberians has been described as “black imperialism” (Akpan, 1973) and an “apartheid type oligarchy” (Aboagye, 1999).

Eventually, Sahvaran elites who travelled to southern regions for work or education (due to greater employment and schooling opportunities in the south) observed the disparities in material outcomes with their northern regions of origin. In northern Sierra Leone, Cartwright (1978) argues that the development of a political salient “northern” regional identity at the grassroots level was greatly due to the diamond rush which meant that “great numbers of northerners saw for the first time the relative prosperity of the south, and were thrown together as ‘strangers’ in the diamond areas.” In Ghana, the opening of Achimota College in 1927 enabled an increase in the number of Northerners trained as teachers. Mostly teachers, the dissatisfaction of the Northern elite about the backwardness of the Protectorate led them to form an association in Tamale in 1936 to promote Northern interests (Brukum, 1998). The association was disbanded after its members faced sanctions from colonial authorities. In addition, the formation of the Moslem Association Party (MAP) (1953-1957) occurred because many muslims particularly in the southern regions of the Gold Coast, were migrant laborers from the north. The party sought to mobilize muslims on the basis of shared economic exploitation (Allman, 1991). In Upper Volta, which was the largest labor reserve in French West Africa (Cordell and Gregory, 1982), the individual experience of otherness as migrants in Côte d’Ivoire “became the collective faith of Voltaic migrants who could hope for no other state than that of migrant laborer” (Gervais and Mandé, 2000). In Nigeria’s case, Sa’adu Zungur, was the first northerner to study at Yaba Higher College in southern Nigeria in 1934, after which he established the Zaria Friendly Society in Zaria (then a center of the educated elite of the north) in 1941 “to raise the north out of its centuries-old slumber” (Feinstein, 1973).

However, until the late colonial period there was not a major burst of writings on material divergence among Sahvarans. This is endogenous, resulting from the late entry and expansion of western education among them. It was the elites who received western education and/or travelled to Europe who penned down their thoughts and sought to modernize their regions. This lack of texts on modernization or material divergence is therefore worst for the most neglected colonies – Niger, Upper Volta and Mauritania.

Moreover, there was a weak appreciation for western materiality among these *ulama* until late into the colonial period. This was in continuity with the nineteenth century situation. It is not that there was altogether an absence of economic thought or economic policies in the nineteenth century Western Sudan (Islahi, 2011; Chafe, 1994). Rather, the European threat came late to the Sudan. Austen (2010) agrees that at the time of Clapperton’s travels in the 1820s, “the European presence in North and West Africa consisted only of coastal trading posts that did not threaten the sovereignty of local states, the prosperity of cross-desert caravans, or the Islamic and Islamicate culture that followed them.” Thus, in the mid-nineteenth century, the Tukulor ruler Al Hajj ‘Umar Tal noted that the Europeans were only traders (Herbst, 2000). Likewise, Lt Dixon Denham, part of the British government-funded Bornu Mission of 1821–25, quoted the effective ruler of Bornu, Shaikh Muhammad al-Amin al-Kanemi, as asking why he would not send his country’s merchants to Bornu to compete with Arab merchants and promote non-slave trade (Wright, 2007). There was a vibrant Sudanic regional trade, as the kola trade involved directly or indirectly, “people from the east shores of Lake Chad through Borno, the Sokoto Caliphate, Borgu, the Mossi states, and most of the Volta basin” who were directly or indirectly involved in the trade, shows “that a process of economic growth was already under way before the imposition of European rule” (Lovejoy, 1980). The trade encouraged the expansion of other industries, such as textile manufacturing, onion farming and natron processing, as well as helped to finance numerous states (Lovejoy, 1980). This therefore provided a means of economic growth and stability before the early 20th century cash crop revolution which fed northern Nigerian

groundnuts to Atlantic trade demand. At this time, the Sudan saw itself as prosperous. During the mission of Hugh Clapperton, Dixon Denham and Walter Oudney for which an escort was provided by the Yusuf Pasha Karamanli of Tripoli, the Pasha had written to Shaykh al-Kanemi of Bornu to allow the British travellers to behold the Sudan's "marvellous things" (Umar, 2002).

Within this context of normalcy and continuity, most *ulama* of the Western Sudan may have been closer in their "thinking on economic issues in a traditional way" to nineteenth century Arab conservative *ulama* such as Muhammad Ali al-Shawkani (1270–1250/1759–1834) – *qāḍī al-quḍāh* (chief justice) of Yemen – and Muhammad Amin b. Umar Ibn Abidin (1198–1252/1783–1836) – the Chief Mufti of Damascus (Islahi, 2015). For these clerics:

"As against the later generation of scholars, they neither visited foreign countries, nor did they read translations of foreign works. They were therefore unaware of the tremendous developments in politics, economics, the sciences and education that had already taken place in the Western world. Although their works touched upon some economic issues, their treatments nonetheless remained within the jurisprudential framework." (Islahi, 2015).

The economic ideas on technological intensification and reform in relations of production of North African reformists, such as Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi in Tunisia and Al-Azhar scholars like Rifā ah Rāfi 'al-Tahtawi and Muḥammad' Abduh in Egypt also did not have any influence in the Western Sudan. As interest in political economy was on the increase in the Arab world and North Africa from the 1870s (Islahi, 2015), with the first economics book translated into Arabic in 1870, Last (2011) observes that "Even at the end of the nineteenth century when conditions for traders and pilgrims were good, such new, radical works as those of Muḥammad 'Abduh and al-Afghānī caused apparently no stir in intellectual circles in northern Nigeria." Thus, while North African and Middle Eastern reformists of the nineteenth century were seeking,

to meet the challenge of the West by restating the basic principles of Islam in the light of the contemporary situation, West African revivalists sought a return to the same basic principles-but not in order to accommodate or adjust, but rather to rediscover and revive; not so much to face the challenge of the West, but rather to confront the incursions of syncretism and polytheism (Anwar, 2019).

Transmission of these Middle Eastern reformist ideas was also limited, since,

"despite its many relations with the Middle East, the Sahel's Islamic clerisy remained impermeable to the *Nahda*, the intellectual effervescence that grew in the Middle East out of the contact with Europe's culture of modernity...far from bringing fundamental concepts under discussion, the Sahel's Muslim intellectuals were committed to a stark reassertion of what, for them, was foundational, ancient, and unalterable" (Idrissa, 2021).

This partly reflects the relative material weakness of the Muslim world beyond West Africa at this time, with the last great Muslim empire, the Ottoman Empire, on the defence, and the caliphate finally being abolished in 1924. Hence, the Ottoman Empire was sidelined when the colonial scramble for Africa began in the 1870s (Minawi, 2016). It also particularly reflects the failures of ambitions by D'Ghies (1822) in Libya – who served as Chief and Foreign Minister (1826-1829) – for North Africa to take the lead in "sowing the seeds a civilization" in Sudanic Africa; the intangibility of the proposition made by Algerian notables to the French government in 1831 for an Arabic newspaper to be established which would "to spread civilization and commercial relations in the interior of Africa" (McDougall, 2017); and the unrealized dreams by the Ottomans for a railway to connect the Central Sudan with the Mediterranean coast to economically develop sub-Saharan Africa (Minawi, 2016).

When the European conquest occurred, religious elites, literate in Arabic or, more commonly, *Ajami* (local languages written in modified Arabic script) were, as Mason (1993) remarks for Northern Nigeria, "engrossed almost entirely in religious texts", or interpreted military inequalities between their lands and the Europeans largely in moral-theological terms. Salvaing (2004) also observes that in Futa Jallon where, after the failure of a military response to colonial conquest, Fulfulde written literature "moved to other fields, and particularly to the religious sphere". A similar recourse to a moral-theological framework characterizes a chain letter addressed to all Muslims which circulated in 1913 in the Haut-Senegal Niger in areas of what is present-day western Mali (Soares, 2003). The prescribed measures to prevent *fitna* (anarchy and disorder) and imminent calamity in relation to Africans' experiences of colonial rule were religious in nature (Soares, 2003). These included stopping the practice of *zina* (sexual immorality), reversing the failure to give *sadaqa* (alms/charity), ensuring the continuation of fasting during the month of Ramadan, and the writing down of Quranic verses for the ink to be drunk, used for washing, and given to livestock (Soares, 2003). The social agenda of the Imams was also often couched in religious terms and focused on physical security and spiritual intervention against natural insecurity. When al-hadji Sani Abdulaye was installed by the French authorities as Imam of the Muslims of

N'zara in northern Togo in 1929, his promises to the Muslims were that: no enemies would conquer the town during his lifetime; no epidemics, famines or droughts would occur during his lifetime; and if the Kambaya house was ever attacked he would defend it to his last breath (van Nieuwaal *et al.*, 1986).

There were *ulama* (religious scholars) in Northern Nigeria, especially those employed by the colonial state, who interpreted the political fall of the Muslim Sudan in cyclical terms – and this was common among members of the Sokoto aristocracy (Usman, 1998; Umar, 2006), believing that the time of the Muslims would come with the passage of time (Umar, 2006). This cyclical view was also echoed in the late colonial period by Abubakar Imam, for whom the European presence – and strong coastal West African association with it – was merely the turn of the West in having power, whereas previously the East – and the Sokoto Caliphate's strong association to it – did (Imam, 1989). Among religious Ffulde writers in colonial Futa Jallon, there were those who believed that the world had been divided into two parts: *al-dunya* (terrestrial world) and *al-akhira* (celestial world) (Salvaing, 2004). In *al-dunya*, “the conquerors had wealth and power, but which could not last longer than human life (or than the life of all empires)... It is interesting to note that the Fulani authors of that period insisted on the idea that French rule will be short and temporary” (Salvaing, 2004).

For some prominent Sokoto thinkers, millenarian expectations meant that the subjugation of the Muslim hinterland would be temporary, and the economic geography was not important since it was the end of days. This is observable in the case of the Chief Judge of Yola, Alkali Modibo Abdullahi Bellel, whose 1901 fatwa, *ar-Risaalat wa 'n-Naseehat* (A Treatise and Good Advice), was “universally accepted by the officials of the Sokoto, including the *Caliph* who chose the *Risaalat* as the official policy in dealing with the British and all Europeans” (Shareef, 2005). He ruled that the *hijra* need not be to another Muslim community or populated area, but the spaciousness of the earth was such that it could be to “a remote place secluded from people, and even if he is alone in the earth and isolated”, such as tops of mountains or inside caves (Shareef, 2005). Indeed, there was an implicit argument that economic crisis would discourage economic intensification since, as Maryum bint Shehu Uthman ibn Fuduye explained in her 1884 *Wathiqa ila Amir Kano fi Amr 'l-Mahdi* (Treatise on the Exodus), the two signs preceding the *hijra* would be drought and “seas of tribulations” to occur in Western lands (including the Western Sudan) that will drive their inhabitants to the east (Shareef, 2012).

For the *ulama* under colonial rule, the weak material culture is depicted in the fact that even when their discourses featured relations of power, “their concern is with how the superior power of the colonizer impacts negatively on the moral and religious fabric and Muslim communities” (Umar, 2006), and comments made about other colonies were often about the quality of rule and their moral fabric (Umar, 2006). By 1943, in the most economically prosperous Saharan economy (judging by the intensity of the cash crop revolution), Northern Nigeria, Mallam Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, who would become the first Prime Minister of Nigeria, could observe, in a letter written to Abubakar Imam in 1943, that “most of the North is not yet aware of the effects of modernity” (Imam, 1989).

Moreover, in contrast to Egypt where Rifā 'ah Rāfi' al-Tahtawi could travel to France and get ideas on things that Egypt could emulate, or Sultan Barghash bin Said (r. 1870–88) who, previously harbouring anti-European sentiments, could marvel at the Bombay, India's industrial center, and seek to replicate certain modern elements in Zanzibar, there were very few early 20th Sahelian reformers traveling to the West, Egypt and elsewhere and being inspired to advocate for robust educational, infrastructural and/or economic reforms. Mallam Abubakar Imam noted in 1943 that “Northerners mostly undertake journeys to Mecca” (Imam, 1989), while a British Resident of Katsina reassured fellow colonial authorities in 1946 that “most of the pilgrims were illiterates and unsophisticated and unlikely to pick up much” (cited in Usman, 1998). Many of the soldiers and laborers from French West Africa who fought overseas during World War II came from Upper Volta and French Sudan. Despite the fact that, as a result of colonial demands for conscripts, this war “saw the largest movement overseas of Africans since the slave trade”, most African soldiers and laborers serving in colonial armies were “non-literate and there are relatively few first-hand records of their experiences” and they did not play major roles in the post-Second World War nationalist politics (Killingray, 2001).

It is then no wonder that Abubakar Imam, in 1944, advocated for Muslims of the Northern Nigerian provinces to be sent to Near Eastern countries where “they will themselves see and hear that the religion of Islam does not prevent progress... A Northern Nigerian Muslim will be more prepared to adopt the practices of his fellow (Eastern) Muslim, and will accept more readily what he hears from the East, than what he hears from the West” (Imam, 1989). He even wrote a book praising the importance of traveling, titled *Tafiya Madubin Ilmi* (Traveling is a Key to Knowledge), after his trip to England in 1943. Similarly, it was after visiting France in 1931 and 1934 that Muhammad-Ali of northern French Sudan authored a manifesto in 1939 for the modernization of the Kel Entsar and sent it to the governor of the colony (Hall, 2011).

Even among the more internationally exposed West Africans who undertook *hijra* (migration) to Mecca following colonial conquest, and who returned to the region to preach the Saudi *Wahabbiya-Salafiyya* doctrine in opposition to the Sufi teachings in West Africa, “The Saudi nation state, the nostalgia for the Ottoman Islamic caliphate, and the idea of the *umma* as a national entity of all Muslims were far from the minds of these *ulamā*” (Ahmed, 2015). There was

a strong focus on religious reformism and they had no anti-colonial agenda in their countries of origin, contrary to the suspicions of the colonial administration (Ahmed, 2015). An example is Muhammad Abdallah b. Mahmud al-Madani, who returned to Africa in 1938 and was “the first to spread the Wahhabiyya *da’wa* in the region of the great bend of the Niger toward Nigeria and Ghana” (Ahmed, 2015). The contact that West Africans had with the Arab world was primarily religious and cultural. Even during the late colonial period, for the “explosive intersection of nascent party politics and confrontations between reformists...and Sufi traditionalists” that occurred in Northern Nigeria, Mali and other French territories in West Africa, it was religious, educational and legal (and not economic) influences that some of these had received from travel and study in Egypt and Saudi Arabia (Thurston, 2009).

It was not until the 1940s that “there was the emergence of a new generation of scholar - poets among the Muslim - Hausa apparently with a new world outlook ready to appreciate modern changes under colonialism” (Usman, 1998). Many of the scholar-poets whom Usman (1998) examines appear to marvel at the technological innovations brought by the British, with Malam Aliyu Namangi composing a poem in 1959 which stated that “We rejoice in the rule of the English, For since they came our country has not known poverty” (quoted in Skinner, 1977). Another scholar-poet, Mallam Muharazu, noted that “many of their manufactures are harmless” (quoted in Usman, 1998).

There is an additional, more complex reason for the lack of written reflections on material divergence among Sahvarans. The fall of trans-Saharan trade prompted some writings among Saharans since there was an absolute diminishment of commerce and wealth in the Saharan regions. A case in point is Ghadames, in southern Libya – which, like many other Saharan oases and towns, was more strongly dependent on trans-Saharan trade –, where there was a spike in private papers pondering over the downfall of the great entrepôt (Haarman, 1998). However, Atlantic trade brought more opportunities in volume and diversity of trade for Sahvarans further south. Stein (2008) also observes that “In the years after 1907, the number of bankruptcies filed by Tripoli’s merchant community soared.” The primary response was to continue to trade new goods, as well as to migrate. For instance, “Many Jewish merchants left Tripoli and even North Africa altogether, for Khartoum, Kano, Paris, and other locales” (Stein, 2008: 102). S. Raccah – a Tripolitanian Jew of Livornese origin – and the London and Kano Trading Company, in response to declining trade between Tripoli and Kano, chose to become “an independent middleman” in Kano and moved into the lucrative trade in groundnuts, eventually handling “more than a third of the Sudanese peanut crop, eventually exporting more of this commodity from Kano than all other European export firms combined” (Stein, 2008). For Stein (2008), this is a demonstration of how the reaction to the shifting geography of regional trade in the early twentieth century among Jews involved in trans-Saharan and trans-Mediterranean commerce was often adaptation by shifting as well.

As Austen (2010) argues, “railroads were so much more efficient than camel caravans that the Sudan could now export not only traditional commodities, including cattle hides and goatskins, but also a whole new range of goods such as peanuts and raw cotton” (Austen, 2010). In effect, the attractiveness and safety of trade increased (Arnould, 1986) and therefore “Sudanic merchants and producers only abandoned trans-Saharan trade because they had better commercial opportunities to their south” (Austen, 2010).

In French West Africa, by 1936 the French colonial economy offered better opportunities than caravanning to merchants (Lydon, 2005). There are many examples of traders previously involved in trans-Saharan trade transitioning to Atlantic trade, such as the most prominent trader in Shinqit in the late nineteenth century, Mhaymad Wuld ‘Ababa initially selling ostrich feathers at the port of Dakar instead of in Morocco as was the practice (Lydon, 2009). Zinder and Maradi in Niger declined at first, but resurged from the mid-1920s due to the groundnut revolution (Roberts, 1981). The largest city in the Sahvara, Kano, did not go into absolute decline, but instead benefited from the cash crop revolution and exportation of groundnuts through Lagos. The construction of the railway from Lagos to the North in 1912 and from Port Harcourt in 1926 “brought about an economic revolution in the North and enabled it to increase the value of its exports from about £180,000 in 1910 to about £65,000,000 in 1962” (Nixon, 1972).

On the other hand, Umar (2006) highlights that there were perhaps also some for whom colonial rule meant little for their traditional life, and they could go on about their normal affairs without having experienced much disruption. Such cases are understandable, since in Francophone West Africa for example, “Away from the Atlantic coast, the period of colonial rule was relatively short, and increasingly so as one moves to the east. In many parts of Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad, the colonial period hardly lasted a person’s lifespan.” (Mann, 2021). The lack of French economic interest in the Sahara drove the colonial administration to leave the residents of the area to their own devices, “as long as they did not disturb *la paix française*” (Lecocq, 2004). The majority of the Tuareg was ambivalent about this situation (Lecocq and Klute, 2013).

Moreover, in absolute terms, despite great colonial expenditure in coastal areas, there was no great suffering across the Sahvara to spark a revolt (Austen, 2010). Typical of many other areas, Zolberg (1969) notes how in northern Côte d’Ivoire,

there was no great misery anywhere as despite the north's status as having the lowest per capita cash income in agriculture with 91% – the highest among Ivorian regions –, being subsistence subsistence farmers, the Senufo “could meet their basic needs in food, shelter, and clothing from traditional economic activities” (Zolberg, 1969).⁵ Moreover, Meagher (1997) argues that while “The major shifts in trade routes and profitable goods as a result of colonialism ruined many of the established precolonial merchants”, these same major shifts, “along with the *pax Britannica*, increased opportunities for the entry of small-scale, rural-based traders into long-distance and crossborder trade”. In essence, there was a “levelling” of the commercial class structure in the Central Sudan (Hashim and Meagher, 1999).

Yet, for the Sahvaran areas which experienced a surge in economic activity from cash crop production, this advancement was uneven when taken in conjunction with coastal advancements. In 1956, 91% (in value terms) of exported products in French West Africa was accounted for by the coastal sector encompassing the West of Senegal and Guinea, the south of Ivory Coast and Dahomey which cumulatively had a population of 5 million spread over an area of 5,00,000 km² (Debie, 2010). On the other hand, less than 10% of the exports (mainly agricultural) was accounted for by the remaining continental spaces which had a population of 12 million over an area of 40,00,000 km² (Suret-Canal, 1972, cited in Debie, 2010). In 1950, the major agricultural products (groundnuts and cotton) produced in Northern Nigeria as a whole made up 20% of the colony's exports, compared to cocoa, palm kernels and palm oil produced mainly in the south which made up 54% of exports (Usman, 2022). In 1927, cocoa exports (produced in the Eastern, Central, Ashanti and Western provinces of the colony) accounted for 81.7% of the total Gold Coast export value (Colonial Office, 1929). Decades later, out of a total national export value of GBP114.7 million in 1954, northern Ghana which occupied two-thirds of the country's land area, exported less than GBP250,000 (Varley and White, 1958).

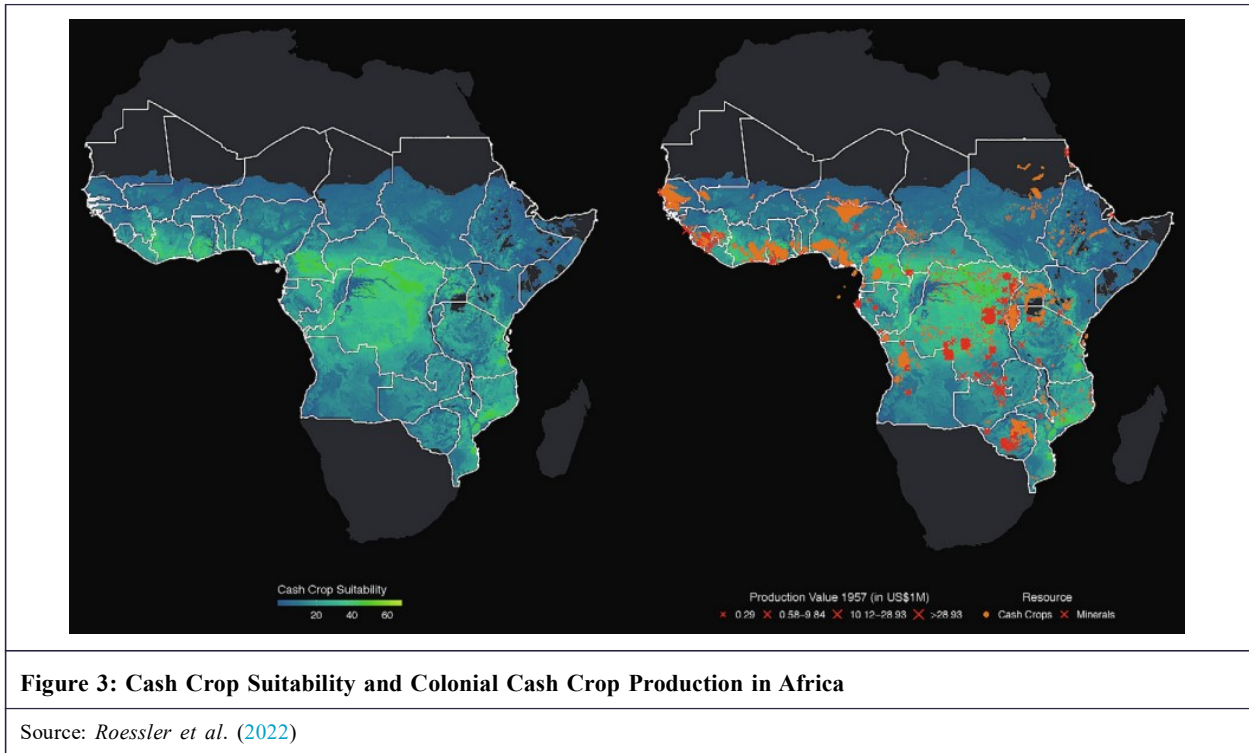
Similarly in Togo, the two major export crops, coffee, cocoa and palm kernels, were cultivated exclusively in the south (Farnham, 1997), and Ewe elites held a monopoly on cocoa, cotton, and coffee sales. Phosphate, which eventually became Togo's principal source of foreign earnings by the late 1960s and early 1970s, was also mined in the south (Farnham, 1997). In Benin, 64.9% of exports in 1952 was made up of palm oil and kernels, which were cultivated in south and central Dahomey (Akindélé and Aguessy, 1955; Staniland, 1973). In Côte d'Ivoire, the savannahs contributed only 2% of national exports in the 1950s (Rougerie, 1964). Thus, the northern region (making up half of the land area) having over half of the Ivorian population at the turn of the 20th century, fell to only a third of the population and contributed less than 10% to the country's economy which was based primarily on the export of trees, cocoa, coffee and bananas by the 1950s (Woods, 1989). In Sierra Leone, “While palm kernels, the main agricultural export, seemed to be drawn nearly as much from the north as from the south other crops, including those which were to prosper most greatly in the next decade, were concentrated in the south” (Cartwright, 1978), since kola and groundnuts grown in the north did not have the same export potential as the southern crops (Cartwright, 1978). In Liberia, whereas agricultural exports other than rubber (most importantly palm kernels) accounted for a very small proportion of total exports by 1963, they were “virtually the only foreign earnings generated by the native population of the hinterland” (Qureshi *et al.*, 1964).

This spatial inequality in cash crop production is mapped by Roessler *et al.* (2022). Figure 3 depicts the spatial distribution of cash crop suitability and the production value of cash crops in 1957 across Africa. Within West Africa, there is a clear concentration of cash crop suitability across nine most important African cash crops (cocoa, coffee, cotton, groundnuts, oil palm, tea, sugarcane, tobacco, and bananas) along coastal regions, a pattern followed by the actual production value of cash crops. Even for the largest cluster of cash crop production in the Sahvara (northern Nigeria), this is concentrated in the north-west of the country. Indeed, the district of Kano accounted for about half of the annual groundnut crop which made the Northern region famous for its groundnut exports (GATT, 1965) and made up 80% of the total groundnut exports of Northern Nigeria in the 1910s and 1920s (Fika, 1973).

Nonetheless, the absolute, albeit uneven and locally conflictual (especially between chiefs and peasantry), material advancement ensured a period whereby western educated Sahvarans and uneducated Sahvaran migrants to southern spaces could observe uneven colonial development and could complain. Victims of southern clerks' frothy attitudes could also express their criticisms.

Merchants were likely the most in favour of the system and could even cooperate with southerners against the shared experience of European anti-competitive practices. Indeed, while antagonisms between the Krio and immigrants from Sierra Leone's interior existed, common interest in countering unfair competition from European and Syrian businesses, racial discrimination and economic injustice (Howard, 2003) meant that “elite Krio newspaper editors and association officers in some circumstances took the side of traders from [Freetown's] lower ranks and from the interior” (Howard, 2003). Similarly, the late 20th century Ivoirian novelist Kourouma Ahmadou (1981) emphasized the pertinence of free trade by noting that “What matters most to a Malinke is freedom of trade. And the French, also and

⁵ Famines, forced labour and imposition or increase of colonial taxes, nonetheless, often garnered discontent.



above all, stood for free trade that allowed the juula, the big Malinke traders to prosper”. Hogendorn (1970) narrates how, in the early 20th century, it was Kano traders in northern Nigeria who mobilized the countryside – village headmen, traders, agent-buyers and farmers – to produce more groundnuts to take advantage of the better profit opportunities, “resulting in the groundnut boom experienced shortly after the Baro-Kano rail line was completed: 1912 and in 1913-14” (Salau, 2011). Olukoju (2002) makes the argument that a characteristic of the economic thought of the coastal West African nationalists up to the Great Depression period (1929-1933) was an adherence to *laissez faire* economics, as “All they wanted, it seems, was a level playing field where Africans could compete.” (Olukoju, 2002).

3. Late Colonial Tensions in Political Competition

It was not until the late colonial period (the 40s and 50s), when colonial powers opened up more space for self-governance within colonies, that tensions substantially intensified. Green (2011) explains that:

“In colonies with unequally distributed capital and labor, the late colonial period foreshadowed Africa’s future conflicts by pitting those areas with more capital investment against other areas. Insipient anti-colonial political parties such as Alliance des Bakongo (ABAKO) in the Belgian Congo, National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) in Nigeria, National Unionist Party (NUP) in Sudan, Parti Democratique de la Cote de Ivoire (PDCI) in Ivory Coast, and Uganda People’s Congress (UPC), among others, coalesced around high human capital populations, leading other political parties to form in opposition to the previous ones. Divisions over centralism versus federalism, industrial/urban versus agricultural/rural investment and nationalisation versus privatisation of land ownership all grew out of the differing sources of support for these parties.”

There were fears that southern peoples would dominate the state bureaucracy due to their quantitative superiority in western education, thereby adding to their economic domination. In 1946, in the context of the establishment of Nigeria’s Richards Constitution and the southern-dominated National Congress of Nigeria and the Cameroons’ (NCNC) opposition to some of its “undemocratic” provisions, Mallam Aliyu Bida, onetime headmaster of Bida Middle School and a member of the Bida Emir’s Council, is reported to have wondered:

“If independence comes too quickly the North will be at the mercy of the more progressive South. This the Northern peoples will certainly resist by force. What can be done now? The North is poor, the South is wealthy. The South has its own home-born lawyers, doctors and engineers. The North has produced, as yet, no lawyers, no engineers, and has only one doctor. There are twenty schools in the South for everyone in the North... More important still, the Southerners have learned to organize themselves in unions and political parties.” (quoted in Bryan, 1969).

Indeed, “With the increasing development of the north in the last five years before independence, the hostility of the north toward the south seemed to grow apace, rather than lessen. Part of the reason was that, as in Northern Nigeria, this

development depended on southern civil servants, professionals, and teachers.” (Johnson, 1970). In Dahomey, prior to and following the 1946 reforms, modern elites from southern ethnic groups in the north were rejected as “foreigners” or “black Europeans” (Ronen, 1974).

In the Gold Coast in 1946, the Northern Territories Territorial Council (NTC) was created, and “Beginning from the third session the Council members requested more development for the North on the grounds that the area should have everything the South had” (Brukum, 1998). When in 1951 representatives of Northern Ghana for the first time took seats in the expanded Legislative Assembly, “they found the immediate self-government demand of the southern members distasteful. Northerners advocated a slower approach of self-government to enable their region, which had lacked behind in socio-economic development to catch up with the rest” (Brukum, 1998).

Concerned with the prospects of the poorer northern region under a southern-led and almost certainly Convention People’s Party-dominated government, educated members of the northern aristocracy such as Yakubu Tali and Joseph H. Allassani did not wish to gain self-governance and independence as quickly as the southerners desired. Tali argued, “A person who wishes to become a driver must begin first as a driver’s mate.” (quoted in Staniland, 1975). Allassani likewise urged that progress should be gradual: “It will be a tragedy to attempt to jump all at once from the ground to the top. We have to start from the bottom and climb step by step to the top.” (quoted in Staniland, 1975). In a northern region where, at the time of independence, only one secondary school was available to the 20% of the Gold Coast population living in the northern areas (Langer, 2007), a major fear was that the Africanization of colonial governance in the absence of a sizable northern educated class would mean replacing British officials with southern officials (Staniland, 1975). The North:

“feared that if the Gold Coast was granted independence, they would become subject to a government in Accra run by southerners that would further neglect their region. What they most wanted was some guarantees that the North would be given equal representation and resources. But those reassurances were never really made.” (Rabinowitz, 2013).

In May of 1953, Nkrumah and the Governor met the Standing Committee of the NTC and traditional rulers of the North in Tamale to discuss constitutional reform and progress for independence. In response to the northern demand for their region to be developed first before agreeing to independence and other demands, Nkrumah assured that the North would be represented in the Assembly in proportion to its population, would have “adequate representation” in the cabinet and would have a “special development organization” to look after its development (Brukum, 1998). Despite these assurances, the north remained sceptical, and in September 1953 the NTC appointed a Development Committee that recommended “A special grant to facilitate rapid development in the Northern Territories during the transitional period which the Gold Coast will pass before attaining Dominion status” (Brukum, 1998). The fear of the northern elite was that decolonization would mean an African government controlled by southerners and they would not agree to develop the North (Brukum, 1998).

By the end of 1953, the forceful resignation of J.A. Braimah, the only northern representative in the Government, based on corruption allegations, and the failure of the government to extend the railway to the North (Brukum, 1998) made the North perceive that the Nkrumah government could not allay its fears of domination and therefore formed the Northern People’s Party (NPP) (Rabinowitz, 2013). During the Nkrumah years (1957-1966) Braimah would argue that the large number of southerners relocating to the north to work as clerks and administrators was an invasion, and “Southern dominance in the north, Braimah argued, threatened northern leaders’ political prospects and the regions potential for development.” (Talton, 2010: 128). In 1955 Braimah declared “Away with local expatriate officers,” and “Down with Black Imperialism in the North.” (Ladouceur, 1979).

The aims and objectives of the NPP expressed in its constitution reflects “the desire of the North to be at par with the south in terms of social, economic and educational development” (Brukum, 1998). For the NPP, “The campaign speakers knew that a majority of the men in each village once worked in the South and experienced discrimination against backward Northerners.” (Lentz, 2006). Consequently, “the fear and resentment directed at southern politicians” in the north prevented the CPP from having easy wins since it had to fight the Northern People’s Party (NPP) for northern votes (Staniland, 1975).

In Upper Volta, the Moro Naba (paramount chief of the Mossi) used the economic argument of migrant labor and its devastation to the Voltaic economy and social fabric to further his requests made to the French for the reconstitution of the colony of Upper Volta and Mossi reunification (Gervais and Mandé, 2000). This was supported by intellectuals, civil servants and political activists who “signed petitions systematically invoking the negative effects of labor demands on Voltaic society and the urgency of rebuilding the social fabric” (Gervais and Mandé, 2000). Finally gaining independent

territorial status from Cote d'Ivoire, the Union Voltaïque got a representative, Philippe Zinda Kaboret, elected to the National Assembly, who in April-May 1947, presented a proposition for the rebuilding of the colony of Upper Volta (Gervais and Mandé, 2000).

However, unlike the more systematic and textually rich tradition of anti-colonial and nationalist fervour which characterizes coastal West African writings, Sahvaran reflection on uneven colonial development is fragmented and geographically uneven. For instance, in Dahomey where political parties formed on an ethno-regional basis, Decalo (1970) notes how Hubert Maga, who formed the northern-dominated *Mouvement Democratique Dahomeen* (MDD), “appealed to regional and ethnic sentiments” and “exploited northern grievances against southern domination”. In Togo, during the clamour for Ewe unification and independence across French Togo and British Togoland from 1951, the northern political grouping, *Union des Chefs et des Populations du Nord* (U.C.P.N.) formed against the unificationists, led by future first president of Togo Sylvanus Olympio, such that after Olympio won the 1958 general elections, he “set out to settle old scores with former political opponents, especially those from the north” (Decalo, 1987). Even the history of the economic arguments of the Moro Naba, intellectuals, political activists and civil servants in the largest labor reserve in West Africa, Upper Volta, are yet to feature centrally in any publication beyond brief mention (Gervais and Mandé, 2000). Frederick Cooper briefly mentions Joseph Ouedraogo of Upper Volta who argued in January 1959 that “We must not forget that some territories are incapable, in the current situation, to balance their budgets. The [Mali] Federation must, through its solidarity, succeed in helping them” (quoted in Cooper, 2014). For Burkina Faso in general, even creative literature—a genre which has typically made up a great portion of texts written by African elites under colonial rule—, appears to be sparse (Klíma et al., 1976). A more comprehensive history of Burkina Faso’s grapple with uneven development in West Africa would need to consider legislative debates on Mossi reunification—as Gervais and Mandé (2000) allude to—, debates about the consequences of the *loi-cadre* and diminution of the AOF—as Cooper (2014: 335) alludes to—, and legislative and newspaper debates about the advantages and demerits of joining the Mali Federation or the Conseil de l’Entente—as Cooper (2014: 336) alludes to.

For Mauritania, linguistic constraints and a lack of attention paid by Anglophone scholars to its intellectual and political history are key barriers. First, unlike Northern Mali where Muhammad Ali of the Kel Entsar could author a manifesto by 1939, Mauritania (especially northern Mauritania) was only declared a colony in 1920 and was not pacified until 1934 (with some resistance in Atar continuing till, 1958), much later than other parts of the Sahvara (Sabatier and Himpan, 2019). In fact, Sid Ahmed Ould Aida, the Emir of Adrar (the *bidane* stronghold), led a resistance against French colonization in 1932 in response to “the social and economic situation made difficult for the tribes of Adrar by the colonial administration”. Second, much of the history of Mauritania is religious, political and anthropological and written in French without the availability of English translations (given Mauritania’s status at the far periphery of the English-speaking world’s interest). These Francophone scholars pay much less attention to economic intellectual history, and therefore much of the economics-related primary sources remain in Arabic, thereby adding an additional layer of neglect. An example is the corpus of Arabic manuscripts (which have been digitized by the British Library) of Mountaga Ba, who was an adviser to the country’s first president Moktar Ould Daddah.

On the other hand, there was really no ethno-spatial material “divergence” in Mauritania. Senegal remained the administrative capital of Mauritania until 1957, while the black areas in southern Mauritania, along the Senegal River basin, were not substantially invested in to have created an economic class of black Mauritians which threatened *bidane* hegemony. In fact, it was an Arab-Berber-controlled region, Trarza, in the southwest (which bordered the French colonial headquarters of St Louis du Senegal) that “colonial educational efforts were more clearly felt, leading social actors from this region to ascend to political leadership during the country’s founding period”, including the country’s first president, Moktar Ould Daddah (1960–1978) (Friere, 2019).

Therefore, the responses to spatial material divergence in northern Benin, northern Togo, Burkina Faso and Mauritania are less comprehensively documented than, for instance, Abubakar Imam’s (1989) thoughts on the need for northern Nigeria to develop independently of southern Nigeria or those of Yakubu Tali and J.A. Braimah in the Gold Coast, both in the Anglophone world. In addition to linguistic barriers, a major reason for this is the scholarly concentration on broader anti-colonial and nationalist struggles, writings and speeches. Perhaps a stronger reason for the less obvious expressions of uneven development among the poor Sahel territories was that, as French colonies, there was a greater salience of debate over federating with France and receiving economic aid from the French. In contrast, northern regions of British colonies, which were never part of a colonial federation, could not strongly conceptualize federation with Britain. Cooper (2014) indeed argues that most Francophone West African politicians in the 1950s agreed that “As part of a large economic ensemble, . . . , the impoverished territories stood a better chance of developing, even if they were assuming much of the financial burden and political risk”, by transferring responsibility for development to territorial governments.

Among the Sahvarans who reflected on economic underdevelopment, there were different theories explaining the uneven development. Some blamed the traditional rulers and chiefs for resisting modernization; others blamed colonial powers for underdeveloping their region at worst or not doing enough at best; others blamed coastal West Africans; and yet others adopted a combination of these theories.

Aminu Kano in northern Nigeria, for instance, blamed both chiefs and colonial actors, arguing in a 1943 letter to Abubakar Imam that “after 43 years of the so-called government Northern Nigeria has only one medical doctor – and that is all! No sanitarians, no politicians, no educationists, no financiers...”, attributing this to the backwardness of native authority elites (quoted in [Imam, 1989](#)). In 1944 he also noted that the local craftsmen, “who are the backbone of the country”, were being “liquidated by the European merchants”, and were at risk of vanishing into non-existence (quoted in [Imam, 1989](#)). This allowed him, eventually as leader of the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), the first political party in Northern Nigeria founded in 1950, greater leeway to seek political cooperation with southerners. Indeed, his close friend, Sa’adu Zungur, the first northerner to study at Yaba Higher College in southern Nigeria in 1934, is regarded as the first northerner to think of, and agitate for, pan-Nigerian and pan-African unity ([Feinstein, 1973](#)).

Yusuf Bala Usman (1945–2005), northern Nigeria’s “comrade with the greatest theoretical output” ([Mayer, 2016](#)), and “one of the best Marxist historians of Northern Nigeria” ([Mayer, 2016](#)), along with Abubakar Rimi, Aminu Kano and other leftists sought to carry out rural social justice. This included the abolition of feudal dues, taxes that weighed most heavily on the rural poor, such as the cattle tax, and the investigation crimes when the political leadership and the feudalists arbitrarily took away someone’s property, contrary to legal procedures and/or local custom ([Mayer, 2016](#)). For them, anti-colonialism was also a class struggle, and thus, “Nigerian radicalism was born with an ethos that transcended ethnic divisions...In the late 1960s and 1970s, prominent socialist figures...believed that ethnicity was a problem that would disappear...once the dictatorship of the proletariat was established.” ([Mayer, 2016](#)).⁶ After independence, Usman would eventually come to believe that resources are not truly scarce in Nigeria, and that as a petro-state, it is “not the resource that is scarce but its utilization, cooperation and collusion” ([Usman, 1987](#)). In Neighbouring Niger, whose Marxist influences were more pronounced than elsewhere in the Sahvara, the disappointing levels of capital investment, stagnating wages and increase in taxation made the struggle led by the Sawaba movement of Djibo Bakary to be both anti-colonial and against the ascent and insularity of the *évolués* and the power of the *Sarakuna* (chiefs in Hausaland) used unjustly and despotically over rural communities ([van Walraven, 2021](#)).

In other cases, certain minority northern populations were almost preoccupied with struggles against traditional elites. This was because colonial authorities showed preference to more politically centralized ethnic groups and the policy of indirect rule created an interest in extending the power of centralized localities over non-centralized ones, thereby creating political and economic inequalities. Hence in Ghana:

Dagomba, Mamprusi, and Nanumba leaders sought to define ‘northern interests’ to counter a government dominated by southerners. There was little relationship, however, between Konkomba political developments and mainstream ‘northern’ politics. Konkomba Western-educated leadership launched their own fight against ‘black imperialism,’ which they regarded as coming from Dagomba within the region, not from the south.” ([Talton, 2010](#)).

This strongly affected the extent to which northern Ghana, already a minority within Ghana, could mobilize to defend its economic and political interests at the national level. As Stewart and Langer ([2007](#)) observe even till today:

“the lack of political mobilisation of the ‘north’ as a whole makes more extensive and comprehensive redistribution and development initiatives highly unlikely...the (re)occurrence of several serious inter- and intra-ethnic conflicts in the northern regions – for example, the 1994 Konkomba war and 2002 Dagbon crisis, themselves related to [horizontal inequalities] within the north – has not only resulted in the destruction of political as well as social capital, but it also makes mobilisation for mutual benefit less likely.”⁷

⁶ This did not take into account the economic struggles within the Eastern bloc of the Soviet Union over the distribution of manufacturing capabilities within the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) created to coordinate national development plans, import-export trade, and mutual assistance to enable the industrial development of the developing members and eliminate achieve industrial coordination. The most industrialized members, such as the German Democratic Republic and Czechoslovakia, were reluctant to subsidize the industrial development of future competitors within the bloc, while accepting low quality products in return ([Dragomir, 2015](#)).

In contrast, cooperation was also made possible in Côte d'Ivoire since for the Senufo of the north, the primary economic problem was forced labor exacted by the colonial regime which Houphouët-Boigny worked to abolish in 1946, earning him celebrity status and political alliance with northerners. In 1945, on Houphouët's first foray to Korhogo, the capital of Senuofoland, to solicit voluntary labor for Syndicat Agricole Africain (SAA) planters (to demonstrate to the French the needlessness of forced labor), according to one report the paramount chief of the Senufo Gbon Coulibaly called the people of Korhogo to gather to hear Houphouët by claiming that he had found someone who would end forced labor (Lawler, 1990). Lawler (1992) even argues that "There is little need to explain further why the Senufo – remote as they might be from the centers of Ivorian power and prosperity – were to become the most ardent supporters of Felix Houphouët-Boigny and the PDCI-RDA".

In other cases, coastal elites and colonial authorities were blamed. A group of educated elite in the northern area of the Sierra Leone Protectorate, the Committee of Educated Aborigines (CEA) founded in 1922, argued that their interests had been ignored by the Krio who enjoyed the country's wealth disproportionately, and they therefore demanded more development schemes for the Protectorate (Akintola, 1985). The CEA accused colony politicians of neglecting the interests of the protectorate (Akintola, 1985). Muhammad-Ali ag Attaher in northern Mali criticized French colonialism's failures of development and limited development assistance in his region (Hall, 2011), although cooperation with southern elites was deemed unattractive because it meant being politically ruled and dominated by them which, besides the racial and political connotations, also meant economic marginalization.

Scholarship has also been silent on Sahvaran responses to the expansion in colonial development expenditure after the Second World War. The expenditure was also concentrated on coastal regions. In French West Africa only 30% of the funding in the first FIDES (Economic and Investment Fund) plan of 1946 was allocated to the three continental territories (Niger, Soudan and Mauritania) (Debie, 2010). Likewise, 56% of funds allocated in its second phase (1952-56) went on port and road development in the coastal states (Higgott, 1980). Moreover, until 1955, the light industries around Dakar received almost the whole of the external private financial contribution to this public effort (Amin, 1973: xii). There was limited discussion of these plans by Sahvaran elites since they were distant from the strategic and day-to-day administration of colonial capitals based in coastal cities (Staniland, 1973; Imam, 1989).

However, there was not a complete absence of northern voices in the emerging era of colonial development action (Utietiang, 2015). In 1943, Lord Friedrich Lugard made a request to Abubakar Imam in August of 1943 for suggestions on the ways that Barclays Bank could help Nigeria. In response, Imam requested his friends to send in their suggestions. Aminu Kano's letter to Imam in response, written in November 1944, expressed support for the improvement of tools and output of local farmers and craftsmen, construction of good roads for transport and an increase in education (Imam, 1989). He also rejected what he called "double exploitation" by advocating in its stead, resource processing industries, such as the processing of groundnuts and cotton into soap and simple cloth (Imam, 1989).

Imam, after collecting all the views expressed by his respondents, finally replied Lugard in December of 1944. Imam urged Lugard "to leave the problems of the Southern parts of Nigeria in their hands," while he focused on the need of the Northern provinces (Imam, 1989). In addition to expanded access to education, he advocating for the technological intensification to increase production of northern raw materials such as groundnuts, tin, fish in the Lake Chad region, salt in Borno in northeastern Nigeria, ginger, rice, cattle hides and so on, and using simple modern machines to processes them into finished products (Imam, 1989). This would improve employment since, "the more demand there is the more people are encouraged to supply. Thus, as secondary industries spread, primary industries spread too. Thus you will find work, so to speak, 'Looking for people to do it, and not people looking for work to do', which creates all evils in a country." (Imam, 1989). He believed that Northern Nigeria was in fact rich enough if only the training and tools were availed (Imam, 1989).

Interestingly, he argued that "In fact, we are in a country rich enough to make us richer and perhaps to allow us to stand economically on our own feet, if only we are given the training and the tools with which to finish the job." (Imam, 1989). Simple modern machines would also enable the processing of these raw materials into finished products. This would improve employment since, "the more demand there is the more people are encouraged to supply. Thus, as secondary industries spread, primary industries spread too. Thus you will find work, so to speak, 'Looking for people to

⁷ This tendency is observed across West Africa, such that even when northern groups gain power, ethnic rivalry among northern groups continues to fuel ethnic tension beyond coastal-hinterland tensions. In Liberia, the end of America-Liberian rule came with increased salience of tensions between Krahn and Gio and Mano; in Gambia the end of urban Wolof and Aku predominance increased the salience of Mandinka; in Sierra Leone, the end of Creole dominance paved the way for Mende-Temne rivalry. One might therefore surmise that northern Ghanaian, northern Nigerian or black Mauritanian substantive predominance would make Konkomba-Ninumba, Hausa-Kanuri-Middle Belt and Afro-Mauritanian and haratine rivalries, respectively, more nationally politically salient.

do it, and not people looking for work to do', which creates all evils in a country" (Imam, 1989). This was a vision in implicit resistance to being used as labor reserves for more economically dynamic coastal regions as was the norm across West Africa. A similar sentiment was expressed by J.A. Braimah in 1950 during the six session of the Northern Territories Territorial Council (NTC) by saying that he did not want northern Ghana to "remain nothing more than labor camp" (Brukum, 1998: 22). In the French Sudan in the 1950s, the *Union Soudanaise* (the Sudanese section of the RDA):

"focused on strengthening the agricultural base of the economy. It sought to limit labor migration to cities and the coastal regions of French West Africa, arguing that migration was a loss of critical agricultural labor. The US would increasingly come to see migration as incompatible with the construction of the nation, adopting restrictive measures to curb migratory flows." (van Beusekom, 2008).

In Upper Volta, pressure groups questioned the role of migration in the territory's economic development, and created a parliamentary mission in 1952 and 1955 to examine working conditions (Gervais and Mandé, 2000).

When forced labor was outlawed by the French Assembly in 1946, Senoufo and Dyula in Côte d'Ivoire refused to migrate to the southern plantations, preferring to work their own farms (Lawler, 1990). Namongo Ouattara, leader of the Korhogo section of the national veterans organization, *Association des Anciens Combattants et Victimes de la Guerre*, in a 1986 interview explains that at this time:

The Senoufo people rebelled. We did all the work in the Cote d'Ivoire-roads, even built the railway. All this without machines-nothing. It's us who did it all.... We couldn't migrate to the south. They refused to give us even one forest. They were afraid that if we came, we'd take over, because the Senoufo does more work than all the rest of them. The land here is without gratitude. Even today, the Senoufo who do go to the south won't work on plantations. They won't work for others. They want their own plantation.

It is probably due to the greater salience of colonial forced labor in Côte d'Ivoire that agricultural technological intensification was not as prominent a developmental desire as in northern Nigeria. Kamaté (2019) notes how, by May 1946, due to colonial abuses, the population interpreted "freedom" as an end to economic activity and the abandonment of cotton production. This expectation was corrected by Houphouët-Boigny and a delegation to Mankono composed of northerners such as Ouezzin Coulibaly who argued that this was a misconception. Instead, they exhorted, freedom of labor meant the need to intensify economic activity and produce more: "Que la liberté du travail implique pas l'abandon de tout travail, mais, au contraire, un accroissement, une intensification de l'activité de tout un chacun dans tous les domaines économiques intéressant le pays" (Kamaté, 2019). In postcolonial Côte d'Ivoire as well, efforts to spur development in the economically disadvantaged northern region were envisaged, as the Economic Planning Minister Mohammed Diawara held, to create jobs so that "the outflow of Northerners to Abidjan would be stopped." (Woods, 1989).

The tensions of uneven development in West Africa are also manifest in political debates about geographical structuring and restructuring. During the pre-Atlantic period when the only access to the outside world for the coastal regions was through the trans-Saharan trade routes. The rise of the Atlantic trade since the sixteenth century and collapse of trans-Saharan trade by the early twentieth century made the Atlantic the most lucrative and effectively the only viable direction of wealth-making for the Sahvara.

In 1953 when Northern Nigerian elites threatened to secede over a disagreement on the floor of the Federal House of Representatives in Lagos over the question of when Nigeria should be granted independence, Nnamdi Azikiwe used this point of the criticality of access to the Atlantic as one of his seven reasons why it would be calamitous for the North to secede (Azikiwe and Philip, 1961). The Premier of the North, Ahmadu Bello, indeed recognized the importance of this spatial configuration (Tamuno, 1970). During the clamour for Ewe unification and independence across French Togo and British Togoland from 1951, the northern political grouping, *Union des Chefs et des Populations du Nord* (U.C.P.N.), in French Togo was convinced by the French against the unificationists, led by future first president of Togo Sylvanus Olympio, that "Ewe unification would cut the north from the coast" (Amenume, 1975). Burkina Faso was encouraged to vote "Yes" in the 1958 referendum to remain in the French community partly because of its economic dependence on the Côte d'Ivoire, which required the colony "to remain in Houphouët-Boigny's good graces" (Schmidt, 2009). The country was also influenced to reject entry into the Mali Federation and to enter into the Conseil de l'Entente because, as Maurice Yaméogo explained, the country relied on Abidjan for port access, railway connection and aid which the Mali Federation could not supply (Cooper, 2014). For French Sudan, it was partly because the colony was economically tied to Senegal, especially its heavy dependence on the Dakar-Niger railway, that "the landlocked territory could not afford to alienate its powerful neighbour" and followed suit with Senegal to vote "Yes" in the 1958 referendum (Schmidt, 2009).

This consideration even extended into the postcolonial period. President Hamani Diori's support for the Federal Military Government of Nigeria during the Biafran War (1967-1970) was partly influenced by "the land-locked Niger's

dependence on Nigerian railways as its vital link with the sea” (Ahmad, 1984). President Keita Modibo (1961) linked the fact that Mali remained “faithful to the aim of African unity” and that its “Constitution therefore provides for a total or partial abandonment of sovereignty in favour of a grouping of African States”, to the precarious situation of the country, including the fact that it had no outlet to the sea and had “common frontiers with the French-speaking African countries at a time when relations between the Republic of Mali and France were bad.”

There may have been more visible minority forces in the Core Sahel territories which sought geographical restructuring than there were among Gulf of Guinea territories. Compared to four (Dahomey, Ghana, Guinea and Senegal) out of eleven of the latter, all four of the Core Sahel territories exhibited serious efforts to reorder their nationhood. In Northern Nigeria, Aminu Kano and the Northern Elements People’s Union was indeed in favour of Kwame Nkrumah’s efforts towards an African Union. In Mauritania, more radical forces among Black Mauritians wanted to join the pan-Africanist Mali Federation and radical forces among Arab-Berber Mauritians sought to join unify the country with Morocco. In Niger, Djibo Bakary, leader of the Sawaba party hoped to build relations with Algeria as part of the “confederal Union” (Cooper, 2014). He also discussed a possible merger of Nigeria and Niger after both had gained independence, an idea that members of the NPC outright rejected when, following Niger’s independence, Bakary sought assistance from Nigeria to subvert Hamani Diori’s rule. The Sudan Republic entered into a federation with Senegal in order to salvage the pan-African dream of horizontal solidarity as a requisite to entering French federation, following the fall of the AOF (Cooper, 2014).

Infranational debates about administrative structuring were also influenced by these tensions. Northern elites in Nigeria preferred regional autonomy, even initially preferring what was effectively a confederacy with a weak central government, in order to avoid political and bureaucratic domination by southern Nigerians. In Ghana, “Leaders from Ghana’s isolated and impoverished northern province... were torn between their interest in preserving northern political autonomy...and their thirst for the development revenues that only a strong central state could extract from their wealthy southern countrymen” (Boone, 2003). The Northern People’s Party (NPP) believed that “in a federal system that was truly decentralized, the North would be worse off since it did not have enough resources to sustain a regional administration let alone a development programme” (Brukum, 1998). Ultimately, while the party “represented the poorest region in the Gold Coast, the one most easily short-changed under a federal system, it maintained that the North would suffer more under a unitary system with power concentrated in Accra.” (Allman, 1993). As Mumuni Bawumia, a northern minister in Nkrumah’s first cabinet thought, “We understood what federalism meant: that Ashanti wealth would largely remain in Ashanti.” (Ladouceur, 1979). Indeed, Boone (2007) argues that regional conflicts in the 1950s in countries like Ghana, Nigeria and Côte d’Ivoire were battles over economic redistribution where “protagonists assumed that development and ‘nation building’ would be funded by taxing the most successful export-producing farmers or mineral-rich region.”

Where northern populations had strong racial or ethnic identities and believed in the economic viability of their region, some irredentist sentiments emerged. There was an attempt by the *Qadi* of Ahl Arawan in Northern Mali, Mohammed Mahmoud Ould Cheikh, in launching petitions in 1957-1958 for a separate Tamasheq Saharan territory to avoid domination by black populations in the Southern Sahara and Sahel (Suggitt, 2018). In 1957, Ould Cheikh managed to collect 360 signatories for a petition he spearheaded in favour of Northern Mali remaining under French rule under the *Commune des Regions Saharienne* (OCRS) which the French created in 1957 to unify Mauritania, southern Algeria, the northern regions of Mali, Niger, and Chad, in order to monopolize the exploitation of oil discovered in the Algerian Sahara in 1956 (Mathee, 2011). The petition stated:

“If there exists, a right to self-determination for a people, we would like to believe that we are allowed to make our aspirations known. We declare without restrictions that we already are, and want to remain, French Muslims and an integral part of the French Republic. We manifest our formal opposition to being integrated in an autonomous or federalist Black Africa or North Africa ... We demand the incorporation of our country in the French Soudan of which we are part, historically, emotionally and ethnically ... France has not found us under Soudanese, [i.e. “black”] domination” (quoted in Mathee, 2011).

However, not one of Timbuktu’s high-ranking *ulama* such as Abu al-Khayr or Muhammad Ibrahim bin’ Abidin were among these signatories (Mathee, 2011). Ultimately, “Despite travelling extensively through the Sahara and the Sahel”, the *qadi* failed to convince all the Tuareg confederations encompassing the whole of the OCRS region, indicating the heterogeneity of the Saharan communities (Suggitt, 2018). With the political dominance of southern populations in Mali and Niger, as well as French use of indirect rule for these nomadic populations, limited French education, and a lack of interest in politics, it was the case that “these nomadic peoples were not given a voice or a place at the discussion tables of the OCRS” (Suggitt, 2018).

While the OCRS project failed, it had sown the seeds of division as it removed the only counterbalance to southern domination that the Tuareg had. The role of a perceived reversal of fortune is highlighted by Muhammad Ali, who, in a letter that he sent to many notables in the Niger Bend in 1959 from Tripoli, expressed his refusal for the Tuareg to form a nation with black populations since “I never accepted that the government of Mali be placed above us because that would be something strange for he who was below us in the past” (quoted in [Hall, 2011](#)).

Where the Sahvaran population was demographically preponderant, there was greater comfort with advocating a unitary system of government. This was the case with Modibo Keita within the Mali Federation. By mid-1958, Soudan’s population was 86.9% higher than that of Senegal ([Kurtz, 1970](#)). Thus, within the Mali Federation created in 1959 and lasting only a few months after gaining independence in 1960, “Acutely aware Federation’s demographic imbalance, many Senegalese worried that Soudanese interests would dominate the new state, just as the growing cadre of Soudanese bureaucrats seemed to dominate Dakar” ([Rodet and County, 2018](#)). Indeed, there was “perceived Soudanese schemes on Senegal’s riches in demands for nationalization of all industries” ([Wolters, 1966](#)) which would put Senegalese industry into the hands of the unitary government dominated by French Soudan due to demographic preponderance ([Wolters, 1966](#)) – as the Sudan had four million people while Senegal had two and a half ([Cooper, 2014](#)). This was in a context of industrial production in French West Africa being concentrated in Senegal ([Austin et al., 2017](#)). Keita and other leaders of the ruling party took a more activist Marxist position than Senegal’s Léopold Senghor and Mamadou Dia because “the Soudanese US-ROA leaders failed to accept the economic reality that investment funds flow to those areas where profits can be found and where development is comparatively more advanced,” since they were well aware of “the colonial heritage of the relatively poor Soudan in which French investments had been minimal.” ([Wolters, 1966](#)). Preference for a unitary government was aided by the fact that the Soudan was demographically preponderant within the Federation and would therefore be politically relevant enough to dictate the direction of flow of national resources under central planning.

4. The Postcolonial Era: Taking Over Political Power

Across West Africa, political power needed to be captured in order to direct resources to their regions and to prevent a double domination of southern regions in both economics and politics. Economically lagging northern regions increasingly asserted centralised power in different countries in different ways. Most did so through military coups, taking advantage of the colonial practice of staffing the military rank and file from the peripheral, northern regions. These coups occurred in Benin (first under Mathieu Kérékou in 1972), Togo (first under Gnassingbé Eyadéma in 1967) and Liberia (first under Samuel Doe in 1980, overturning 137 years of Americo-Liberian settler rule concentrated in the south-west).

It was often with these forced takeovers of power that serious efforts at developing northern regions began. In Togo, it was not until northern political rule with Eyadéma’s ascension to power from 1967 that there was, for the first time in Togo’s history, “a consistent attempt to develop the Kabre areas”, although mid-Togo and the Savanes regions remained neglected ([Decalo, 1979](#)). Eyadema considered the north-south antagonism to be Togo’s number one problem and set about to eliminate “the lack of economic equilibrium” between the two regions (quoted in [Thompson, 1972](#)). The north, especially Kara Region, was a major focus of this initiative. The regime undertook the construction of schools, healthcare facilities and north-south roads, as well as banks opening branches in Kara and work commencing on an industrial zone to have a cotton-processing plant, a fruit-processing plant and other small factories (Farnham, 1997: 47). With the financial support of the European Economic Community, the regime in 1974 undertook a land resettlement project in the Kara Region of northern Togo, called the Kara River Valley Agricultural Development Project.

Similarly in Benin, it was not until northern rule, led by Kérékou from 1974, that “for the first time ever, an even-handed development of the country... with roads, tourist facilities, cottage industry, mechanized agriculture extended to the hitherto neglected north” ([Decalo, 1987](#)). Northern Benin also enjoyed a cotton boom. Whereas 60% of export revenues in 1962 was made up of palm oil cultivated in south and central Dahomey ([Akindélé and Aguessy, 1955](#); [Staniland, 1973](#)) as against 2% for cotton, from 1972 a reversal occurred, with the share of palm oil declining to 19% and almost non-existent by 2016 while cotton’s share rose to 30% in 1972 and 46% by 2016 ([Honfoga et al., 2023](#)). The cotton sector also contributes to the livelihoods of about one-third of the population and makes up 60% of physical capital in Benin’s industrial sector (nineteen ginning factories, four textile factories, and two agro-food factories for vegetable oil extraction) ([Honfoga et al., 2023](#)). From two thirds of the cotton production originating from the northern province of Borgou in the early 2000s ([Sida, 2004](#)), by 2016 this diversified to 51% in Alibori, 21% in Atakora and 15% in Borgou – 87% from northern Benin in total ([Honfoga et al., 2023](#)).

In other countries, northern regions leveraged their demographic power to hold political power through the electoral process, such as in Sierra Leone (first under [Siaka Stevens in 1967/1968](#)) and Nigeria (under civilian prime minister,

Tafawa Balewa, in 1960), although waves of military rule centralizing national power further entrenched their influence, as in Nigeria (beginning with Yakubu Gowon in 1966). Regions without large relative demographic size or regional political unification enjoyed less prominence at the national level and within the core of national ruling coalitions, as with northern Ghana and northern Côte d'Ivoire.

Many countries created development plans that had balanced national development and regional development as one of their priorities. This period (1960s and 1970s) was relatively free of more intense conflicts due to the capacity of foreign inflows (aid and export earnings) to ameliorate north-south tensions over fiscal distribution and burden of taxation. As Boone (2007) notes,

“In the 1960s and 1970s, however, international borrowing and state entrepreneurialism emerged as alternatives to the transfer of resources from big exporting regions to the center and to poorer regions. External inflows and the expanding pie made it possible for central rulers to engage in distributive politics while dodging some of the political costs and risks of social conflict that are associated with direct taxation and redistribution.” (Boone, 2007).

For instance, in Mauritania, “from 1970 to 1975 foreign loans provided between 75 and 90 per cent of the funds for the governmental development programmes” (Bennoune, 1978). For Mali, it was “With the help of foreign development aid and loans from various countries” that “a wide range of state enterprises, industries and parastatal organisations were created” (Lecocq, 2010). Following the Civil War in Nigeria, oil rents made it possible for the number of public enterprises increased from 250 in 1970 to more than 800 by the mid-1970s (Usman, 2022), allowing for wide regional distribution of state-owned industrial establishments across the country. In Côte d'Ivoire, the strategy of expanding investment in the disadvantaged northern region since 1974 included borrowing from international banks to construct sugar plants (Woods, 1989).

Landlocked countries and northern regions of Gulf of Guinea countries did, nonetheless, push for greater transfers from coastal regions. It was Mali's drive for a nationalization of Dakar's industries, which were the most advanced in French West Africa at the time, and centralizing—and thus redistributing—Senegal's wealth, that contributed to the fall of the Mali Federation (Wolters, 1966; Cooper, 2014). In Nigeria, the Northern Region has been most adamant in increasing the federal share of rents from the largest oil producing region in West Africa—the South-South geopolitical zone—since the 1970s. The landlocked Francophone countries, most expressively voiced by Niger's Hamani Diori, pressed for the establishment of financial compensation and transfer mechanisms within the *Communauté Economique de l'Afrique de l'Ouest* (Economic Community of West Africa, CEAO) in the 1970s. Gowon Yakubu (1984), the leader of Nigeria from 1966 to 1975 who spearheaded, along with Eyadama of Togo, the creation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), admits that it was because the poorer, Sahel states (Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso) “would naturally be concerned at possible ‘backwash’ effects” of joining such a regional economic bloc that the Fund for Cooperation, Compensation and Development was created.

However, the efforts at economic convergence and reduction of spatial inequalities did not produce lasting positive impacts. They were either insufficient – as in Liberia (Clower *et al.*, 1966), Ghana (Abdulai, 2017), Côte d'Ivoire (Woods, 1989) northern Mali and northern Niger – and/or the typical problem of clientelism, corruption, weak states and inter-regional rivalry prevented sustained national and regional development from occurring rapidly in Nigeria (Ekundare 1971, 148), Ghana (Anyinam, 1994), Benin (Bourguignon and Platteau, 2022), Togo (Daigneault, 2020), Côte d'Ivoire (Woods, 1989) and Sierra Leone (Harkness, 2016).

There was a previous failure to mobilize massive international funding for the Sahel when the drought of 1973 hit the region and the underdevelopment of the Sahel region became a topic of global discussion. President Hamani Diori of Niger advanced the idea of a “Marshall Plan” for the Sahel and the Inter-State Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS) was created in 1973. However, “there was no wealthy super-power waiting in the wings prepared to finance a large-scale regional development programme for the Sahel.” (Robinson, 1978). Moreover, “After the initial burst of enthusiasm, however, the long-range strategy began to flounder.” (Robinson, 1978).

The Saharan groups such as the Tuareg had already been suffering from the droughts of the 1970s which reduced their herds and forced many of those among the small group of contemporaneous Western-educated Tuareg intellectuals to conclude that pastoral existence had no future (Ag Mohammed, 1977; Lecocq, 2004). In the 1980s, the generalised economic crisis across West Africa further encouraged the growth of illicit movement-based activities such as smuggling. However, in the formal sector, with dreams of significant agricultural intensification and subsequently hydrocarbon wealth generation gone unfulfilled, the last great Tuareg hope laid in the tourism sector. Other than semi-nomadic animal husbandry, in the decade prior to 1992, tourism was the main source of income for the Tuareg (Keenan, 2018).

In the 1990s, the Tuareg, most prominently through the *Union Nationale des Associations des Agences de Tourisme Alternatif* (UNATA) and the *Association des Agences de Tourisme Wilaya de Tamanrasset* (ATAWT) also “reflected on and planned how the region in future could become a world centre for sustainable ‘green’ tourism,” which would bring what they foresaw as “a new age” (Keenan, 2018). These visions and aspirations, however, came crashing down with the rise of terrorism in the Sahara from 2003, leading to “the decimation of Tuareg livelihoods” – a situation which persists till today with ongoing and protracted insecurity in the Central Sahara (Keenan, 2018).

In addition to violent repression of the Tuareg rebellion of the 1960s in Mali, the Tuareg experienced great stress in the 1970s and 1980s from the droughts which swept the Sahara-Sahel. These enhanced an already emerging tendency for young men to migrate to Algeria to look for work, which morphed over the years from seasonal migration to permanent settlement in Algeria and Libya (Lecocq, 2003). These young Tuareg migrants, who could observe the new ways of life and higher standards of living in their host countries, “gradually became convinced that ‘traditional’ Tuareg culture and the nomadic way of life were doomed to extinction” (Lecocq, 2003). There were three responses to this: the young Tuareg abroad sought to undergo a modernisation to adapt and prepare the Tuareg for a modern existence; others sought to rethink Tuareg existence from a more intellectual point of view, but from within the Malian system of administration and NGOs; and others pursued *tanekra* (insurrection) as a political and separatist movement seeking national independence for the Tuareg (Lecocq, 2003).

These shortcomings are also visible at the supranational level, especially within the CEAO, which was the most “successful” regional integration experiment in West Africa by the end of the 1980s. In the absence of developmental integration and despite the modest fiscal compensation and redistribution mechanisms, “Contrary to the initial expectations of the landlocked countries, intracommunity trade patterns grew increasingly lopsided in favour of Côte d’Ivoire, whose share of products registered under the Taxe de Cooperation Regionale (TCR) had grown to 80% in 1986, compared with 51.6% in 1976.” (Bach, 1997). By 1990, Côte d’Ivoire accounted for 75% of intra-CEAO exports, but only 13% of imports, and similarly within ECOWAS, while generally Côte d’Ivoire and Nigeria together accounted for 72% of bloc exports, they accounted for only 22% of ECOWAS imports (Lavergne and Daddieh, 1997).

The end of the developmentalist era and the rise of the Washington Consensus and its neoliberal reforms in the 1980s and 1990s therefore ushered in various challenges to the prevailing order. With weakened foreign inflows, it became more difficult for regimes to redistribute wealth to patrons and regions (OECD/SWAC, 2020). However, the crises of the lost decades and Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) did not have symmetrical impact on the coastal cities and interior growth poles. Usman (2022) argues that in Nigeria, “SAP unintentionally exacerbated ethno-regional economic inequalities,” with south-western businessmen, due to their proximity to Lagos and their educational advantages, gaining from the privatizations. The most populated city of the Sahvara, Kano, underwent a premature deindustrialization, worsened by the trade liberalization reforms by the early 2000s (Usman, 2022). Anyinam (1994) also observes spatially differentiated impacts of the SAPs in Ghana.

It was also in this period that the supranational redistributive mechanisms put in place also faltered. The Community Development Fund (FCD), mainly funded by Côte d’Ivoire (50%) and Senegal (16%) and established under the *Communauté Economique de l’Afrique de l’Ouest* (CEAO) had served as compensation and redistribution mechanism “demanded by Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania as a quid pro quo for their participation in a process of trade liberalization primarily beneficial to Côte d’Ivoire and Senegal.” (Bach, 1997). The increasing demands placed upon the wealthier members of the CEAO for more financial contributions towards common policies as well as the economic turbulence of the 1980s forced Côte d’Ivoire and Senegal to demand, in 1980, “a postponement of their contributions to the F.C.D., to which they owed a total of C.F.A. 5,000 million.” (Bach, 1983).

The sum of these disruptions and failures across the Sahvara has been the perception of the secular, democratic and developmentalist order as a failure (Sulaiman, 1986; Usman, 2022). The increased levels of insecurity and religious conflict manifest in terrorism in the Central Sahara, Central Sahel and Lake Chad basin are few of the problems that arise when economic divergence is not adequately addressed.

The tensions have also generally reflected in high levels of elite political violence, contributing to West Africa’s status as Africa’s biggest producer of military coups (McGowan, 2003). The first successful coups in Togo (and postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa’s first coup), Nigeria, Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali (Gazeley, 2022) are linked to north-south tensions. Conflicts and wars have also been fought due to or linked to these north-south tensions, including the First Malian Tuareg Rebellion (1964-1967), the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), the Senegal-Mauritanian Conflict (1989), the Liberian Civil Wars (1989-2002), the Second Malian Tuareg Rebellion (1991), the Ivoirian Civil Wars (2002-2011), the Third Malian Tuareg Rebellion (2012), as well as terrorism in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Nigeria since 2009. It is not a coincidence that some of the most economically and/or politically marginalized regions in these four countries have

been the epicentres of terrorism—Diffa in Niger (Idrissa, 2020), the Northeast in Nigeria, Timbuktu in Mali, and the Sahel region in Burkina Faso.

More than one-third of the terrorism-related deaths in sub-Saharan Africa is occurring in just four countries, three of which are Sahvaran – Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali (UNDP, 2023). In 2022, four out of the five African countries that scored the highest on the Global Terrorism Index were also Sahvaran – Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Nigeria (concentrated in northern Nigeria) (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023). Analysts now fear that extremism or violent extremists from Mali and Burkina Faso may diffuse into northern Benin, northern Côte d’Ivoire (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2021; Sampaio *et al.*, 2023) and northern Ghana (Knoope and Chauzal, 2016). In fact, out of the four African countries that are among the ten countries in the world with the largest deteriorations in Global Terrorism Index scores, two are Sahvaran – northern Togo and northern Benin (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023).

These all reveal a continued struggle against spatial tensions in West Africa; but this has not emerged as a coordinated movement or robust ideology. This partly has to do with the variation in experiences across the Sahvara. Thus, on one hand in Mali, Niger and Côte d’Ivoire where the northern regions do not have a high level of political power, allegations of neglect are common, demonstrated in the poems, writings and songs of the intellectuals in the Malian and Tuareg cases (Lecocq, 2004) and the *Le Grand Nord en marche* (The Great North on the Move) which emerged in 1991 in the Ivoirian case.

On the other hand, this is largely not the case in places like northern Mauritania, northern Nigeria, northern Togo where interior regions are highly politically relevant or dominant. In these cases, repression and ideologies of superiority have instead emerged. For instance, in Togo where most top government and military officials were Kabre from the north, southern Togo remains a stronghold for opposition parties (Madore, 2021), and The “Atlas of Torture, a watchdog group against exploitation, ranked Togo the fourth worst country in the world in terms of those detained without trial. Disproportionately, most incarcerated are of southern provenance... Other international surveys consistently rank Togo the unhappiest country in the world.” (Montgomery, 2020). The Gnassingbé Eyadéma regime promoted the notion of *authenticité* against the Ewe ethnic group framed as so called “southern immigrants”. Among southern Ivoirian elites the idea of *Ivoirité* emerged in an attempt to exclude northerners from political contestation. In Nigeria, the north has systematically monopolized leadership of all the security outfits, which helps in suppressing dissent and maintaining a hold of power, while Sheikh Abubakar Gumi, former Grand Khadi of Northern Nigeria and the spiritual leader of a movement of political Salafism, the *Izala*, “developed an ideology of cultural authenticity that defined the Hausa-Fulani of northern Nigeria as essentially Muslim... and deserving of hegemony in the Nigerian context, by virtue of the notion that Muslims should not be subjects of non-Muslims.” (Idrissa, 2021).

Benin’s greater democratic disposition, compared to the others, has enabled the emergence of an “operative equilibrium between the north (holding political power) and the south (which has social and economic influence)”, which has “so far succeeded in fostering national unity and in preserving peaceful relationships among Benin’s communities” (Knoope and Chauzal, 2016). In Mauritania, the Arabo-Berber-dominated military retains substantial influence over who is elected as president (Akrimi and May, 2019). However, the *Le manifeste du négro-mauritanien opprimé* (Manifesto of the Oppressed Black Mauritanian) of 1986 and the Manifesto of the Nineteen of 1996 in Mauritania are Black Mauritanian discourses against this Arabo-Berber domination.

The fall of state entrepreneurialism, developmentalism and Keynesianism through Washington Consensus reforms has had the impact of creating a “new territorial politics” under the current open economy regime (Boone, 2007). The open economy policies which scaled back state interventionism have created “Upsurges in regional conflict, ethnoregional conflict, and land-related conflict [which] all challenge the territorial cohesion of African states and political systems.” (Boone, 2007).

The rise of Salafist reformism movements across the region since the 1970s and of Islamic economics in West Africa in the 1980s have been precipitated by the alleged failure of the secular postcolonial order. Sulaiman (1986) for example, blames “our slavish application of English law and English social and political and economic system” for “The ascendancy of crime in Nigeria, the injustice, the economic exploitation and the corruption that now eats deep into the fabric of our society”. These religious movements “mobilize transnational, national, and regional networks to support Muslim claims for autonomy, state power, and new international borders” (Lubeck *et al.*, 2003). Since these networks preexisting and predated Western modernity, they can easily be mobilized in for progressive or regressive populist directions. Indeed, Hunwick (1996) argues that the global, regional and local institutions of the new Western order – the United Nations Organization, the Organization of African Unity and the nation-state –

“often seem unequal to the challenges posed by communal and international strife, gross inequities in the distribution of wealth, environmental catastrophes, severe public health crises, unemployment, violent crime,

and in many countries the virtual breakdown of state educational systems, it is natural that Muslims should seek solutions for themselves within the frame of reference of their own culture which is at once global and local.” (Hunwick, 1996).

In other words, there has been a more confrontational attitude against the Atlantic Order and its allies. In Nigeria, for instance, Sheikh Abubakar Gumi argued against Muslims being subjects of non-Muslims.” (Idrissa, 2021). Gumi had been shaken by the assassination of his friend, Ahmadu Bello, the Premier of Northern Nigeria during the 1966 coup which had also involved the assassination of the Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, and which Austen (2010) interprets as an indication of “the problems that could arise from a split between the Saharan and Atlantic orientations of modern West Africa.”

Idrissa (2021) argues that by the 1980s, “Gumi was the spiritual leader of a movement of political Salafism, the *Izala*, whose activism is at the root of the adoption of ‘full Sharia’ in the judicial system of the northern Nigerian states in the early 2000s.” Many of those who advocated for the Shariah reforms among northern states in Nigeria in the early 2000s did so within a context of governance challenges, deindustrialization, rising poverty and poor human development which trailed the lost decades of the 1980s and 1990s (Usman, 2022). This was then combined with nostalgia, when compared with the status quo of poverty, misgovernance and unemployment, for the idealized prosperity and power of the Sokoto Caliphate and Kanem-Bornu Empire and the desire to “return to the glory of former times” (Usman, 2022).

The “forces of globalization, political liberalization, and Islamist revivalism in post-military Nigeria in the 2000” could therefore be unleashed to give ground to “ultra-conservative Muslim clerics to implement a puritanical vision of Islamic public morality without a strong economic strategy” (Usman, 2022). In this sense, the reversal of fortune in West Africa is deepened by a global reversal of fortune whereby global Islam, heralded by the Ottoman Empire, also went into decline with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the abolition of the Caliphate in 1922, the Western colonization of Muslim lands across the world, and Western imperialism and neo-imperialisms in the Middle East in the late 20th century.

It was not a coincidence, in Usman’s (2022) opinion, that “the shari’ah movement was ignited by Sani Yarima the Governor of Zamfara, a state with the highest incidence of poverty in Nigeria.” The sentiment was so strong that the most prominent politician in the Far North, Muhammadu Buhari, declared his willingness to die for the cause of Islam, and the Governor of Yobe State, Bukar Abba Ibrahim, declared that “If necessary, we are prepared to fight another civil war. We cannot be blackmailed into killing Sharia” (Harnischfeger, 2014). For Nigeria, this was, in effect, a return to a moral-theological approach to reversal discourse. The reform environment neglected issues of economic reform and policy (Usman, 2022). Similarly in Sierra Leone,

“Despite the many cultural, economic, and political contributions of Muslim leaders and institutions, no national program was ever designed by a unified Islamic community to promote the general welfare of the citizens of Sierra Leone... Instead of a coherent Islamic movement there has been disunity, competition for resources (both internal and external), promotion of self-interested projects, waste of funds, and corruption. At any time during the twentieth century there were hundreds of Islamic schools, missions, and associations at the local, regional, and national levels of society; and usually two or more national “umbrella” organizations coexisted, claiming to represent the Sierra Leone Muslim community. External nongovernmental organizations have contributed to this situation by favoring their own organizations and agendas, not demanding accountability and often promoting *da wah* over development.” (Skinner, 2016).

This is despite the fact that

“The religion of Islam promotes social welfare and economic development programs, as demonstrated by the long history of services and business activities by families, foundations, and regimes in the past from Islamic Spain to the Mughal Empire... The leap from the golden age [of Islam] to the present may be great, but the knowledge and the tools for development are based on Islamic thought and practice and are available to be applied by contemporary societies” (Skinner, 2016).

Among scholars of Islamic economics who engage with topics of development and economics, there is typically a focus on economic institutions such as Islamic banking, *riba*, *zakat* and social policy and Islamic multilateral economic governance. This is the case for the Department of Economics at Usmanu Danfodiyo University, which “has become one of the major centres of research on Islamic Economics in Sub-Saharan Africa” (Weiss, 2002). This Islamic economics literature does not typically engage in political economy analysis or economic geography – even when it looks to the Sokoto Caliphate as a golden age – beyond seeking greater bilateral and multilateral economic cooperation with Muslim countries across the world.

Therefore, the criticisms directed against the mainstream Islamic economists and the “neo-fundamentalist” sharia extension advocates by more politically economy-minded Islamic economists, liveliest in northern Nigeria and led by Nigeria’s Sanusi Lamido Sanusi (Weiss, 2002; Idrissa, 2021), tend to note that the struggle is not purely against secularism, but is also a class-based and political one against growth-reducing ruling coalitions, meaning that “the poor farmer in Maiduguri has more in common with the poor farmer in Ogoniland than with his northern elite.” (Sanusi, 2001). In this case, the challenge to the West African Sahvara is the general politics of development and class struggles (in line with earlier northern Nigerian nationalists such as Aminu Kano), as well as historical continuities such as colonial and postcolonial deprivation of Muslim West Africa of Arabic or Ajami-based modern literacy and education, rather than certain geographical distinctions and histories. This was not always the case, as northern Nigeria’s most prominent Marxist, Bala Usman, after 1999 “became a Hausa-Fulani ethnic chauvinist who aired views that came dangerously close to fascism” (Mayer, 2016).

Nonetheless, economic connectivity is still envisaged. Northern Nigeria, where the most last vibrant southern terminus of the trans-Saharan trade, Kano, is situated, seems to have been the most avid supporter of a revived trans-Saharan trade. When the “cement armada” led to the congestion of the Lagos port in 1974, there were debates about making use of trans-Saharan highways to Algerian ports as an alternative to Lagos (Arnold and Weiss, 1977). Indeed, Arnold and Weiss (1977) reveal that in 1975, there was a general “discussion in Nigeria as to whether the Trans-African Highway from Lagos to Mombassa or the Trans-Saharan Highway following the ancient caravan routes across the desert to Algiers and the Mediterranean had greater economic value for Nigeria.” Haroun Adamu in the *Sunday Times* in 1975, for instance, argued that the country had effectively become landlocked and that it should seek to develop the Trans-Saharan route to link its major cities with Algeria’s ports.

Nigeria’s President Muhammadu Buhari’s launch of the Kano-Katsina-Maradi rail project in 2021, revealed belief by some that “All knowledgeable and focused people have been praying for a day like this where the over 1,000 year trans-Saharan trade will be revived” (Daily Trust, 2021). Regarding the insecurity in the Sahel in the 21st century, the Nigerian Ambassador to Algeria, Mohammed Abdullahi Mabdul, expressed in a 2021 interview that poverty and unemployment were the major causes of the phenomenon, due to lack of decent jobs and desertification, making possible drug trafficking and terrorism (Matazu, 2021). Similarly, the Chairman of the Governing Board of the Nigerian Railway Corporation (NRC), Mallam Alhassan Musa, argued that because Maradi and Jibiyi are springboards for those leaving and being trafficked from West Africa for Europe, railways that help create economic activities in these areas “will make people want to sit down and earn here rather than take the risk of going through the Sahara into oblivion.” (Aliyu, 2021). These visions, however, face substantial challenges in becoming a reality.

The neglect of economics observed among the early 2000s Shariah extension advocates in northern Nigeria is visible in violent extremist movements which envision a regional sphere of territorial conquest, but no economic propositions to enhance regional economic growth. For violent extremists in West Africa opposing the Western, secular, Atlantic and Euro-globalized order (and some of which draw on the legacies of the pre-20th century *jihad* movements against aspects of the Saharo-Atlantic Order), “Unlike earlier insurgencies, Jihadist movements rarely seek to win the hearts and minds of the local population... Their political program, if any, relies on moral issues rather than development, which they regard with suspicion.” (OECD/SWAC, 2020). In other words, “The new generation of religious extremists that thrives on the inability of states to fully control their own territory is less interested in negotiating a larger share of the government revenue than in destroying its political order.” (Walther, 2022).

Where they seek to gain legitimacy through their recruitment, proselytizing and propaganda, they may point to the corruption of secular governments and propose that only Islamic law can establish a fair and just society (Mbara *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, they hearken back to the past glories of the precolonial era such as the past domination of the Tuareg nobility (Hall, 2011), the Sokoto Caliphate (in Boko Haram’s case), the Macina Empire – in the case of Hamadou Koufa of the Macina Liberation Front in Mali (de Bruijn, 2022) –, and other precolonial Muslim empires as the golden age to return to. In some cases, “The population in the Sahel is receiving these messages, and it is clear that they resonate with the structural grievances of many Sahelians, who have seen a degradation of their livelihood and who have experienced no positive support from the state... they perhaps feel more listened to and heard by these jihadi groups than by anyone else” (de Bruijn, 2022) although “other groups (those enslaved in this era) remember the earlier times as a period of fear and chaos.” (de Bruijn, 2022). Yet, these insurgencies are further impoverishing the Sahvara.

5. Conclusion

Sahvaran development remains a major challenge, and the forces of divergence are strong in the direction taken by private capital (investment and credit), national fiscal distribution, foreign aid, rents from extractive sectors and remittances.

First, the higher transport costs, lower population density and less lucrative cash crops characterizing the Sahvara ensure that foreign and domestic private investment will always be more attracted to the coastal regions. The UN Habitat (2018: 157, cited by [Usman, 2022](#)) observes that between 2000 and 2016, “Lagos attracted the second highest amount of FDI inflows in Africa” and, within Nigeria, “most headquarters and branches of banks, financial institutions, real estate, and IT firms as well as NGOs and multinationals are located in Lagos.” In addition, “Lagos borrowers receive the largest share of bank loans compared to other economic hubs in Nigeria...Lagos entities are financed by savings from other parts of the country acquired by financial institutions headquartered in Lagos but with a national spread (Usman 2022: 158). Within the *Union économique monétaire l’ouest Afrique* (UEMOA):

“it is not the credit needs of the UEMOA countries (which are nearly all LDCs) that determines their credit allocation, but the level of their external reserves. In effect, the credit cap strengthens the non-egalitarian nature of the zone, since 20% of Nigerien national fiscal revenues are a much scantier sum than 20% of Ivorian national fiscal revenues – while Nigerien development credit needs are much greater than those of Côte d’Ivoire.” ([Idrissa, 2013](#)).

In terms of fiscal distribution, in northern Ghana, out of the 2,939 registered projects undertaken by the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre (GIPC) between 2000 and 2005, only 1.3% were located in the three northern regions ([DFID, 2005](#)). In Nigeria, with federal revenues derived mainly from the southern part of the country, government expenditure per capita in the North (\$78 in 2018) is substantially lower than in the oil-producing states in the south (\$294) and the non-oil-producing south (\$182) ([Doran, 2022](#)).

In terms of foreign aid, Senegal from independence until the mid-1980s received more foreign aid than any other Sub-Saharan African country ([Chowdhry and Beeman, 1994](#)). The coastal Sahel states “receive more aid on average than the other groups (more than the land-locked Sahelian countries which are even poorer)” ([SWAC/OECD, 2006](#)). Within UEMOA, the large landlocked countries:

“are paradoxically the least aided in the world. Niger, which is listed at the bottom of the United Nations Human Development index, is also the country receiving the least aid in the region (and perhaps in the world): \$4 per capita, an amount that is typically twice or three times lower than in other West African countries.” ([Idrissa, 2013](#)).

Although the Sahel region contains many minerals, “deposits are generally of poor to fair quality, i.e., not highly concentrated”, and thus high transport and power costs limit exploitation ([Seifert and Kamrany, 1974](#)). Even for those Core Sahel countries that exploit minerals, their fiscal gains are limited because they are “mostly exploited by foreign companies while the populations struggle to see the benefits” ([Oxfam, 2019](#)). The result is that, relative to the importance of public and private international aid, “income from mining resources (e.g., gold in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and uranium and oil in Niger) is relatively insignificant in the Sahel” ([De Sardan, 2021](#)). Shaw and Reitano (2014) further note that “In most cases, however, inaccessibility and instability have delayed significant exploitation of these resources, and bad governance has prevented their benefits being realized for the populations that sit outside of the capital, which leaves the borderland Saharan communities largely marginalized and underserved.”

While migration from interior to coastal-proximal spaces is greater in scale than the other way around, a greater proportion of interior migrants take on low income jobs in coastal-proximal spaces than coastal-proximal migrants in interior spaces ([Stewart and Langer, 2007](#)). This therefore limits the scale of remittances. Thus, for example, the IOM (2009) reports that Nigériens sent over a mere \$88,000 in remittances to Niger in 2006. Within Ghana, the northern regions receive “much lower inflows of remittances” than the south ([DFID, 2005](#)) and this is due to language barriers and northerners’ lower average education levels ([Bryceson, 2006](#)). Moreover, remittances are mostly geared towards consumption rather than productive investments, thereby limiting their transformational impact. Only in Cape Verde, a small island country in West Africa, have remittances been transformative.

Despite the great strength of, and interaction among, these forces of divergence, the responses to Saharan underdevelopment continue to be fragmented. The actors calling for a region-wide response are the insurrectionists and jihadists but have tended to adopt an ethnic and/or moral-theological framework. The young Tuareg who, in the 1990s and early 2000s, pursued *tanekra* (insurrection), as a political and separatist movement seeking national independence for the Tuareg, also sought to eliminate political difference among Tuareg federations and thus created the name “Kel Nimagiler” – a mix-up of Mali and Niger, as rebels had the dream of uniting Northern Mali and Northern Niger ([Lecocq, 2003](#)). In 2018, Hamadou Koufa “called on “the Fulani of West Africa to unite in order to ensure the triumph of jihad in the region” ([Cline, 2021](#)). Both calls have fortunately failed to trigger immediate regional responses among insurrectionists.

Even among international actors seeking to ameliorate the security consequences of Sahelian poverty, there is fragmentation. By 2018 “19 different regional strategies for the Sahel have impeded coordination, create overlaps and duplications, as well as weaken coherence and impact” ([United Nations, 2018](#)). Moreover, responses to crises in the

Sahvara are responses to perceived separate crises in the Sahara, the Sahel and the northern regions of Gulf of Guinea countries.

Cooperative institutions therefore emerged according to this pattern: The G5 Sahel (created in 2014), the Multinational Joint Task Force in the Lake Chad region (authorized by the African Union in 2015), and the Accra Initiative (created in 2017 at Ghana's behest to prevent spillover of jihadist attacks from the Sahel and address organised crime and militancy in member countries' border areas). In all cases, enemy-centric counterinsurgency approaches dominate, partly because development is itself a weak point of salient advocacy among violent extremist organizations.

Radical, transnational and expansionary leftist movements have failed to emerge to prompt Sahvaran political elites to bring development to the foreground of counter-insurgency strategies. This is despite the fact that Arnould (1986) compared late 20th century Zinder to pre-revolutionary tsarist Campbell (2010) surmised that Nigeria might well produce a Fidel Castro, echoing the Trotskyist revolutionary expectations created by uneven and combined development starkly manifest since the depression of the 1980s and neoliberal continuation into the 20th century (Davidson, 2009: 15-16). The result is that in West Africa, empirical evidence indicates that military interventions "only have had short-run impacts on and rarely improved the long-run stability of the region" (OECD/SWAC, 2020: 30).

These are the key challenges to the development of a "Sahvaran identity" and problem-solving approach. Common Sahvaran challenges such as *talibé (almajiri)*, spiralling farmer-herder conflicts, violent religious extremism, poverty and uneven development, the need for a revived trans-Saharan trade, and north-south political conflicts are therefore largely discussed within national frameworks and, even then, often in fragmented and impermanent ways. Perhaps the challenge could partly be overcome with scholarship on West African countries becoming more regional in orientation, which begins by recognizing the need for "Anglophone and Francophone West African students to go beyond the national framework on which the educational curriculum is generally based, to have a shared understanding of their region and its interdependencies" (Lauzon, 2009: 6).

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