

OLD HOMES AND NEW HOMELANDS: IMAGINING THE NATION AND  
REMEMBERING EXPULSION IN THE WAKE OF THE MALI FEDERATION'S  
COLLAPSE

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Abstract: This paper examines concepts of 'home' and 'abroad' for migrants and citizens in the twilight of empire. It focuses on the *cheminots refoulés*, railroad workers with origins in the former Soudan (today's Republic of Mali) who were expelled from Senegal shortly after both territories declared independence, and other 'Soudanese' settled in Senegal sometimes for several generations. Using newly available archives in France, Mali, and Senegal, and interviews with former *cheminots* and 'Soudanese migrants' on both sides of the border, this study seeks to historicize memories of autochthony and allochthony that have been constructed and contested in postcolonial nation-building projects. The Mali Federation carried the lingering memory of federalist political projects, but it proved untenable only months after the Federation's June 1960 independence from France. When member states declared independence from each other, the internal boundary between Senegal and the Soudanese Republic became an international border between Senegal and the Republic of Mali. In the wake of the collapse, politicians in Bamako and Dakar clamoured to redefine the 'nation' and its 'nationals' through selective remembering. Thousands of *cheminots* and 'Soudanese migrants' who had moved to Senegal from Soudan years (and decades) earlier were suddenly labelled as 'foreigners' and 'expatriates' and faced two governments eager to see them 'return' to a hastily-proclaimed nation-state. This 'repatriation' allowed Republic of Mali officials to 'perform the nation' by (re)integrating and (re)membering the migrants in a nascent 'homeland'. But, having circulated between Senegal and Soudan/Mali for decades, 'Soudanese migrants' in both states retained and invoked memories of older political communities, upsetting new national priorities. The loss of the Mali Federation raises questions about local, national, and international citizenship and movement in mid-century West Africa. Examining the histories invoked to imagine postcolonial political communities, this paper offers insight into the role that memory has played in constructing and contesting the nation's central place in migrations histories within Africa and beyond.

INTRODUCTION

The Mali Federation collapsed on the night of 19–20 August 1960. It was the tragic end of an ambitious project to preserve ties between French West Africa's eight territories as nationalist politicians renegotiated their relationship to France and the French empire. The idea of African federalism was not new on the continent but gained its momentum in the 1950s-1960s against the backdrop of expanding pan Africanist ideas and decolonisation, which led to the creation of several federations such as Ethiopia-Eritrea Federation (1952) or East African Community (1967). Most of these federal experiences were deemed to fail though mostly due to increasing political leadership competition and differing socio-political views, in a context of heightened tensions between socio-cultural diversity and emerging territorial and national identity. In the case of the constitution of the Mali Federation whose main initial political goal was to preserve the unity of the late French West African Federation, France and Ivory Coast clearly opposed the project in the defense of their political and economic interests and ultimately succeeded in preventing Upper Volta and Dahomey from joining in 1958 (Kurtz 1970).

In its final phase, the Mali Federation joined only Senegal and the Soudanese Republic in a union that lasted only nineteen months - and only two months of formal independence. In the final two months, preparations for the Mali Federation's presidential election exacerbated social and political tensions as Léopold Senghor and Modibo Keita rallied supporters in their respective constituent republics. The campaign for the Federal presidency represented two different ideas of nationalism and decolonisation: Senghor wanted to maintain ties with France, and both he and Mamadou Dia, the president of Mali's constituent Republic of Senegal, believed in distinct and discrete nationalities; Keita's Union Soudanaise-RDA (Rassemblement Démocratique Africain, hereafter US-

RDA) party favoured a definitive break with the colonial past, closer relations with the Soviet bloc, and an incorporative idea of the nation that would, over time, unify postcolonial categories of belonging into an inclusive and expanding Pan-African federalism.

A week before the election, Keita, the Federal government's provisional head, accused Senegalese leaders of plotting with Paris to dissolve the Federation. Senghor and Dia, in return, mobilized Senegalese troops to secure against fears of a Soudanese coup. In a suburban Dakar station 36 hours later, 130 people under military guard — all high-ranking Soudanese officials and their families — were forced aboard an express train bound for Bamako. The passengers disembarked at Kidira, the riverside town that marked both the geographic centre of the Dakar-Niger railroad and the border between the Federation's two constituent republics. Now, it was the end of the Senegalese line. Crossing the railroad bridge on foot, Modibo Keita entered the Soudanese Republic to a hero's welcome. He climbed aboard a Soudanese train and continued eastward to Bamako. At every station, crowds turned out to cheer Keita and hear his denunciation of the Federal collapse, French neocolonialist designs, and the treachery of the Senegalese politicians who were struck a bargain to trade African unity for national sovereignty. Within a month, politicians in Senegal and the renamed Republic of Mali, rushing to salvage political legitimacy from the federal wreckage, had proclaimed separate independences on each side of their shared border.<sup>1</sup>

For the *cheminots* (railwaymen) of the Dakar-Niger railroad, their families and more generally the Soudanese living in Senegal, the Federation's collapse brought

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<sup>1</sup> This narrative draws from: République du Sénégal 1960, Foltz 1965, Kurtz 1970, Campmas 1978, Ndiaye 1980, Diarrah 1986, Cissoko 2005, Joly 2014, Cooper 2015.

different problems. Under French rule, inter-territorial labour unions and migration had shaped politics and social ties that spanned the colonial borders. As in other colonial territories on the continent, those railwaymen forged alliances and came at the forefront of socio-political movements against colonial rule and its discriminatory policies (Cooper 1996; Grillo 1973). Yet, with the tense independence that split 1288 kilometres of railroad, people in station towns were forced to re-evaluate their relationship with their places of residence. For those populations originally from French Soudan who had been living in Senegal for decades and sometimes even for several generations, the collapse forced the difficult choice of either staying in a country whose political leaders had overtly expressed great hostility towards their now ascribed 'homeland' or to return to a country which themselves or their ancestors had left under very different political and social circumstances. In the following months, patriotic appeals and administrative pressures persuaded thousands of *cheminots*, their families, and other Soudanese populations living in Senegal, to cross the Falémé River and return to their 'homeland' over the now-international border. In Malian Kayes, Senegalese Thiès, and the other railroad towns between Dakar and Bamako, generations of trade, travel, migration and labour activism had sustained ties and shaped expectations that differed from national priorities set in new national capitals (Jones 2002, Rodet and County forthcoming). Indeed, populations along the railroad had developed enduring intergenerational and translocal links between Mali and Senegal, with people regularly traveling back and forth between regions along the railroad (Rodet 2008). They shaped translocal communities through specific remembering of 'home' and 'homeland' (indeed, in 'remembering', one

can find ‘member’ – see Rodet and Reinprecht 2013).<sup>2</sup>

Stung by Senegalese leaders’ actions, the Soudanese Republic closed the border to all trade with its former partner.<sup>3</sup> The Dakar-Niger railroad and the people who lived by it suffered the most immediate effects of this decision. Senegalese officials in Bakel, on the border with Mali, had complained that Malian customs agents had confiscated over 750,000 FCFA from Senegalese nationals crossing from Mali in September and October 1960.<sup>4</sup> In turn, these officials began to confiscate cash held by migrant workers returning to Mali in early 1961.<sup>5</sup> Besides, with international freight traffic blocked, Senegalese railroad operations changed dramatically. Kidira, the station town that had marked the midpoint of the Federal railroad, was transformed into a distant outpost in independent Senegal’s eastern borderlands. The Senegalese railroad’s centre of gravity shifted to the urban centres of the coast and the trading stations in the peanut basin. With service reduced, the Senegalese railroad authorities began to reduce the number of workers employed. Approximately one quarter of the more than 5,000 *cheminots* working in Senegal had been ‘Nationals of the Soudanese Republic’ under Federal law.<sup>6</sup> Most of the railroad’s administrative staff in Thiès hailed from the Soudanese Republic.<sup>7</sup> Far fewer Senegalese *cheminots* worked in the smaller railroad centres on the Soudanese side of the border.<sup>8</sup> Any exchange of nationals would be lopsided.

The political implications of the Federation’s collapse have been widely analysed

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<sup>2</sup> On ‘remembering’, ‘dismembering’, and ‘re-membering’, see Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (2009).

<sup>3</sup> ‘Écoute Radio-Bamako mercredi 31 Août 1960’, p. 3, VPPCGS 149, ANS.

<sup>4</sup> Cdt Bakel to Min Interieur Senegal #4/CF-CB, 2 February 1961, VPPCGS 201, ANS.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Entretien avec les autorités Sénégalaises à TAMBA le 28-2-61’, 28 February 1961, FBPN 88/300, ANM-H.

<sup>6</sup> RCFS, ‘Compte-rendu de gestion’, 20 August–31 December 1960, p. 7, GGAOF 2G 60/6, ANS.

<sup>7</sup> Renseignements (confidential), 1 September 1960, 5D 14, SRAS-Dakar.

<sup>8</sup> RCFS, ‘Compte-rendu de gestion’, 20 August–31 December 1960, p. 7, GGAOF 2G 60/6, ANS.

by political scientists and historians alike, but the social dimensions and the living experiences of those events by the concerned populations – *cheminots* and others - have been barely touched upon. This article explores these often-unheard voices of the decolonization process in West Africa. In particular, it attempts to examine how Soudanese populations who were settled in Senegal at the time of the Federation's collapse navigated the national identity that was newly ascribed to them by the Senegalese and Malian authorities and the extent to which their experiences and memories of 'home' and 'homeland' permeated the way they adapted to the new political situation.

Here, memories and migration were certainly central social and political challenges of decolonization: migrants' experiences and practices sometimes conflicted with new national memories-in-the-making, highlighting the complexities of national-identity building processes in the wake of independence. Thus, examining complex histories and memories of 'home' and 'homeland' along the Dakar-Niger railroad, this article sheds light on multi-layered and sometimes competing processes of both national and diasporic identity-building at the time of the decolonization process in West Africa. The article ultimately attempts to examine how perceptions of the past confronted with political and social realities of the time affected the incorporation of 'migrants' in independent Senegal and Mali.

#### DISPUTED MEMORIES OF BELONGING: TERRITORY, NATIONALITY AND AFFILIATION IN THE MALI FEDERATION

In order to prevent the balkanization of French West Africa, the Soudanese Republic merged on 4 April 1959 with Senegal to form the Mali Federation, which became entirely

self-governing when it gained independence from France on 20 June 1960. The idea of this formation mainly relied on both a Pan-Africanist ideal and the memories of a long-standing economic, social and cultural connections dating back to the West African pre-colonial empires. Over generations and in a much more accelerated manner since the construction of the Dakar-Niger railroad under French colonial rule at the beginning of the twentieth century, numerous families had built translocal lives sustained by continuous flows of peoples, goods and experiences back and forth and intermarriages over several generations from the Sudanese hinterland to the Senegalese coast (David 1980, Manchuelle 1997, Rodet 2009 and 2015). Many people living and working in Senegal in the 1950s located their family history in the Soudan and thought of it as ‘home’, even if they had spent little or no time there.

Under the federal Malian structure, Soudanese politicians and technocrats had moved into the administrative offices of the former French West Africa and the stately villas of the former French administrators. Senegalese officials and citizens chafed at seeing Soudanese in offices that had been disproportionately staffed by Senegalese clerks during the period of French rule. An anonymous Senegalese bureaucrat complained that ‘you had to speak Bambara to get anything done in the Administrative Building’ so great was the Soudanese presence (Foltz 1965: 148). 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 (N’Diaye 1980: 31-32). Speaking in Wolof just days before the Federation’s collapse, Mamadou Dia made an even more unlikely claim. ‘Our country was colonized by France. Today we no longer suffer this arrangement. We have become free and independent. It is

not to allow another country, and above all a territory so similar to our own, come and colonize us in turn' (quoted in Zuccarelli 1988: 82).

The same day Modibo Keita's train left Dakar, Soudanese *cheminots* in Thiès, 'visibly sad' at the news, wondered aloud about their fate in Senegal.<sup>9</sup> The physical rails quickly became 'Senegalese' when the railroad was nationalised after the Federation split, but for people living and working along the rails, the question of citizenship was more hotly contested. Dialimady Koité, secretary-general of Mali's railroad workers union, condemned the events of Dakar, and proclaimed the union's indefatigable support to 'the Malian *cheminots* living in Senegal'.<sup>10</sup>

Officials in Bamako recognized that the cash-poor country would require considerable human effort to meet their socialist goals. They appealed to expatriate citizens of the former Soudanese Republic to 'return' and build the new Mali (Gary-Toukara 2008: 200-202).<sup>11</sup> The call was particularly addressed to *cheminots* working in Senegal, many of whom had graduated from colonial French Soudan's few technical schools.<sup>12</sup> While Keita, Koité, and other political leaders pleaded with skilled workers to join Mali's new national railroad, Senegal had a different problem. Graduates of Bamako's Terrasson de Fougères technical school dominated the railroad's highest ranks. Thus, Senegalese *cheminots* and trade unionists often attempted to convince their Soudanese colleagues and friends to stay despite the collapse, claiming that the collapse

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<sup>9</sup> 'Compte rendu de renseignements fournis par le groupe de Thiès sur la situation politique' #3/S, 21 August 1960, 5D 14, SRAS-Dakar.

<sup>10</sup> Dialimady Koité, speech at Congrès des Cheminots du Mali, 25-26 September 1960, BK 26, ORTM Archives Soniques.

<sup>11</sup> Interview by Brandon County: Bibata Maïga, 25 December 2008, Markala (Diamarabougou), Mali.

<sup>12</sup> Interview by Isaac 'Chaka' N'Diaye: Mamadou Sidibé, 19 January 2008, Kita, Mali.



was purely political and they ultimately remained united as *cheminots*.<sup>13</sup>

In twilight of empire, nationalist politicians and new states in West Africa assumed that family histories rooted in colonial and precolonial territories and polities would extend to postcolonial citizenship (Malkki 1992; County and Skinner 2008; Mann 2015). With the September 1960 ‘socialist option’ of the Republic of Mali, Modibo Keita announced that the new state included people far beyond its borders. In a radio broadcast, he named several prominent Federation loyalists from Senegal. The new republic included them ‘and all the other Senegalese who have remained faithful to their vows’ and their commitment to the Federal government’.<sup>14</sup>

The question of nationality before the Federation’s collapse had primarily been a Senegalese question. Long the seat of the French West Africa government, Dakar maintained its political primacy in 1959 when it was named the Mali Federation’s capital. Frederick Cooper claims that the politicians and intellectuals in charge of Senegal in the late 1950s argued for a distinction between a unified citizenship for all Africans living in the French Union (and later French Community) and a set of nationalities whose membership would be determined by territorial governments (Cooper 2015). Yet Modibo Keita on the Soudanese side had been hostile to a unified citizenship and more generally opposed to further common institutions with France within the framework of the French Community. And despite the Senegalese claims for a unified citizenship, practical distinction between Soudanese and Senegalese had a long history in Senegal, which

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<sup>13</sup> Interviews by Marie Rodet: Mahamadou Sacko, 4 February 2007, Bamako (Gare ferroviaire), Mali; Cheik Doumbia, 4 February 2007, Bamako (Gare ferroviaire), Mali; Cheick Sidiya Diombana, 5 February 2007, Bamako (Badalabougou), Mali; Cheikh Oumar Tabouret, 16 April 2008, Bamako (Lafiabougou), Mali.

<sup>14</sup> ‘République du Mali-Soudan’, 24 September 1960, 5D 14, SRAS-Dakar.

actually relied on the memories of two distinct cultural, economic and social spaces of the colonial era instead of the historical continuum claimed by political leaders at the time of the constitution of the Federation. The term ‘Bambara’ in particular had a long history of praise and stigmatization in Senegalese (colonial) records, where they represented the ‘other’, and very often the slaves.<sup>15</sup> The *cheminots* and their families heading from French Sudan and living in Senegal on the eve of the Federation’s collapse further experienced this distinction: while they were often called the ‘Soudanese’ or the ‘Bambara’ by the local Senegalese populations, they also attempted in some cases to defend their specificity by priding themselves on keeping the Bamanankan as the main language spoken at home and maintaining social ties with their ‘homeland’ through the steady flows of information, goods and people along the Dakar-Niger railroad (Rodet 2015). Mahamadou Sacko, whose father worked as a construction supervisor for the Dakar-Niger in the early twentieth century, explained in particular how he and his siblings were forbidden by their parents to speak Wolof at home in Thiès.<sup>16</sup>

Distinction was also reinforced by the railroad reorganization and the devolution of its competencies to the former administrative regions, as well as measures of ‘Africanization’ that replaced metropolitan French employees with Africans in the post-war processes of decolonization. The commission charged with dividing the Federal colonial railroad authority issued a decision that localized the employment of *cheminots*, transferring employment status and pension responsibility from the former colonial railroad divisions (*régions*) to the newly autonomous public companies (*régies*). It created the category of ‘*dépaysé*’ (relocated) applied to African workers from outside the

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<sup>15</sup> On the genealogy of the term, see Bazin 1985.

<sup>16</sup> Interview by Marie Rodet: Mahamadou Sacko, 4 February 2007, Bamako (Gare ferroviaire), Mali.

colony who therefore received a financial compensation for working away from home (Tixier 1965: 931-32). This in turn led to a series of personnel moves meant by these new authorities to cut costs by reducing the number of workers from outside the territory of each new *régie* (Tixier 1965: 923-24). Thus, particularly important in the Mali Federation was the 4 February 1960 order that eliminated the category of ‘*dépaysé*’. Levelling pay provided a disincentive for *cheminots* to remain in jobs outside their home territory, but it also equalized payment for all Malians no matter which constituent republic they called home. Yet, despite the official abolition of relocation bonuses in February, the Dakar-Niger still calculated expatriate worker salaries at a higher rate. The expatriate category initially applied to French *cheminots* working in the colonies, but Senegal’s declaration of independence from the Mali Federation transformed de facto Soudanese *cheminots* from nationals to expatriates. Worried about the increased labour costs and the possibility of layoffs should the railroad administration decide to keep some or all of its top-level Soudanese employees on the expatriate pay grade, Senegalese *cheminots* protested any such unequal pay scale.<sup>17</sup> Rumour spread that the Senegalese government would not pay Thiès’s sizeable contingent of Soudanese at all.<sup>18</sup>

Immediately after the Federation’s collapse, more than four-fifths of the *cheminots* working in Senegal were Soudanese and although Senegal’s national railroad could certainly not maintain this entire workforce, if *all* of them left the country and the railroad at the same time, the railroad risked being paralyzed.<sup>19</sup> At the beginning of September 1960, at a meeting of Soudanese Terrasson graduates in Rufisque, a teacher

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<sup>17</sup> ‘Comités de Vigilance des Cheminots’ 19 September 1960, 5D 14, SRAS-Dakar.

<sup>18</sup> Interview by Brandon County: Maciré Coulibaly, 22 July 2007, Thiès (Diamaguène), Senegal.

<sup>19</sup> Renseignements 1 September 1960, 5D 14, SRAS-Dakar.

working in Dakar said that if Soudan's *cheminots* and public works employees left Senegal, Soudan could reconquer the rebellious republic and reunite the Federation,<sup>20</sup> a statement which echoed to some extent some of the concerns addressed by Dia before the collapse.

In its truncated 1960 annual report, Senegal's newly created national railroad authority stated that it could not maintain the workforce it had inherited and, in October 1960, decided that members of 'the group of Soudanese serving in Senegal' would 'return to their country of origin'.<sup>21</sup> In the second week of October, 400 *cheminots* and their families boarded trains in Thiès for an overnight voyage that would end at the border at noon.<sup>22</sup> Railroad officials on both sides of the border were unsure if they could send the Senegalese train into Malian territory, so the passengers disembarked at Kidira, trudged across the railroad bridge to Diboly, and boarded trains sent by the Republic of Mali's newly organized national railroad. By November, over one thousand *cheminots*—and several thousand relatives and dependents—had crossed the Falémé bridge.<sup>23</sup> Other state employees with ties to Soudan also left Senegal in response to official decisions, social pressures, and political appeals.<sup>24</sup> Reluctant repatriates and anticipatory nationalists

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<sup>20</sup> Renseignements 8 September 1960, 5D 14, SRAS-Dakar.

<sup>21</sup> RCFS, 'Compte-rendu de gestion', 20 August–31 December 1960, p. 7, GGAOF 2G 60/6, ANS.

<sup>22</sup> Chef Service Exploitation [Thiès] to Chefs Service Exploitation [Bamako and Dakar] #4–T (5 October 1960), FBPN 88/300, ANM-H.

<sup>23</sup> Government officials used a figure of 1,046 and the *cheminots*' union cited 1,048. Min Fonction Publique Travail Affaires Sociales, PV 9 October 1961, FBPN 181/622, ANM-H; "1<sup>o</sup> Congrès ordinaires [*sic*] du Syndicat des Cheminots du Mali: rapport moral d'activité," p. 3 (18–20 March 1962), 1W 21 dossier 'Police spéciale du Chemin de fer 1961–1963,' AGRK; Cheick Doumbia mentioned 1,700 repatriates in the country in November 1961, but his categories might be more expansive, including temporary and contract workers. Interview by Brandon County: Cheick Doumbia, Bamako (Gare ferroviaire), Mali (13 March 2009). The figure of 2,700 cited by Daouda Samaké is probably mistranscribed. "Les refoulés du Sénégal après l'éclatement de la Fédération du Mali en 1960" (Université du Mali–École Normale Supérieure mémoire de fin d'études, 1998), 24

<sup>24</sup> Amadou Seydou Traoré, *Devoir de mémoire, devoir de vérité* (Bamako: La Ruche à Livres, 2005), 80–82; See also "Liste nominative des gradés et gardes républicains originaires du Soudan remis à la disposition du gouvernement de leur pays à compter du 1er novembre 1960," SC 11D 1/1393, ANS.

alike bade farewell to their jobs, their friends, and their families in Senegal, loaded their possessions onto eastbound trains, and returned to the Republic of Mali for the very first time.

The Federation's collapse certainly became a founding national moment for the newly-declared Republic of Mali which henceforth experienced a particularly exalted nationalist climate (Campmas 1978: 199, Rillon 2013: 92). When the Republic of Mali and families in Mali called on its children abroad to 'return', it garnered an overwhelming response. People who had spent only months in Senegal headed east alongside people who had been born there. Cheik Doumbia, who was born in Kaolack of Soudanese parents and had been working for the railroad since 1951, had never thought of resettling in Mali but after the Federation collapsed, his father, a stationmaster in Kayes, sent a telegram: "come if you have received decision". The younger Doumbia had no choice but to obey his father's call.<sup>25</sup> Government bureaucrats, *cheminots*, artisans and students all heeded similar calls. Young mothers boarded the eastbound trains with newborn babies in their arms.<sup>26</sup> After a difficult trip, a festive and patriotic reception met them at the border. The Union Soudanaise-RDA (US-RDA) leadership in Kayes mobilized party activists, musicians, dancers, and cooks to transform the experience of expulsion into a happy homecoming. '*Fasobaara, anw ka fasobaara ke*', they sang in Bamanankan; exhorting each other to "work to build the nation."<sup>27</sup> Every day for nearly three weeks, 300 to 400 volunteers set out from Kayes in another special train. Members of the US-RDA women's association cooked meals for the repatriates to eat after they

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<sup>25</sup> Interview by Marie Rodet: Cheikh Doumbia, 17 January 2008, Bamako (Gare ferroviaire), Mali.

<sup>26</sup> Interview by Brandon County: Bibata Maïga, 25 December 2008, Markala (Diamarabougou), Mali.

<sup>27</sup> Interview by Brandon County: Makanba 'Martin' Kanouté, 5 August 2009, Kayes (Khasso), Mali.

arrived on Malian soil and social workers provided first aid to adults and children.<sup>28</sup> Similar scenes repeated in each station of the railroad from Kayes to Bamako.<sup>29</sup> The repatriated drifted to the homes of friends and relatives, or slept in converted public buildings and used Kayes as a staging area as they contacted relatives further down the line to arrange for more permanent accommodation. A retired *cheminot* in Mahina donated 100 kilograms of rice and slaughtered a bull to help feed the *refoulés* lodged in and around the station. He also took up a collection to meet the new arrivals' needs and received 4500 FCFA, or approximately one month's salary for a new worker.<sup>30</sup> In the neighbouring administrative centre of Bafoulabé, residents denounced Senghor and Dia and demanded that all ties with Senegal be cut. Some of the town's older residents, recalling their experiences as migrant labourers in Senegal, were not surprised by the events of Dakar. Acerbically they assured young Malians that 'these acts of treachery are not new'.<sup>31</sup>

In Bamako, officials made creative use of the resources available to help integrate repatriated workers. West of the city centre, 2000 families of repatriates and urban migrants moved into waterlogged but free plots of land (Samaké 1998: 35).<sup>32</sup> On the national level, the government deducted a small portion of the wages earned by the country's formal-sector workers and used the money to establish a Solidarity Fund that

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<sup>28</sup> Cercle Kayes, Report, September-October 1960, RME 10, AMI; Arrondissement Oualia, Report, November 1960, RME 9, AMI; Cercle Kita, Report, November 1960, RME 9, AMI; Cercle, Kita, Report, October 1960, RME 10, AMI; Cercle Kita, Report, November 1960, RME 9, AMI.

<sup>29</sup> Cercle Bafoulabé, Report, November 1960, RME 9, AMI.

<sup>30</sup> 'Félicitations au nom des cheminots rapatriés de Sénégal en résidant au Cercle de Bafoulabé', [late 1960 or early 1961], FBPN 79/267, ANM-H.

<sup>31</sup> Cercle Bafoulabé, Report, September 1960, RME 9, AMI.

<sup>32</sup> The largest of these neighbourhoods, Lafiabougou (Bamanankan: 'serenity town') was platted in 1961 as a refuge for Malians expelled from Senegal and Congo-Léopoldville. Interview by Marie Rodet: Birama Traoré, 7 June 2008, Bamako (Lafiabougou), Mali. See also Traoré (2005: 82). Claude Meillassoux refers to the neighbourhood as 'Lafadié', possibly from *lafiya je*, 'sharing serenity'. (Meillassoux, 1968: 14).

paid repatriated *cheminots* half-salaries for twelve months, allowing them to meet their families' basic financial needs while officials worked to place them in new jobs (Traoré 2005: 82).<sup>33</sup> Some left to work on the railroads in neighbouring Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>34</sup> A few others went further afield to technical training programs in Yugoslavia.<sup>35</sup>

The plight of the repatriated *cheminots* had become rhetorically tied to the country and, more broadly, the continuing political struggle against imperial domination.<sup>36</sup> On Radio Mali, announcers read a letter allegedly sent by sympathizers in Dakar who celebrated the new republic as a victory over French neocolonialism. Careful to highlight that 'the Malians expelled from SENEGAL leave stronger because of their ordeal [...] because those who have the sympathy of their people and of another people are twice as strong'.<sup>37</sup> The US-RDA leadership continued to thank party members in Kayes for their support of 'our brothers expelled from Senegal', one of the locality's many sacrifices 'to safeguard the dignity and the liberty of the whole Nation'.<sup>38</sup> Keeping attention on the railroad, Senegalese dissidents based in Bamako broadcasted their disgust over 'the anguish in which the [Senegalese] cheminots have lived [...] since the manufactured collapse of the Mali Federation, the Senegalese railroad reports more than a billion

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<sup>33</sup> Interviews by Marie Rodet: Cheik Doumbia, 4 February 2007, Bamako (Gare ferroviaire), Mali; Cheik Sidiya Diombana, 5 February 2007, Bamako (Badalabougou), Mali

<sup>34</sup> Police Spéciale Kayes, 'Renseignements: A/s Réunion syndicale des Cheminots' #02/PSK-C, 23 January 1962, 1W21, AGRK; 'Mémoire présenté par le Bureau de l'Union Nationale des Travailleurs du Mali sur les suggestions du Ministre des Finances concernant la proposition du Budget d'État (exercice 1967-1968)', FBPN 105/406, ANM- H.

<sup>35</sup> Secretariat Gen Min Fonction Public, PV 9 October 1961, FBPN 181/622, ANM-H.

<sup>36</sup> Police Spécial Kayes, 'Renseignements: Réunions syndicales des cheminots', 28 August 1961, 1W21, AGRK.

<sup>37</sup> 'Radio-Mali: émission de 12h45', 24 October 1960, 5D 14, SRAS-Dakar.

<sup>38</sup> BPN to Sec Gen BPL Kayes #93, 10 October 1962, FBPN 239/857, ANM-H.

[FCFA] in deficit despite the shameful repatriation of Malian *cheminots*'.<sup>39</sup>

Yet, as we shall see, the repatriated *cheminots* and the Soudanese living in Senegal who returned to Mali experienced in some cases a long and precarious journey in the process of resettlement, which disrupted their initial memories of 'home' and 'homeland' and their sense of belonging.

#### FAILING MEMORIES? THE PRACTICALITIES OF BELONGING

Most people recognized the symbolism of the early days of the Malian republic, such as when the population of Bafoulabé 'congratulate[d] the party faithful of Kayes for how they handled the situation of the *cheminots*' and, because the trains' late arrival prevented them from offering such a spectacular welcome, they decided to redeem themselves by contributing more to the Solidarity Fund.<sup>40</sup> Government officials fretted over the slow pace of job creation and job placement for repatriated *cheminots*. The Solidarity Fund was slated to pay out after one year, a fact that the head of the railroad nervously raised in a meeting of Bamako's regional officials in September 1961.<sup>41</sup> When the fund did end, it became both a pressing concern for those *cheminots* still without jobs and a test of the government's ability to give economic shape to its political rhetoric. Auxiliary workers, the lowest rank of permanent employees, were particularly worried. Police reports in Kayes noted that their situation 'remains as confused as ever, and this has caused them to worry'. Union officials promised new jobs in state industrial ventures, but *cheminots*

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<sup>39</sup> 'Appel du PAI (à l'occasion du 2ème anniversaire de l'Indépendance du SENEGAL) lancé sur les ondes de Radio Mali le 4 avril 1962 à 12 heures 45', DIMI 10T 735, SHD.

<sup>40</sup> Cercle Bafoulabé, Report, October 1960, RME 10, AMI.

<sup>41</sup> PV de la première conférence régional trimestrielle de la Région de Bamako, 29 September 1961, 1W13, AGRK.



recognized that ‘the positions taken up by the Government have not always brought concrete results. A new worksite with 500 jobs cannot be achieved in the short term. Workers see the reality of this proposition and they remain pessimistic and impatient to hear the government’s official decision’.<sup>42</sup>

The arduous wait for news and jobs drove many *cheminots* to reappraise the possibilities offered by the new state. Those who secured work on the railroad often traded prestige for employment. Mechanics took up partial employment as manual labourers, with hours slashed in order to offer partial employment the remaining unemployed *cheminots*.<sup>43</sup> In this context, the letter from a woman on behalf of her repatriate brother takes on extra significance. She pleaded with the governor of Kayes to find or make even a part-time job ‘to save us from disgrace’. And, while the letter described her immediate family’s dire straits, it also evoked a national concern.<sup>44</sup> In 1961, one man wrote to the regional governor in Kayes and alluded to the connection between repatriated workers and the state’s duty to address the problems created by repatriation. Emphasizing his patriotic choice to leave Senegal, he introduced himself as ‘a mechanic by profession’, who had not worked in his field of expertise since 1956. ‘I will gladly accept any task that is assigned to me in order to meet the needs of my family [...]. I used to live in Senegal, [and] at the collapse of the Mali Federation, I came to reinforce the ranks of those who build the Malian Nation, since all Malians aware of their duties had to return to Mali after all that the Senegalese had done’.<sup>45</sup> Two months later at a union

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<sup>42</sup> Police Spéciale Kayes, Report, November 1961, 1W21, AGRK.

<sup>43</sup> Interview by Isaac ‘Chaka’ N’Diaye: Mamadou Sidibé, 19 January 2008, Kita, Mali.

<sup>44</sup> Sow Aminata to ‘Cher Ly’ [GRK], 17 July 1961, 1W8, AGRK.

<sup>45</sup> Coulibaly Birima to GRK, 11 December 1961, 1W8, AGRK.

meeting a certain Diombana<sup>46</sup> publically criticized the government's decision to encourage expatriates to return, since their subsequent unemployment had exposed the new republic's economic fragility. He continued, saying that 'The work of the Government, as gigantic as it may be, will be in vain if one single repatriated worker remains unemployed, for it was shouted from the rooftops [in Senegal] that Mali will be incapable of accommodating all its repatriates'.<sup>47</sup> Diombana even claimed years later that he personally had regretted coming back to Mali: had he known, he would have stayed in Senegal.<sup>48</sup> Some graduates of École Terrasson also wrote to complain that they still had not found work years after the Federation's collapse.<sup>49</sup> 'Modibo was the first one expelled from Senegal', *cheminots* often said in the early 1960s as a wry comment on how they felt betrayed by the new government.<sup>50</sup> Some *cheminots*' wives did not hesitate to castigate the Malian railroad authorities regarding the conditions of their repatriation: numerous pieces of luggage had gone missing during the transfer from Kidira to Diboli.<sup>51</sup>

Some of the repatriated soon became the objects of political suspicion and appeared as the new "enemies within" since they did not intend to bend to the party's discipline.<sup>52</sup> Diombana spent some time in prison for insisting that rather than force demoralized *cheminots* to squander their mechanical expertise and adopt agricultural labour, the

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<sup>46</sup> Although identified in the report as 'Moussa Diombana', the speaker is almost certainly Cheick Sidiya Diombana.

<sup>47</sup> Police Spéciale Bamako, Renseignements #16/C/PS-B, 1 February 1962, FBPN 64/191, ANM-H.

<sup>48</sup> Interview by Marie Rodet: Cheick Sidiya Diombana, 5 February 2007, Bamako (Badalabougou), Mali.

<sup>49</sup> Sountougoumba Kéita to Sec Gen US-RDA s/c BPL Kita #13 BPK, Kita: 1 October 1964, FBPN 240/861, ANM-H. Interview by Brandon County: Cheick Doumbia, 13 March 2009, Bamako (Gare ferroviaire), Mali.

<sup>50</sup> Moussa Diabaté's speech in Police Spéciale Bamako, Renseignements #16/C/PS-B, 1 February 1962, FBPN 64/191, ANM-H; Interview by Brandon County: Assa Dabo, 29 December 2008, Markala (Kirango), Mali.

<sup>51</sup> Interview by Marie Rodet: Mrs Tabouret, 16 April 2008, Bamako (Lafiabougou), Mali.

<sup>52</sup> Interviews by Marie Rodet: Cheikh Oumar Tabouret, 16 April 2008, Bamako (Lafiabougou), Mali; Birama Traoré, 7 June 2008, Bamako (Lafiabougou), Mali; Cheick Doumbia, 4 February 2007, Bamako (Gare ferroviaire), Mali.

government should have supported them so that the new country could profit from their expertise.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, shortly after the welcome in Kayes, government representatives had come to railroad towns and urged *cheminots* to take up farming jobs. Officials, including the Kayes's mayor (a *cheminot* union leader in the 1950s) and the national labour union coalition, criticized *cheminots* for refusing to farm, raise livestock, and gather wood. One self-styled patriot in Kayes offered the national government his unsolicited advice, suggesting that the state stock the towns and villages along the railroad so that 'all the native Malians now living in Senegal' could return to Mali and 'labour together to build the nation'.<sup>54</sup> Some *cheminots* did transfer their employment to work as local administrative agents, teachers, or technical experts elsewhere in the country.<sup>55</sup> This seemed to be more out of necessity, and government officials complained bitterly that *cheminots* were not interested in open posts outside the railroad.<sup>56</sup> The government expected *cheminots* to do whatever work was asked of them—most commonly agricultural labour, in the same way as they requested from the youth to "return to the land" to build the new nation (Gary-Toukara 2003; Rodet and County forthcoming).<sup>57</sup>

Such a predicament demanded sacrifices. In a meeting in late November 1962, Dialimady Koité tried to encourage the members of his union to identify with the nation, asking them to 'work more than ever because it is necessary to build the nation'.<sup>58</sup> At the

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<sup>53</sup> Interview by James Jones: Cheick Sidiya Diombana, 16 April 1992, Bamako.

<sup>54</sup> 'Un Malien qui songe à la grandeur de la Nation' to 'Messieurs Les Présidents et Membres du Conseil du Ministre de Gouverneur [*sic*] de la République du Mali', 29 March 1961, FBPN 239/857, ANM-H.

<sup>55</sup> Interviews by Isaac 'Chaka' N'Diaye: Mamadou Keita, 23 November 2007, Negala, Mali; Mamourou Keita, 9 September 2007, Toukoto, Mali; Interview by Brandon County: Cheick Doumbia, 13 March 2009, Bamako (Gare ferroviaire), Mali.

<sup>56</sup> Min Intérieur to Sec Gen BPN #697/MII-CAB, 16 June 1961, FBPN 112/428, ANM-H.

<sup>57</sup> Commission nationale de la jeunesse 1957-1968, PV réunion du jury, semaine régionale de la jeunesse, 29 March 1967, FBPN 52/140, ANM-H.

<sup>58</sup> Police Spéciale Bamako, 'Renseignements a/s d'une Assemblée générale du syndicat des cheminots tenue le 22.11.62 dans l'enceinte du Chemin de Fer' #133/C/PS-B, 23 November 1962, FBPN 35/71,

same meeting, Sibiri Kanouté, a delegate from Kayes, accepted the importance of nation-building while he lambasted the government's attempts to draw the *cheminots* closer to the state: 'At the railroad, you don't dare speak because you risk being labelled 'anti-nationalist'. [...] All the *cheminots* here have things to say. Who among you has nothing to say? [...] But you don't dare. We struggled to chase away the European colonialists because they did not support the interests of the workers and the country. But those who are at the head of the railroad now did not earn their place there. [...] We *cheminots*, we are determined to work in the country's best interests, but this burden must not be carried by the workers alone, it must be carried by everyone'.<sup>59</sup> Everyone agreed that something had to be done to assist the repatriates who remained unemployed, but *cheminots* in Kayes had a more pointed critique, arguing that the fallout from the Federation's collapse was part of a national problem and not simply a problem for the railroad.<sup>60</sup>

While publicly proclaiming the repatriated *cheminots*' civic virtue, US-RDA leaders recognized that they often returned from Senegal carrying a different set of political values. Reports from Kita noted 'with satisfaction' that *cheminots* arriving from Senegal had made public declarations in favour of the new state and had conducted themselves well since their arrival.<sup>61</sup> In other towns, they challenged the established political leadership, such as when a group of repatriates in Bafoulabé accused the area's National Assembly deputy of cronyism and corruption.<sup>62</sup> The spark for this was that the

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<sup>59</sup> Police Spéciale Bamako, 'Renseignements: a/s d'une Assemblée générale du syndicat des *cheminots* tenue le 22.11.62 dans l'enceinte du Chemin de Fer' #133/C/PS-B, 23 November 1962, FBPN 35/71, ANM-H.

<sup>60</sup> Police Spéciale Kayes, 'Renseignements: A/s Réunion syndicale des *Cheminots*' (#99/PSK), 16 November 1961, 1W21, AGRK.

<sup>61</sup> Cercle Kita, Report, October 1960, RME 10, AMI.

<sup>62</sup> Cercle Bafoulabé, Report, November 1960, RME 9, AMI.

deputy, Hamady Diallo, said that all the *'refoulés'* could not possibly stay in Mahina.

Within the railroad workers' union, repatriated *cheminots* formed an important interest group that coalesced into an irritated voting bloc as hundreds of them remained unemployed more than a year after arriving with the expectation of working for Mali's national railroad. A government report on the railroad warned that the repatriates 'recognize neither the union Leadership nor the Railroad Administration, except through the mediation of their own representatives. [... T]he group from the region of Kayes has been the strongest due to the poor methods used to find jobs for repatriated agents'.<sup>63</sup> Reports of backroom negotiations at the highest levels of the government show that the 'national interests' articulated in economic policy began to diverge from 'the interests of the workers'—railroad workers at least. Despite the economic blow to the regional economy and the continued unemployment of hundreds of *cheminots* who had left Senegal, the leaders of the US-RDA could not agree to negotiate with their western neighbours to re-open the railroad to international freight traffic.<sup>64</sup> In January 1962, police reports complained that merchants in Kayes talked loudly and openly about how the Dakar-Niger was Mali's ideal link to ports and world markets, far more so than Guinea or Côte d'Ivoire.

For the Malians who stayed in Senegal on the wake of the Federation's collapse, the issue of citizenship became particularly charged as its acquisition conditioned access to polling stations, social services, and even bursaries for students. Demba Traoré, originally from Kayes, explained how he was obliged to return to Mali following the

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<sup>63</sup> M. Diarra, 'Rapport sur la situation de la régie des chemins de fer du Mali', 4 October 1961, p. 3, FBPN 104/404, ANM-H.

collapse while he had been pupil in Diourbel since 1958.<sup>65</sup> His father had left French Soudan several years earlier for Senegal in order to find work. At the time of his departure from Kayes, he had entrusted his children to his brother. Later, he had managed to bring Demba to Senegal so that he could pursue his education. But because of the collapse, Demba had to acquire Senegalese nationality in order to obtain a bursary and pursue his studies. Yet, his father categorically opposed this. Demba had to return to Mali in January 1961 with his brother who was in the same situation. Arouna Coulibaly, born in 1940 in Kobongoye in the Senegalese Siin and whose father had migrated from Niore in French Soudan to Senegal in 1924, was doing the paperwork to establish his citizenship in Senegal when the Federation collapsed.<sup>66</sup> He ultimately decided to establish his identity papers in the name of Fall, the Wolof equivalent of the Mande patronym Coulibaly, to prevent any further administrative issues because of his Malian origins in this period of high diplomatic tensions.

Independent Senegal struggled with its history as French West Africa's political centre. Nationals of neighbouring countries—and particularly Mali—had grounds to make material claims on the Senegalese state without necessarily offering their political support. To avoid a flood of requests, these colonial and federal claims could not be accorded the same status as the needs of Senegalese citizens, and that the state would limit a broad range of services. This strategy created an environment in which officials judged citizenship applications with an ahistorical view of the country's political past and an eye for minimizing the state's financial obligations. One Soudanese-born applicant who had had lived in Senegal since World War 1, drew a wary note for having a 'definite

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<sup>65</sup> Interview by Marie Rodet: Demba Traoré, 29 January 2008, Kayes, Mali.

<sup>66</sup> Interview by Marie Rodet: Arouna Fall/Coulibaly, 9 July 2009, Kobongoye, Senegal.

[financial] interest' in acquiring citizenship in the country that was home to all his material investments as well as the source of his quarterly pension.<sup>67</sup> The citizenship requirement was stated more explicitly in the analysis of the right of a Malian *cheminot*'s widows to collect pensions from the new national railroad.<sup>68</sup> One man born in Kayes had moved to Senegal before his tenth birthday and applied for Senegalese citizenship shortly after leaving the army in late 1961. His file suggests a strong candidacy: four years of schooling in the colonial system, six years as an apprentice carpenter in the Dakar-Niger workshops in Thiès, and thirteen years of army service, mostly peaceful tours in Senegal. He never fell afoul of the law and posed no risk to public safety. He spoke fluent Wolof, married a Senegalese woman, and lodged his family in the home of a Dakar police officer. Although his file indicated that he was 'perfectly integrated into Senegalese society [*la collectivité sénégalaise*]', he had not held a job since leaving the army six months earlier and had no personal wealth. In his report to governor of Cap-Vert, the regional police chief opined that such an applicant 'offers nothing of interest to Senegal'.<sup>69</sup>

Around the same time, repatriated *cheminots* had to navigate between their uncertain position within Mali's shaky economy and the certainty of their memories and enduring relationships in Senegal. Many of the Soudanese *cheminots* who left Senegal held important posts in the railroad (especially those based in Thiès) and owned property in the city either near the railroad's bureaucratic headquarters or in one of the working-class neighbourhoods associated with *cheminot* life in each station town. In large cities

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<sup>67</sup> 'A/s demande de naturalisation [C. G.]' #359C/SU/RG, 13 June 1962, 2D 13, SRAS-Dakar.

<sup>68</sup> 'A/s demande de naturalisation de [T. A.]' #506C/SU/RG, 7 September 1962, 2D 13, SRAS-Dakar.

<sup>69</sup> 'Demande de naturalisation [K. A.]' #503/C/SU/RG, 7 September 1962, 2D 13, SRAS.

like Thiès and Tambacounda, their former neighbours managed these properties, collected rents, paid taxes, and at regular intervals, transferred the remaining money to the repatriated proprietors in Mali.<sup>70</sup> Some of these Malian workers returned to Senegal after their retirement, and sometimes even before as we shall see, to find their homes waiting for them.

#### WHEN CONNECTED MEMORIES STRIKE BACK

A Kayes police report from January 1962 noted that ‘Those who have not yet been hired back are worried for their future. People believe that they will no longer receive their half-salary. They have no more confidence in the words of the Union and they invade the Government Ministries looking for work. Dissatisfaction reigns in their world and the reaction is that some will not wait to return to Senegal’. Other reactions were that Mali should discourage its citizens from returning to Senegal. ‘[T]his is serious’, the Governor of Kayes wrote in the report’s margins.<sup>71</sup> So serious, in fact, that some had already tried it. One *cheminot* returned to Senegal in February 1962 and submitted his application for Senegalese citizenship shortly thereafter, despite his expulsion from the country less than a year and a half before. ‘[I] only need to be naturalized to return to my work on the D.N. in Senegal’ he explained, treating his application as if it were a bureaucratic formality and alluding to a waiting job at a railroad, the Dakar-Niger, that no longer existed. ‘I did not have a job in Mali’, he added as a postscriptum.<sup>72</sup> Officials in Dakar picked up on

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<sup>70</sup> Interviews by Brandon County: Alhadji Pape Sangane Diop, 23 June 2009, Thiès (Mbambara), Senegal; Abdou Sissokho, 30 June 2009, Tambacounda (Dépôt), Senegal; interviews by Marie Rodet: Cheikh Oumar Tabouret, 16 April 2008, Bamako (Lafiabougou), Mali; Cheick Sidiya Diombana, 5 February 2007, Bamako (Badalabougou), Mali.

<sup>71</sup> Police Spéciale Kayes, Rapport January 1962, 1W21, AGRK.

<sup>72</sup> Sûreté Région Cap-Vert, ‘Renseignements Généraux’ #156/SU/RG, 13 September 1962, 2D 13, SRAS-Dakar.



this, deciding that ‘his choice is only guided by the need to recover the job that he had left after 20 August’.<sup>73</sup>

The threat of migration - by *cheminots* and others - made trains and train stations important sites for the expression of state power (Rodet and County forthcoming). In 1961, the Senegalese government weighed rumours of Malian plans to demolish the railroad tracks between Kayes and the border, part of a hardline policy meant to encourage Malians residing in Senegal to repatriate and isolate those who did not.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, when Senegal began a short-lived policy of requiring visas of Malian travellers in late 1961, the US-RDA branch in Kayes suggested that the government suspend all train services with Senegal and transfer the railroad’s western terminus to Gouloumbo, 20 miles east of the border.<sup>75</sup>

Despite the closure of the border until 1963, intermittent trade between the two countries continued by the road from Kayes (Lambert 1993: 43). Neither government could reconfigure the region’s longstanding migratory networks, as stated by Malian administrative reports that regularly denounced the circumvention of the border via Mauritania by Malian nationals attempting to reach Senegal<sup>76</sup>. State officials often cited train stations on the border and far beyond it as sites of anti-national activities such as emigration and smuggling. Memories of Senegal’s break with the Federation lived on, underscoring the border’s political threat and the problematic nature of train travel. ‘[I]n each train from “Katanga”’,<sup>77</sup> local officials in Kayes complained in 1962, ‘comrades

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<sup>73</sup> Chef Services Police Région Cap-Vert to GRC-V #548C/SU/RG, 26 September 1962, 2D 13, SRAS-Dakar.

<sup>74</sup> ‘Activités des maliens,’ 3 January 1960 [*sic*, 1961], 5D 15 SRAS-Dakar.

<sup>75</sup> BPL Kayes to Sec Gen US-RDA, 8 September 1961, FBPN 239/857, ANM-H.

<sup>76</sup> MIIT to GRK #285/MIITCAB, 6 September 1961, 1W5, AGRK.

<sup>77</sup> People in Kayes and in train stations across Mali named the Falémé River bridge ‘Katanga,’ a reference to the condemned secessionist province in Congo-Léopoldville. Interview by Brandon County: Dramane

come and go without luggage. These people deserve to be watched'.<sup>78</sup> Those most suspect were the ones coming from Senegal, 'foreigners' who brought dubious morals, economically unproductive enterprises, and political subversion.<sup>79</sup> To stop the flow of illegal importations from Senegal, the governor of Kayes made provisions for four members of the party's youth wing to ride the trains along 175 miles of tracks between Mahina and the border to prevent the movement of both smuggled goods and smugglers.<sup>80</sup> Even with heightened surveillance, officials throughout western Mali continued to see 'Maliens flock to the station in order to continue to Senegal or France'.<sup>81</sup>

In Kayes, the economic decline caused by the closed border with Senegal, its position at the far west of the country and political disagreements with the central government and neighbouring administrative districts that stemmed from this, distanced the city from the rest of the country. Tidiani Traoré, a politician from Kayes, came under scrutiny from the US-RDA's radical wing in January 1961 after having decried the 'suffocation' faced by Kayes with the rail line closed.<sup>82</sup> Traoré was denounced as a Senegalese agent, but the following month a joint meeting of government ministers swept the most serious charges aside, explaining 'We can only reproach Tidiani for having spoken about re-establishing the Railroad between Mali and Senegal, even though the anger born from the collapse of the Federation has not yet dissipated in us'. While

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Touré, 29 August 2004, Kayes (Plateau), Mali. Further east, in Kita, 'Events in the ex-Belgian Congo were frequently discussed, especially by the teachers and students on vacation from school'. Kita Cercle, RM (August 1960), p. 5, RME 10, AMI; Immediately after the 19-20 August crisis, Senegalese security forces reported Soudanese residents of Thiès saying that 'Senegal's position is that same as that of KATANGA in the former Belgian Congo'. 'Compte rendu de renseignements fournis par le groupe de Thiès sur la situation politique' #3/S, 21 August 1960, 5D14, SRAS-D

<sup>78</sup> Cercle Kayes, PV chefs services 31 January 1962, 1W15, AGRK.

<sup>79</sup> Min Intérieur Information Tourisme to GRegions #40/DI, 25 July 1962, 1W14, AGRK.

<sup>80</sup> Cdt Kayes to GRK #299/AE, 6 February 1962, 1W15, AGRK.

<sup>81</sup> Cercle Kayes, 'Compte rendu de la conférence des chefs de service', November 1962, 1W4, AGRK.

<sup>82</sup> SDECE, 'Au sujet de M. Tidjani Traoré' #40442/N, 30 January 1961, DIMI 10T 704/1, SHD.

admitting that support for re-establishing the railroad did not necessarily mean collusion with Senegal, the Malian politicians were effectively acknowledging that the August 1960 plan to halt transborder railroad service stung Mali more than Senegal.<sup>83</sup>

Throughout the closed-border period, the railroad question coloured all political discussion in Kayes. Senegalese intelligence reports from the summer of 1961 indicate that enormous pressure was being put on Modibo Keita to do something about re-establishing a rail link. Geographically and politically, people in Kayes felt isolated from the rest of the country. The city's financial affairs suffered so greatly, that two wealthy merchants from the region proposed a plan in which Mali could solve its problems with the politically troublesome and administratively remote districts of Nioro and Kayes by transferring them to neighbouring Mauritania and Senegal.<sup>84</sup> National leaders worried that the growing number of public expressions of popular discontent in the region were tied to the government's inability to find employment for nearly half of the repatriated *cheminots* who left Senegal, while further insisting: 'the regionalist attitude in Kayes must be denounced and combated'.<sup>85</sup> And in Bafoulabé, Koli Sissoko's scandalized 100 National Assembly deputies by saying that the Cercle of Bafoulabé would be better off in Senegal.<sup>86</sup> Residents of Mali's westernmost cities grudgingly acknowledged the Senegalese assessment that Kayes was 'a state within the state' in Mali.<sup>87</sup>

As the US-RDA tightened its control over Malian politics, overt challenges to authority were tolerated less and less. The number of secret police reports from this

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<sup>83</sup> 'République du Mali', 28 February 1961, 5D 15, SRAS-Dakar.

<sup>84</sup> 'A/s République du Mali', 8 June 1961, 5D 15, SRAS-Dakar.

<sup>85</sup> US-RDA BPN, PV 21 March 1962, FO 77, ANM-H.

<sup>86</sup> Cercle Bafoulabé, Report, December 1964, p. 8, 1W67, AGRK.

<sup>87</sup> Sidibé Ibrahim to 'Mon Cher Sory', [early 1962], FBPN 239/857, ANM-H.

period testifies to the extent of the surveillance that Kayesian politics earned from the central government. When the contents of one report leaked to *cheminots* in the summer of 1962, police feared that the resulting public outcry over the practice would drive subversive political discussion further underground.<sup>88</sup>

Even after reconciliation with Senegal in 1963,<sup>89</sup> authorities in Mali viewed railroad travel with suspicion. While officials in Kayes said that relations between officials and civil servants in the Cercle were generally good, the head of the Ambidédi Arrondissement believed that the town's stationmaster should be kept under close watch.<sup>90</sup> The local Party branch complained that the customs service's request to stop all international passenger service stops at Ambidédi both undermined the city's functional role as an administrative centre and imposed an unnecessary burden on travel and communication between the westernmost towns along the railroad and the rest of the country.<sup>91</sup> In a 1964 union meeting, one *cheminot* complained: 'The city of Toukoto [...] is for me and for many of my comrades, our primary residence. Four local Customs agents in the train station spare no traveller in what they call the execution of their duty. They dig through all the luggage, registered or not, at arrival as well as at departure, no matter the destination or origin, be it within or beyond the borders of this country. [...] Thiémoko's widow [...] coming from Bamako and still in mourning, was victim of this abuse, much to the dismay of the people gathered around'.<sup>92</sup> In 1965 a police officer

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<sup>88</sup> Commissaire Police Kayes to GRK #109/C, 17 July 1962, 1W14, AGRK.

<sup>89</sup> Under the influence of the newly formed Organization of African Unity, Senghor and Modibo Keita met at the Senegal-Mali border in Kidira on 22 June 1963 to reopen the railroad and to sign a cooperation pact between the two states.

<sup>90</sup> Cercle Kayes, Rapport January-February 1964, RME 30, AMI.

<sup>91</sup> Sous-Section Ambidédi to Sec Gen US-RDA c/o Sec Gen BPL Kayes, 9 November 1964, FBPN 239/857, ANM-H.

<sup>92</sup> CFM Groupe Politique du MR, PV Assemblée General #28, 10 October 1964, p. 2 FBPN 224/736, ANM-H.

reported that an old woman, living in Kayes, had been reported at the Diboli station before reaching Kidira.<sup>93</sup> She had woven amulets in her hair and hidden within them the total sum of 30 010 Malian francs and 1 650 CFA francs. She had obtained a circulation permit from her son-in-law in order to travel from Kidira to Dakar.

By 1967, trains and stations served as sites for a growing number of internecine conflicts between state institutions and branches of the US-RDA, particularly the party militia that assumed an even more important role after the national government inaugurated its socialist ‘Active Revolution’ in 1967. Just as customs agents had upset *cheminots* in 1964, militia bands upset customs agents as well as railroad passengers by searching all trains from Bamako to the border and beyond, and relieving passengers of anything that they considered to be questionable. The railroad administration did not like this because it upset their clients. And the general population worried that the militia was taking over operations of certain state institutions like the railroad.<sup>94</sup>

In March 1967, US-RDA local sections along the railroad received a circular from Idrissa Diarra, the US-RDA national political secretary, warning them of a threat posed by a group of anonymous *cheminots* spreading political tracts and rumours that criticized the UNTM and the US-RDA and questioned the motives of politically active workers who defended either. Such paranoia was not limited to the railroad, but the railroad presented a special problem because it ‘brought into the open the real position of certain anti-party elements, camouflaged in the *cheminots*’ ranks, who plan to create a climate of social disorder’. The subversive threat came from *cheminots*’ ability to relocate themselves all over the line, organize meetings and take advantage of their networks.

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<sup>93</sup> Compte rendu de gendarmerie, G.I.G Kayes, 9 February 1965, 1W110, AGRK.

<sup>94</sup> ‘Action de la Milice au sein de certain services d’état’, 15 December 1967, FBPN 146/568, ANM-H.

Faced with such an egregious ‘violation of our Party’s principles of sacrifice and patriotism’, Diarra ordered local branches to keep watch all travel and political activity in station towns.<sup>95</sup> Later that year, public speeches by union leaders at Mali’s national *cheminot* conference all stressed the line’s economic importance to the country and the related obligations that *cheminots* needed to address: ‘the need to reinforce unity within the union and ideological training for the workers on the rail in order to prevent the return of certain hidden anti-revolutionary activities which had cast doubt on the *cheminots*’ revolutionary credentials and gravely compromised the railroad’s economic worth’.<sup>96</sup> While the central government clearly saw in some *cheminots*’ actions growing political threat and anti-national behaviour, one can wonder to what extent they were not just some of the few circumventing strategies experimented by Malian long-standing diasporic communities along the railroad in order to fight against top-down ascribed national identity and behaviours under an increasingly repressive political climate.

#### CONCLUSION: A CLAIM TO TRANSLOCAL BELONGING ALONG THE RAILROAD

Announcing the constitutive congress of the Republic of Mali’s national union of railroad workers on 26 September 1960, Mali’s state radio lamented the unilateral treason of Senegalese leaders Dia and Senghor, whose desire to leave the Federation had torn apart a ‘railroad brotherhood woven together over so many decades’.<sup>97</sup> But the broadcast had more resonance in the papered world of politics than in the railroad centres in the two

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<sup>95</sup> US-RDA BPN to BPL Bafoulabé, Kayes, Kita, and Koulikoro #12-Letter-Circulaire, 11 March 1967, Dossier ‘Affaires politiques du Cercle de Kayes et du Parti #7’, AC Kayes.

<sup>96</sup> IRT 1ère Région to Min Travail #57/IRT/K, 12 May 1967, CN 19, AGRK.

<sup>97</sup> Broadcast introduction, 26 September 1960, BK 26, ORTM Archives Soniques.

new states. Indeed, the Senegalese maxim *Kees-Kaay: benn dëkk, ñaari gaar* (Wolof: ‘Thiès and Kayes: one city with two train stations’) held true: The ties between the countries proved stronger than the animosity between the states. Even the history of 19-20 August published by Senghor’s and Dia’s government acknowledged the two countries’ strong ties. The authors emphasized Soudanese responsibility for the Federation’s collapse, while at the same time they insisted that the difference between the two countries was primarily political, counselling readers that Senegal would ‘wait for tempers to calm’ before talking to Keita’s government: ‘We refuse to cause irreparable damage to the Soudanese’ (République du Sénégal 1960: 30). If politicians in Bamako abandoned their dreams of restoring the Federation or punishing Senegal for leaving it, the Senegalese official counselled, then in Mali and in Senegal ‘children and grandchildren can again take up our ties of friendship and brotherhood that exists between these two peoples so closely related [*deux peuples frères*]’.<sup>98</sup>

Such ties were closest along the railroad, including among people who, while not railroad employees themselves, benefitted economically and socially from the railway. Sitting in his home’s courtyard across the tracks from the Mahina train station, Mamadou Diakité recalled his ‘return’ to the Republic of Mali as a move that was both unproblematic and fraught with danger. Born in Senegal to a *cheminot* from Mahina and the daughter of migrant farmers who left the Niger River valley to settle in Senegal’s peanut basin, Diakité spent most of his first 30 years in Senegal, but relocated to Mali in 1962 at the request of his repatriated father. Except for his midnight border crossing—where Senegalese guards alternately coaxed him back to the riverbank and shot at his

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<sup>98</sup> ‘Entretien avec les autorités Sénégalaises à TAMBA le 28-2-61’, 28 February 1961, ANM-H FBPN 88/300.

truck—the voyage was uneventful. Arriving in Kayes, Diakité’s father arranged for *cheminot* friends to ship him and the truck to the family home in Mahina. Over the next year, Diakité and his three brothers travelled between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Côte d’Ivoire, driving the truck as small-scale, working a series of odd jobs, and enduring the material and moral challenges that come with life away from home. ‘*Tunḡa man lambe lon*’, he said, repeating the Xaasonga adage that exile knows no dignity. Bandits preyed on travellers along Burkina Faso’s roads and tales of sorcery and cannibalism terrified migrant farmhands in Côte d’Ivoire, but in Diakité’s story, people in Mali and Senegal lived safe from these threats. This sense of tranquillity infused his whole narrative. As of 2009, all four brothers had settled between Mahina and Toukoto, and none of them stray far from the line. The railroad, Diakité explained, was their dignity: ‘*anw ka danbe de dòn*’.<sup>99</sup> Having faced the privations of life abroad, the four Diakité brothers had chosen to guard their honour by staying close to the railroad.

Relocation along the rails over generations engendered change within a socially and culturally acceptable continuum. Sissokos and Sakilibas moving from Soudan settled in Wolofophone western Senegal as Guèyes; Falls and Coulibalys could alternate their family names based on local linguistic practices, political considerations, and personal inclinations.<sup>100</sup> In the colonial period, migrants from Soudan and the upper Senegal River valley entered the administrative record having changed their Mande and Fulbe names to local Wolof forms (Pheffer 1975: 312). Some changed them back again during the

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<sup>99</sup> Interview by Brandon County: Mamadou Diakité, 20 January 2009, Mahina (Mahina 3e), Mali.

<sup>100</sup> Interview by Marie Rodet: Arouna Fall/Coulibaly, 9 July 2009, Kobongoye, Senegal; interviews by Brandon County : Maciré Coulibaly, 22 July 2007, Thiès (Diamaguène), Senegal; Arouna Fall, 26 December 2008, Markala (Diamarabougou), Mali; Amadou ‘Nsònsòn’ Guèye, 5 July 2009, Guinguineo (Kanène), Senegal.



Soudanese ascendancy in Mali Federation politics (Foltz 1965: 149). And some changed only after being expelled from Senegal. Other migrants stubbornly refused to change. ‘Beninese Keitas, Ivoirian or Guinean Diops, Malian Guèyes’ across the territory of the former French West Africa and particularly across its now-international borders, shaped diasporic communities, continuing in some cases calling Mali their ‘homeland’ despite having never visited the country of their ancestors (Keita 1983: 54).

Anthropologist Bruce Whitehouse describes the Mande idea of ‘dignity’ (Bamana: *danbe*; Xaasonga: *lambe*) as a ‘place-bound attribute, inextricably linked with local social hierarchies and family histories’ (Whitehouse 2012: 21). Dignity is lost in exile because travelers move alone—sometimes in groups—away from the people who give shape to the hierarchies and away from societies where their histories have meaning. Another Mande proverb emphasizes the productive role of place in the concept of dignity. *Woloyòrò mòyòrò bè danbe dafa*, ‘A place to be born and grow old brings dignity.’ Dignity is produced in space, and a dignified life can only be lived in this space (Bailleul 2005: 324). For cheminots—railroad workers as well as family members like Diakité—‘the railroad’ is a space produced by railroad-specific conceptions of genealogy and administration, the perceptions of socially important work, and the rhythms of lived experience that were only possible with the comings and goings of the trains. With the collapse of the Mali Federation in 1960, these conceived, perceived, and life spaces all clashed with hardening national cartographies. As Diakité suggested, exile knows no dignity, but some of these communities found their dignity in the railroad as the backbone of their diasporic identity. Moving from Mali to Senegal was not an ‘exile’, nor was the reverse necessarily a ‘return’. As long as the trains circulated, the international

border only marked the difference between two states, but could not fundamentally disrupt the long-standing cultural continuum along the railroad.

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