

Liberal Democracy in an Illiberal Context: the logic of neo-patrimonial democracy in the Sahel

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## **Introduction**

This paper examines the performance of liberal democratic institutions that are implemented in an illiberal context. It addresses the question of why liberal democracy, as it is implemented in the Sahelian countries, failed to produce resilient institutions capable of preventing state collapse. The paper is essentially theoretical. The puzzle that it addresses, however, stems from the empirical study of the emergence of the Islamic insurgency that led to the defeat of the state of Mali, which is the most democratic country in the region, whereas the less democratic countries, namely Niger and Mauritania, proved more resilient. This contrast challenges the core assumptions about liberal democracy; that not only it prevents the emergence of conflicts, but that the resilience of its institutions constitute the more effective tool for facing and handling conflict when it emerges (Robinson and Staatz, 2000).

The central argument of the paper is that liberal democracy failed to function properly in the Sahelien context because of the disjuncture between the formal liberal democratic institutions imported from the western political experience, and the informal institutions, namely the local culture, values, norms and traditions of the sahelien societies. Yet, formal and informal institutions are not static and hermetically compartmented structures. To the contrary, in their daily struggle to adjust to changes, Sahelien people engage both formal liberal democratic institutions and informal local institutions in a constant process of adaptation and re-adaptation that leads to the merging of both in the form of a hybrid political system that at the end is neither totally liberal democracy in its western understanding, nor the traditional African political system, but a messy combination of both. Therefore, behind the façade of a working liberal democracy, the institutions that emerged from this syncretism are those characterized by neopatrimonialism, and which Bratton (1997: 235) calls "delegative democracy". This means a political system that has a large modern bureaucracy, and in which officials got elected in more or less free elections, but nevertheless relies on primordial rather than civic networks of support and political mobilization, and in which the system of governance is essentially based on patronage and "big men" politics. These are the hybrid type of institutions that developed in Mali, Niger, and Mauritania, as a result of twenty years of institutional syncretism; maybe more in Mali than in the other two countries. They suffer of an increasing deficit of legitimacy in the eye of the grassroots population, making them the target of a growing level of contention. They also lack efficacy in terms of maintaining state authority, particularly in Mali where they easily

collapsed under the assaults of the Islamic insurgents.

Not all democracies are concerned in this paper. Only liberal democracy as it is implemented in the Sahelian countries, starting from the early 1990s counts for the argument of this paper. The theory of liberal democracy is drawn from the realm of western historical experience and intellectual tradition. Its core premises are individualism, secularism, electoral competition, and free market economy. These premises are antithetical to the dominant Sahelian culture, values and traditions, which are based on communitarianism, spiritualism, consensus and the “economy of affection”<sup>1</sup>. The imposition of Liberal democratic institution in this illiberal context of the Sahelian societies is followed by an effort by the local population to adapt to the new changes. Through their constant effort of adaptation and re-adaptation people end up syncretizing the formal imposed institutions with the informal existing ones. The result is that the formal liberal democratic institutions become “only partially established”. They are in Galvan’s terms “like broken pieces, shards of modernity, usable in fragmentary ways to mobilize political groups, pattern relations, organize power” (Galvan 2004: 4) As such, they fail to function according to the standard “universal” principle.

This paper first and foremost challenges the idea of the universal applicability of liberal democracy that is very dear to modernization theorists. It makes the case that culture matters in the functioning of any political system. Yet, it does not dismiss the importance of formal institutions. It argues that far from being dichotomous, culture and formal institutions are two different layers of the same institutional structure. In other words, in order for an institution to work properly, there is a need of congruence between its administrative structures and formal rule, on the one hand, and the informal rules, beliefs, and habits that undergird its social relations. Every time that a new institutions is introduced in a society, the local population start struggling to make sense of it in their context. They try to appropriate its meaning and adapt their behavior to cope with it. They do all these by drawing from the matrix of local culture and values that governs social relations.

This argument is neither teleological nor essentialist. It does not imply that people’s effort to adapt new institutions to local reality follow a developmental pattern that leads toward a specific goal, such as achieving a higher stage of democratization. Nor, does it consider the disjuncture between formal and informal institutions and the process of institutional syncretism

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<sup>1</sup> The economy of affection is concept developed by Goran Hyden, 2011.

are specific to Africa. Studies of political institutions in other places in the world have revealed the same phenomenon.<sup>2</sup>

The paper is structured in three major parts: I first examine the formal and informal institutions, digging deep in the history of their geneses and evolutions across time. The second section analyzes the disjuncture between these formal and informal institutions. And the third section examines the process of institutional syncretism and the hybrid institutions that result from it.

### **The outbreak of the Islamic Insurgency in the Sahel and the collapse of Mali**

The third wave of democratization reached the Sahel region in the early 1990s. The end of the Cold War rivalry, the economic depression of the 1980s, and the surge of social movements in Africa combined together to imposed the necessity of change of political systems in Africa. Political and economic liberalization were advanced as the antidotes of the economic crisis, and political violence besetting the continent. The implementation of liberal democracy was required based on certain assumptions: (1) Liberal Democracy is inherently stable, because even if people come to disagree with the regime in place, they will be given regular chances to change those in power; (2) elections brings people to participate in political decision making, therefore the winner of the aggregate majority of vote wins the legitimacy; (3) democracy promote economic development; (4) discontents can be channeled through formal democratic institutions such as the parliament and addressed peacefully and effectively; (5) liberal democracy promotes the protection of freedom, equality and the rule of law.

It is assumed that the routinization of the liberal democratic process through elections will permit the entrenchment of these values, favoring the spread of prosperity and preventing the outbreak of conflicts. Even in the case of an outbreak of conflict, the assumption is that resilient democratic institutions will enable the state to overcome it with lesser cost than any other undemocratic political system.

Since April 2012, however, the course of events that have been happening in the Sahel region seem to contradict these assumptions.

On February 15, 2011, four days after the fall of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and a month after the exile of President Ben Ali from Tunisia, the wind of the “Arab Spring” blew into

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<sup>2</sup> In his book, *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context*, Bell, Daniel A. (2006) analyses similar patterns of Liberal democracy as it is implemented in China

Libya. Protests started in Benghazi - the eastern region on the border with Egypt - and then spread progressively throughout the country. Unlike in the case of the two deposed Presidents, Qaddafi had the support of the Libyan security forces and decided to use them to crackdown on the protestors. The situation turned into a civil war opposing Libyan security forces loyal to Qaddafi and the rebels supported by international forces. Both parties recruited mercenaries from all over the world. Qaddafi forces recruited massively among the Tuareg in Mali and Niger whereas the Libyan rebels recruited among the Toubous in Chad and Niger. The defeat of Qaddafi forces in November 2010 occasioned a massive dispersal of weapons and heavily armed and well trained mercenaries into the Sahel region, which was already threatened by sporadic Tuareg separatist rebellions and a spillover of the Algerian Islamist terrorism.

The three Sahelian countries at the frontline of the looming crisis were Mali, Niger and Mauritania. These countries share some commonalities: They all share the same socio-historical realities<sup>3</sup>; they count among the poorest countries in the world, they all go through ethno racial tensions, and they all engaged in a democratization process - though with varying success - in the early 1990s. All indicators pointed Niger as the most vulnerable country among the three, and for multiple reasons: Niger shares border with both Libya and Algeria - they eyes of the storms; it has the biggest Tuareg community in the region, and most importantly, Niger was politically unstable. Since the democratization process started in 1991 Niger has gone through 3 military coups (the last one in 2010), passed from the 2nd to the 7th Republic, and changed its institutional system seven times (Idrissa, 2008).<sup>4</sup> Mauritania also showed serious signs of vulnerability: (1) it was the first Sahelian country to suffer a major terrorist attack resulting from the spillover of the Algerian Islamic Insurgency to the Sahel region; (2) It is also the first country to develop urban cells of jihadists composed almost exclusively of Mauritania; (3) Mauritania is suspected to be the biggest supplier of Mujahedeen to the insurgent groups in the Sahel after Algeria. In addition, Mauritania could not count on a stable regime and democratic institutions in the capital to counter the massive insecurity threat to the country. Since the 1970s, in fact, Mauritania has been governed by military regimes that use democratization rhetoric to cover their authoritarian nature. The only real experience of democracy in Mauritania was the 18-

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<sup>3</sup> Niger, Mali and Mauritania are part of the Western Sudan territory that was populated by Empires and Kingdoms that controlled all or parts of their current territories. They were all three colonized by France and were parts of the Francophone West Africa during colonization. Finally, they all have similar ethno-racial configurations.

<sup>4</sup> Kimba Idrissa, 2008, *Armee et Politique au Niger*, CODESRIA, Senegal.

months civilian regime between April 2007 and August 2008. Mali appeared as the less vulnerable country in the region. Although it faces the same security challenges coming from the Sahara, Malian institutions were deemed strong enough to counter the threat. Mali was in fact - comparatively - considered the most democratic country the region. It had 20 years of uninterrupted democratic process, two presidents each elected for two terms, and a peaceful, democratic transition of power. Until 2013, Freedom House has always rated Mali higher than any other country in the region. These unprecedented democratic records earned Mali the labels of the “model of democratic success” or the “laboratory of a successful democracy”<sup>5</sup>.

When the 2012 crisis of Islamic insurgency broke out, however, only Mali collapsed. Mauritania won the battle over the jihadists and succeeded in expelling the threat out of its territory. Niger remained an island of stability in the sense that it prevented the establishment of cells of jihadist inside its territory. But, in Mali, the insurgent succeeded easily in defeating the Malian army and occupied 2/3 of the Malian territory. A military coup in the capital city Bamako followed. The state authority collapsed to the extent that angry demonstrators could reach to the Presidential palace and beat up the interim President Dionkounda Traore.<sup>6</sup> At some point, important decisions concerning Mali had to be decided by the regional organization ECOWAS and France.<sup>7</sup>

These events challenge the liberal democratic promises in the sense that not only conflict emerged in the most democratic country in the Sahel region, but most importantly, the liberal democratic institutions that were deemed resilient, collapsed easily in the face of the crisis. This narrative raises at least one of the following challenges to liberal democratic theory: (1) Either the institutions that emerged empirically in the Sahel region in general, and in Mali in particular, were not truly democratic, or (2) the assumption that liberal democracy produces good and resilient institutions capable of preventing conflict and state collapse is wrong.

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<sup>5</sup> Thurston, A 2013 Mali: The Disintegration of a “Model African Democracy”. *Stability*, 2(1): 2, pp. 1-7, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/sta.aq>; Morton H. Halperin, Joseph T. Siegle, Michael M. Weinstein, 2010, *The Democracy Advantage: How Democracies Promote Prosperity and Peace*, Routledge; R. James Bingen David Robinson, John M. Staats, 2000, *Democracy and Development in Mali*, Michigan State University Press; Susanna D. Wing, 2008, *Constructing Democracy in Transitioning Societies of Africa*, Palgrave MacMillan

<sup>6</sup> Francetv info, Mali : le président Traoré "tabassé" par des manifestants à son bureau, 21/05/2012 [http://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/mali/mali-le-president-traore-tabasse-par-des-manifestants-a-son-bureau\\_97801.html](http://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/mali/mali-le-president-traore-tabasse-par-des-manifestants-a-son-bureau_97801.html)

<sup>7</sup> JeuneAfrique, Coup d'Etat au Mali: la Cedeao brandit la menace d'un embargo "diplomatique et financier", 30/03/2012 <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20120330090547/>

My puzzle relates, therefore, to the normative claim that considers liberal democracy as a “universal good”, the ultimate political system that every society ought to implement regardless of its context. Against this claim, I argue that context matters, to the extent that, when liberal democracy is implemented in an illiberal context, the result is likely to be a hybrid political system that is neither democratic nor the existing political system but a combination of both. I will make this argument using the theoretical framework of institutional syncretism developed by Dennis Galvan (2004).

### **Culture, Institutions and Institutional Syncretism: A theory of institutional continuity in Africa**

Include debate between rational choice theory, Institutional theory and Cultural theory (See note for Af Politics class on religion writing on odd pages of the syllabus)

Most theories of Political Science that treated questions related to culture and institutions have approached them in a dichotomous terms; it is either culture or institution. In this paper, and inspiring from the work of Denis Galvan (2004), I consider culture and institution not as dichotomous but as different and complementary layers of the same structure.

#### *Culture versus institution: theoretical debates*

This paper addresses several debates in the broader discipline of Political Science, as well as in the sub-discipline of African of politics. One of the major debate within the discipline Political Science revolves around the question: which of the political culture and political institution determines the proper functioning of a democratic political system?

On the one hand, building on Tocqueville’s tradition, the civic culture theory contends that the political culture is the fundamental factor that determines the proper functioning of democracy. It argues that democracy works well in societies that have developed higher level of civic engagement and social capital, whereas societies that have parochial culture and low social capital suffer of a deficit of democratic performance. Thus, according to this view, culture determines the performance of institutions (Tocqueville, 1841; Almond and Verba, Putnam, 1993; 2000; Lesli Anderson 2010) On the other side, the institutionalist tendency argues that the success of the democratic political system depends on a wise crafting of political institutions, notably the political parties, constitutions, states structures, electoral systems. This trend claims that institutions shape and fixe political culture, not the other way around (Huntington, 1968; Sartori, 1994; Bunce, 1999). In relation to our topic, the political culture literature would argue

that liberal democracy failed to function properly in Africa because African culture is parochial and un-civic; whereas the institutionalist literature would argue that the failure of democracy in Africa comes as a result of the lack of entrenchment of the right institutions.

Another debate opposes modernization theorists, on the one hand, and critical theorists, on the other hand. According to the modernization theory each society can develop gradually from traditionalism to modernity, following similar paths as today's modern countries. This argument goes in line with the belief in the ability of scientific knowledge and its technological application to improve mankind's material and moral conditions (Wolin, 2004: 504). Following this view, positivist scholars devote their intellectual enterprise to discovering scientific laws and principles according to which human societies function; and which once understood and applied, can help develop or modernize societies. One can assume that the implementation of liberal democracy in the Sahelian countries followed this modernization and positivist logic.<sup>8</sup> On the other side, critical theorist, postmodernist and poststructuralist scholars criticize the modernization theory for its overemphasis on scientific solutions to social and political problem and its tendency to downplay the importance of context. Habermas (1970, chap. 6) claims that "by reducing practical questions about the good life to technical problems for experts, contemporary elites eliminate the need for public, democratic discussion of values, thereby depoliticizing the population". This argument builds on the interpretivist epistemology, which considers knowledge as context-dependent. It depends on history, society, ideas and language, which influence both our observation of patterns but also determine the concepts we use to explain and understand these patterns. "Knowledge is always somebody's knowledge (Moses and Knutsen, 2007). The implication of this argument on our topic is that, the implementation of liberal democracy in the Sahel did not take into account the specific cultural context of the Sahelian societies.

Talking about the importance of context, the debate among scholars of African politics have revolved around the question of whether Africa, because of its particular traditions, culture

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<sup>8</sup> Liberal democracy itself is based on Cartesian and Newtonian assumptions that human beings are primarily material beings, individualistic and self-interested (Barber, 2003). From this knowledge of the universal human being is deducted universal values, norms and laws – such as, all people are created equal for example - which liberal democracy is supposed to protect in order to create a good society. Second, since the principle of liberal democracy is scientifically deducted, it becomes, therefore, context-independent, meaning, it can be mechanically implemented in every society irrespective of context and still have it work and produce the intended outcomes.



and values as well as its short and, comparatively, recent history of colonialism, presents exceptional political realities that defies the existing theoretical framework of analysis. Or, whether politics in the postcolonial Africa is not as much different from other parts of world, since postcolonial states in Africa are weberian states just like any other states in the world, having all similar organization, opportunities and challenges. Related to this debate is another one about the impact of colonialism and the extent to which it determined African politics. And the debate about who detained political legitimacy, modernization theorists argue that democracy bestows political legitimacy, whereas culturalists claim that chiefs are the real custodian of political legitimacy. Nugent (2012: 9) argues that “politicians have courted chiefs to gain legitimacy” (Goran Hyden 2011, Patrick Chabal 1992<sup>9</sup>, and Herbst 2000<sup>10</sup>; Nugent 2012)

My argument depart from these theories in one crucial aspect. In their analysis of social realities, social scientists have a tendency to create compartmented and isolated categories that they very often report in dichotomous terms – either culture or institutions, modern or traditional, structure or agency, positivist or interpretivist, etc. I argue that while it may be theoretically useful to create such categories, the fact should be stressed that social realities are more blended and amalgamated than the categories usually reflect. As the argument of this paper shows, it is sometimes better to approach these realities as interactive, and syncretic rather than isolated, and dichotomous. Another critique related to the binomial approach is that the analysis of democracy and the performance of its institutions focuses usually on formal institutions only. My argument tries to draw attention to the overshadowed informal institutions and their ability to consolidate or disrupt the working of the formal institutions. I am basically arguing that while we put more emphasis on formal institutions, the problem of democracy may actually come from the informal institutions that are very often neglected. In this paper, I disentangle the concept of *institution* and examine its internal structure and functioning, asking the question, what are the mechanism under which an institution work properly and yield to the expected outcome?

*The theory of Institutional syncretism*

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<sup>9</sup> Chabbal, Patrick, 1992. Power in Africa: An essay in Political Interpretation. London: MacMillan.

<sup>10</sup> Herbst, Jeffrey 2000. State and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

The concept of institution is very central in social science and its definition has been subject of a lot of controversy. In this analysis I use the definition provided by Galvan (2003) which breaks down the concept into two constitutive elements: On the one hand, the formal structure which is composed of the administrative structure (e.g. political parties, the electoral commissions, and the parliament) and the formal rules (e.g. the constitution, the electoral code). On the other hand, the culture, the local values, norms and beliefs, the habituated forms of action. Therefore, as Galvan (2003: 18) puts it “institutions and institutionalized practices do not exist simply as rules and rule arrangements (whether formally codified or not), nor are they reducible to administrative entities. They draw support from, are embedded in, and are in part

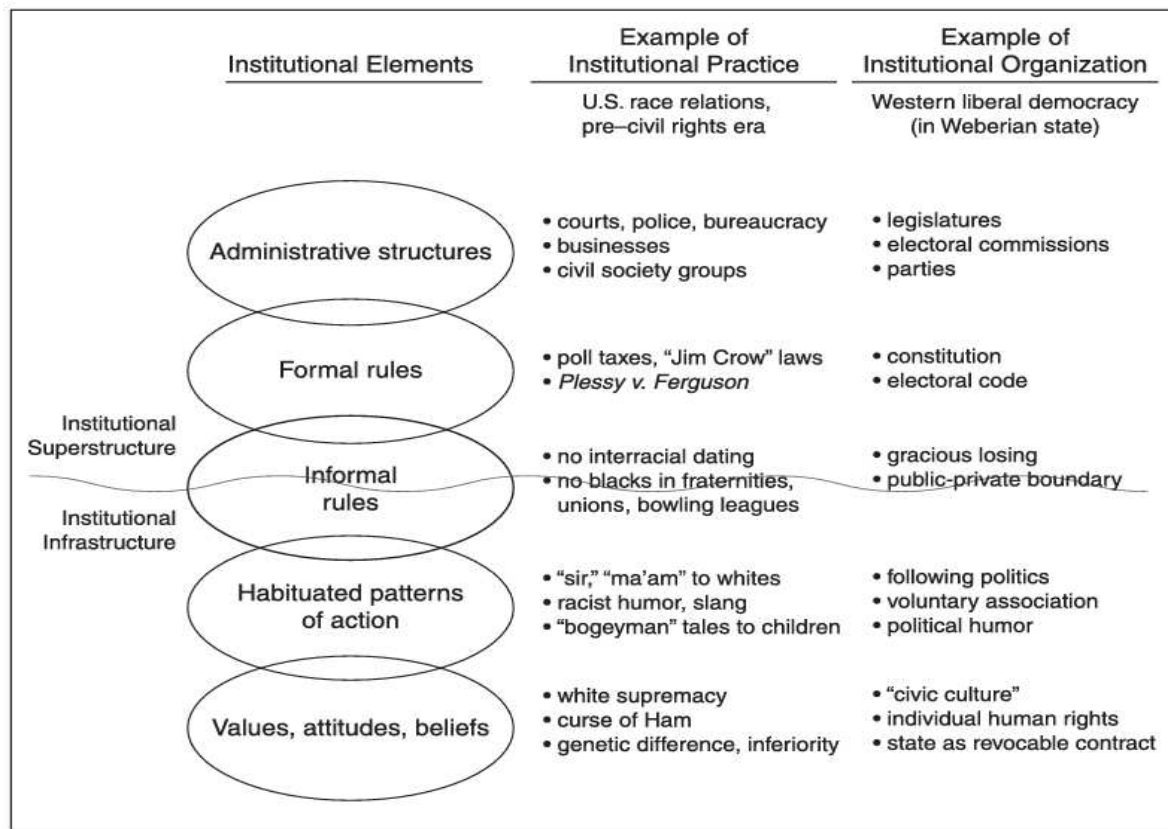


Figure 2. Examples of the layered nature of institutional practices and institutional organizations.

constituted by their embeddedness in culture, understood as values, habituated patterns of action, and informal rules.” Thus, in order for institutions to work properly, there is a need of congruence between the formal institutions itself and the culture, values and norms in which it

operates.

I suggest that the great mistake of the modernization theory - which inspires the imposition of liberal democracy in non-western context in general - lies in its overlooking of the importance of the informal rules in the functioning of institutions. The modernization theory as Galvan emphasizes it believes that “a deliberate, planned reformulation of formal organizations and rules that is designed to achieve “progressive” or “desirable” goals (from the point of view of the planner) can and will entail a natural and corresponding adjustment of the informal infrastructural or, below the waterline, elements of institutional practice” (Galvan 2003: 19).

This is not an argument that subjugates agency to the tyranny of structures. Quite to the contrary, I argue that institutions are not static; they are rather “dynamic, evolving entities”<sup>11</sup>. In fact, the culture, values and norms that constitutes the informal rules are not “given”. They are the product of social actors’ construction and reconstruction of their realities. This process is better understood through Giddens’ concept of “duality of structure”<sup>12</sup> (1984): on the one hand, local culture, values and norms of the society have constraining power over social actors’ behavior, while at the same time these culture and values derive from social actors’ constant struggle to refashion cultural principles to suit their interests”. In their daily life, people experience changes introduced to them by new phenomena such as change in their ecosystem, demographic growth, natural disasters, or by new ideas like religious beliefs, ideologies, values, or by new social and political institutions. Actors try to get the maximum advantages that they could from the new changes. Their range of choices, however are constrained by the limits drawn by the culture, norms and value of the societies. What follow is the actors’ struggle to adapt the changes to local context, culture and value in the way that serves their best interest. The process of adaptation is continuous. People uninterruptedly construct and reconstruct their own reality in the way that it is advantageous for them but in order to cope with the new elements introduced to their culture and values. New elements of change are easily adaptable or not, based on their congruence or proximity to the local realities. Certain elements of change are easily adaptable because of their proximity to the existing values and norms while others are resisted because of their remoteness to those values. The existing informal rules derive from previous adaption to changes; in other words, form previous institutional syncretism.

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<sup>11</sup> The terms are from Galvan.

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How does this theory apply to Liberal democratic institution in the Sahelian context?

### **Informal African institutions and Formal liberal democratic institutions**

The easiest distinction between formal and informal institutions is that the formal refers to the state's institutions whereas the informal refer to non-state institutions, such as cultures, values, norms... Some of what are considered informal institutions today were Africa's formal institutions during the precolonial era. For instance, Chieftaincy, the Council of Elders, and the Qadis in precolonial Sahel, stand respectively in place of Executive, the Parliament and the Judiciary. The process of state building that started during the colonial era replaced these traditional institutions with the current modern states institutions, putting the old ones in the background. We should admit, however, that the distinction between formal and informal is much blurred than the definition above suggests. In this section, I give the history of the genesis and evolutions of these institutions.

#### *Informal institutions: African cultures, values and norms*

The history of the Sahelian culture and traditions can be categorized in three major historical moments: (1) the period prior to 15<sup>th</sup> century characterized by the ancient animist culture (2) the period of Islamization that started from the 15<sup>th</sup> century and accelerated during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, characterized by increasing syncretism between ancient animism and Islamic culture; (3) the period of French colonialism and the creation of the states, which started from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and continues to the present. It is characterized by syncretism between the existing culture – which is a result of the previous syncretism of Islamic and ancient African culture – and the western culture and values introduced by colonialism.

#### Pre-Islamization culture and tradition in the Sahel region

The territory that became the Sahel region was part of the Western Soudan before colonialism. Prior to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, this territory was the home of the Empire of Ghana, the Empire of Songhai and the Hausa kingdoms. The sociopolitical organization of ancient Sahelian societies was characterized by two fundamental aspects: the communal organization of societies and the centrality of religion. First, the social organization of ancient Sahelian societies follows the system of lineages. Members of each lineage are unified by their linkage to one common ancestors. Lineage can be narrow to the limit of one extended family or large to the level of

tribes.<sup>13</sup> The societies function on a system of caste where lineages are divided into freeborn nobles, freeborn non-noble, slaves, franchised slaves, etc. and each lineage is specialized in one professional activity (i.e. lineages of griots, blacksmiths, warriors, nobility, and royalty). The role of the individual in the society is determined by his lineage of origin, in the sense that a slave descendant is born slave and will remain so, unless he is franchised by an external circumstance; likewise, the descent of a blacksmith lineage will exercise the profession of his ancestor. (Martin, 2012; Galvan, 2003) Second, religion is very important in the ancient African societies. Despite the diversity of religious traditions, there are some common characteristics: “they are oral rather than scriptural, include belief in a supreme being, belief in spirits and other divinities, particularly the veneration of ancestors, the use of magic, and traditional medicine”<sup>14</sup>. A lineage is constituted of the current member of the lineage but also the ancestors who not only symbolize the unity and the glory of the lineage but also the spirit and gods who provide protection and prosperity to the lineage.

The communal organization and the centrality of religion determined the political and institutional organization of ancient Sahelian societies. Apart of being a unified social unit, each lineage constituted also a political unit headed by the eldest person of the group. The elder, or the patriarch embodies the political as well as the religious authority of the group. The elder assure the continuity between these two world: temporal and the spiritual. He draws his legitimacy from the ancestors. Land constitutes the most important property, and it belongs to the ancestors who protects and fertilizes it. The patriarch, being the representative of the ancestors becomes the legitimate custodian of the land and he divides it according to the law of inheritance. While the patriarch enjoys a lot of power, he is not supposed to be a despot (Martin, 2012). Decision are supposed to be just and consensual. Lineage are grouped into villages and villages into kingdoms. Authority is much decentralized; villages appear as quasi autonomous from the kingdoms. Political institutions are composed, first, of the village assemblies “where major decisions concerning the society were adopted and ordinary people were able to express their opinions, have their voices heard, and actively participate in a political decision-making” (Martin, 2012). Second, the Inner or Privy Council represented the aristocratic clans and is

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<sup>13</sup> Dr. Susan J. Herlin, 2003 Ancient African Civilizations To Ca. 1500  
<http://wysinger.homestead.com/africanhistory.html>

<sup>14</sup> Molefi Asante, 2009 Encyclopedia of African Religion (Sage, 2009); and BBC, The Story of Africa,  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/index\\_section6.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/index_section6.shtml);

constituted of people in the inner circle of the chief: relatives, friends, and prominent members of the community (Martin, Ibid). The chief is bound by custom to act only on the advice of his council, or otherwise run the risk of being deposed. This could be very difficult to happen because the members of the inner circle are appointed by the king and he could dismiss them. The Council of elders, on the other hand, is composed of the elders of the “non-aristocratic lineages and the commoners, and thus could not be dismissed by the chief. This body reached its decisions by consensus” (Martin, Ibid).

#### The period of Islamization and cultural syncretism

The ancient socio political organization that characterized the Sahelian ancient empires and kingdoms started changing with the introduction of Islam. Islamic religion started playing a major role in politics when at the end of the 15th century, Askia Muhammad - the founder of the Askia dynasty in the Songhay Empire - requested the advice of Al-Maghili – an Algerian Islamic cleric - on view to transforming the government of the Songhay Empire along the lines of Sunni orthodoxy. During that period, Al-Maghili developed a body of work under a title of *On The Obligations of Princes* that addressed both to the Songhay sovereign and to the Hausa kings (A. Idrissa 2009: 38). These works were written in a form of constitutional treatise that “laid down details of administration, court procedures, defense and foreign policy. In brief its main focus is answering the question of how best a state could be administrated (Muhammad, 2004). El Maghili’s political theory roughly recommends that the emperor apply strict Islamic laws in administering the political and economic affairs of the empire.

The influence of Al-Maghili’s political theory receded during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and then regained force with the vague of the Sufi Islamic revolutions that swept the region in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. These revolutions established political systems based on the Sharia rule and accelerated the process of massive Islamization of societies (A. Idrissa; 2009). Islamic values and ideas of governance influenced indigenous African values and ideas on power and governance. A process of cultural and institutional syncretism between indigenous sociopolitical systems and the Islamic culture and values developed during the subsequent centuries. The proximity between the two systems of life, particularly the preeminence of the spirit of community and spirituality in both Islamic and African traditional systems of life helped facilitate the process of syncretism. Today Sahelian culture has become too much syncretized that it has become hard to distinguish between the Islamic from the African traditional and

animist part of it.

### Colonialism and the birth of two publics

The French colonial power that controlled the Sahel region, strived to implement new liberal ideals in place of the existing institutions. In place of the politico-religious system of governance, the colonizers imposed secular states.<sup>15</sup> The clerics had to either collaborate with the “infidel” colonizers or be put under tight control. The religious law were systematically replaced by French positive law, except in issues regarding family where contenders were allowed to refer to traditional courts. The subsistence farming was transformed into cash crop farming. Modern educational and health care system replaced the traditional schools and traditional medicine. New, modern elites emerged to replace the traditional chiefs, clerics, and sorcerers. In the new system, one becomes elites not by inheritance, but by attending colonial school, and pursuing high education in France. These westernized elites became the heirs of the colonizers after independence. They pursued the process of modernization started by the colonizers. They were, in many cases, even harsher than the colonizers in dismissing the traditional authorities and exercising tight control over religious leaders, and organizations. Yet traditional institutions and culture survived the onslaught of colonialism and post-colonial politics of modernization. Although as informal institutions they remained on the background of politics, their role has been determinant in the functioning of the political systems. Nugent (2012: 9) claims that chiefs are still the real custodian of political legitimacy in Africa and that “politicians have courted chiefs to gain legitimacy”. In reality, since colonialism, political system has never function in the margin of the informal institutions. The history of colonialism is usually regarded as either a break or a continuity with the precolonial period. But in reality, the period of colonialism was a period of struggle by both chiefs and the colonizers to adapt to the new context that each of them had to face. In this interactive effort to adapt, the chief struggled to deal on the daily basis with the requirements of the colonial administration whereas the colonizers on his end struggle to adapt to the local context in order not to overtly upset the local population. As a result hybrid form of government emerged in which chiefs and colons assumed each certain responsibilities. The same could be say regarding the post-colonial era.

### *Formal institution of Liberal democracy in the Sahel region*

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<sup>15</sup> Although chiefs were maintained, in most cases, they were reduced simple agents of the administration, subjugated to the authority of the colonial administration (Young 2012; Nugent 2012)

### Liberal democracy as an emanation of western political and intellectual tradition

Huntington (1968: 9) “America was born with a government, with political institutions and practices imported from 17<sup>th</sup> century England. Hence Americans never had to worry about creating a government. This gap in historical experience made them peculiarly blind to the problem of creating effective authority in modernizing countries. When an American thinks about the problem of government-building, he directs himself not to the creation of authority and accumulation of power but rather to the limitation of authority and the division of power. Asked to design a government, he comes up with a written constitution, bill of rights, separation of powers, checks and balances, federalism, regular elections, competitive parties – all excellent devices for limiting government... in many modernizing societies this formula is irrelevant. The primary problem is not liberty but the creation of a legitimate public order. Authority as to exist in order to be limited.”

Liberal democracy is a political system that privileges the interest and wellbeing of the individuals over that of the community. Liberalism that constitutes its backbone emerged out of the context of politico-religious and intellectual contentions of the Renaissance and the Reformation in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Both the renaissance and the reformation movements developed from a critique of the feudal and baronial structure of the medieval European society, as well as from the view of the Catholic Church as an oppressive ruling order (Spellman, 2011: 1). “In the Middle Ages the rights and responsibilities of the individual were determined by his place in a hierarchical social system that placed great stress upon acquiescence and conformity” (Encyclopedia Britannica<sup>16</sup>). These theoretical structures underlays a deeply inegalitarian social order, where a privileged and parasitic few extracted agrarian surplus from a numerous and oppressed rural labor force. As religion and feudalism became politically dirty words with the advent of Enlightenment and social revolutions, the notion of community became also theoretically undesirable. The fundamental issue being raised was in Wolin’s terms ( 215-6) “On what basis the practice of government be conducted once the society was no longer a community?” Would societies better achieve the good life by achieving the well-being of the individuals or that of the community? The dismissal of religion as the foundation of the political order led to the dismissal of the community as the basis of political units (Spillmann, Ibid.).

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<sup>16</sup> "liberalism." Encyclopaedia Britannica. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2014. Web. 01 Jan. 2014. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/339173/liberalism>>.



Social contract theory and natural rights theory developed notably by Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, provided an alternative political theories for the new social order. Contrary to the communitarian view of the Christian political theory, these authors placed the individual at the center of attention. Liberalism became the doctrine of modern political philosophy, stressing the interest of the individual, particularly his right and freedom, over that of the community or the state.

Liberal theory argues in favor of a limited government. Liberalists consider government as “a necessary evil”, meaning that government is necessary only to protect individuals from each other. But they warn against the fact that government is a threat for freedom and liberty in itself. This contrast raises one of the greatest dilemma of liberalism: how to unite between individual freedom and state power? According to Barber, most liberalists including Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Mills, Berlin, Dahl, Laswell have understood freedom and power as mutually exclusive. (Barber 2003: 35) The challenge for liberalism was, therefore, to conceptualize a political system that gives government the power necessary to protect individual liberties while preventing those who govern from abusing power. Liberal democracy was crafted in order to offer the solution to that dilemma by limiting the power of the state over the individuals through three devices: first, the separation of power between the executive, the parliamentary, and the judiciary, the periodic elections, and the commitment to freedoms (Encyclopedia Britannica, Ibid). Robert Nozick, (quoted by Barber 2003: 26) comments it in these terms “Individuals have rights. So strong are these that they raise the question of what, if anything the state and its officials may do. How much room do individual rights leave to the state?”

#### The genesis of the transfer of Liberal Democratic institutions in the Sahel

While liberal institution in Europe emerged as a result of the particular historical and intellectual trajectory of European societies, in Africa liberal institutions were first imposed by the colonial powers as part of the “civilizing mission”, and later supported by the western government and international finance institutions in their effort to modernize African societies and their system of governance.

#### The colonial period as the critical juncture

The first European explorer of the African continent depicted African societies as primitive, savage, and traditional. The strong communal and religious ties of the then-African societies were not without reminding the western societies of their pre-enlightenment

misfortunes. This period coincided with the development of social sciences in Europe. The nascent discipline of sociology that claimed the application of scientific method to analyze social realities provided a theoretical framework that places societies in an evolutionary trajectory, moving gradually from “theological, to metaphysical and positive society” (Auguste Comte 1798 – 1857), or from primitive, to feudal, to capitalist and communist (Karl Marx 1818 – 1883), or from “mechanic to organic solidarity” (Durkheim 1858 – 1917), or from charismatic form of domination, to tradition and finally to rational form of legitimate domination (Max Weber 1864 – 1920 ). Regardless of their differences, these approaches share in common the view that, at their first stage societies are characterized by the preeminence of the community over the individual and progress to the next stage consists of the alteration of the communal hold over the individual. The civilizing mission that started with colonialism aimed at modernizing African societies through replacing the traditional, communal, religious system with the enlightenment ideals of individualism, secularism, and market economy.

*Formal institutions after the period of independence: the modernization theory*

As part of the French West African territory (AOF) the Sahelian countries started experiencing Liberal democracy in 1946 through the election of the colonies’ first representatives in the French National Assembly according to a selective suffrage. Multiparty system and universal suffrage were introduced in the 1957-1958 during the referendums and parliamentary elections. Thus, at the time when these countries gained their independence certain liberal democratic institutions had already been set up. Furthermore, the new leaders committed to pursue the process of democratization as part of the independence deal with the colonial power. Yet, once they were established on power, the commitment to liberal democracy became less a priority for the African nationalist leaders. Their major concern shifted into how to create the mechanism that would allow them to hang indefinitely on power. The answer was the single party regime and a charade of democracy.

While the process of democratization failed, the effort to modernize African societies continued. Concerns about the political stability and economic development of the new nations draws constant attention of the world super powers, the international organizations, as well as the social scientists. The colonial discourse of “civilizing mission” gave way to new approaches of modernization that Goren Hyden (2011: 8-10) divides into five different phases: First, the development economics, which was a philosophy that prevailed in the last days of colonial rule

and in the early years of independence in Africa. It was an approach that was characterized by great confidence and optimism. It is defined in technocratic terms, development was operationalized with little or no attention to context. The principal task was to ensure that institutions and techniques that had proved successful in modernizing the Western world could be replicated. The second phase started in the late 1960s, when analysts realized that without taken the context into account the implementation of technocratic solutions cannot yield to expected results. The new approach, therefore, focused on reducing poverty by intervening in sectors that are considered more effective. Hyden (2011: 9) claims that “whereas capacity building in the first phases had been concentrated on the elite, the second phase focused on such areas as adult education and universal primary education under the assumption that these measures were integral part of a poverty-oriented approach to development”. The third phase started in the late 1970s after the observation that African states lacked the technical capacity to implement developmental policies. There was therefore a need to reform the functioning of the government and the refining of political and economic policies so that market be given larger autonomy from the state. Hence the reform initiated by the World Bank. The fourth phase coincided with the period of the “increase in voluntary organizations around the world and the preliminary efforts to bring such organizations into the development process” Hyden 2011: 9). The assumption was that “with more responsibilities delegated to the market, private and voluntary organizations could play a more significant role in working with people to realize their aspirations”. Non-governmental organization are expected to “do with the people what government had failed to do for the people” (Hyden, Ibid. 10). The current phase started in the early 1990s as a result of the “growing recognition that politics and development are not two separate and distinct activities... Getting politics right reveals fundamental, perhaps a precondition to economic development. (Hyden, Ibid 10). “People, not government, constitutes the principle force of development. They must be given the right incentives and opportunities not only in the economic, but also in the political arena. They must have a chance to create institutions that respond to their needs and priorities” (Hyden, Ibid 10). This triggered the period of the return for liberal democracy. “The main ambition has been to carry out transfer of institutions from the north to the south, based on the assumption that somehow they realign the incentive structures to foster improved forms of governance. The emphasis on strengthening civil society, free, and fair elections... The way these attempted transfers have occurred, however, has

typically ignored the social and political realities on the ground in Africa.” (Hyden, Ibid. 10-11)

### **Disjuncture between Formal and Informal institutions**

It has appeared cleared by now that there is a fundamental disjuncture between the principles underlying the formal institutions of Liberal democracy as it is implemented in the Sahel region and the dominant informal rules, culture and values of the societies living in those regions. This section examines the major breakpoints that are characteristic of this disjuncture. It argues that the liberal democratic principles of individualism, secularism, market economy, and competition clashes respectively with the preeminence of community, religion, subsistence agrarian economy, and the drive toward consensus in the Sahelian culture.

#### *Communitarianism vs individualism*

In both Locke and Mills’ theories, liberal democracy represents a system of government that is based on majority rule, meaning that the government executes the will of the majority of citizens expressed through periodic elections. Citizens in the liberal democratic assumptions are isolated individuals, naturally independent from the society, and predisposed with natural right, namely, freedom and equality. Each individual is deemed capable of knowing “his best interest” and to think and act rationally, that is in accordance to that best interest. The elite members of the society compete for representative positions of legislators or chief executive based on an electoral agenda that they submit to the citizens seeking their votes. Again, citizens are deemed capable of understanding and comparing the different electoral agendas and vote for the candidate that serve best their interest, so that the aggregation of their vote reflect their conception of the common good, the way to achieve it, and by whom.

None of the abovementioned assumptions finds support in the local sahelien culture and values. People, first, do not perceive themselves in individualistic, and atomistic terms. Primordial grouping and moral attachment to the community remain strong and influence heavily individuals’ behavior. In addition, the pattern of relationship between and among individual and groups is significantly vertical. Such systems of inequality as slavery in Mauritania and Niger, cast structure in Mali, gender gap, personalized system of rule, constitute hierarchies that countervails the assumption of equality in liberal democracy. Most people vote not to elect the candidate that will serve their self-interest but to respond to their tribal and ethnic watchwords. The aggregation of their votes does not, therefore, result in their aggregated view of their self-interests, but the interests of their communities.

### *Secularism vs Spirituality*

Secularism, or the separation between state and religion, is one of the foundational principle of liberalism and liberal democracy. But there are two different interpretations of secularism in the history of political philosophy: on the one hand, “benign secularism”, is a belief rooted in the philosophy of St Augustine and Tocqueville, that ecclesiastical matters should remain distinct from state functions; on the other hand, “aggressive secularism”, or “laicite” in French vocabulary, is a doctrine that originated from the philosophy of Marx and Nietzsche, and that rejects the significance and value of religious faith( Schmid 2003). As former French colonies, the Sahelian countries inherited “laicite” as one of their constitutional principles. This means the absence of religious involvement in government affairs as well as the absence of government involvement in religious affairs (Remond, 1999). Religious communities are not allowed, under this principle, to get involved in politics. No party can officially claim adhesion to a form of religious belief. In brief, liberal democracy as implemented in the Sahel region restricts the political expression of religion, trying to confine it within the mere private realm.

The adoption of the principle of laicite, however, contradicts an important fact of life in Sahelian societies and cultures, which is the centrality of religious beliefs and practices. The importance of religion in African societies in general is very well described by John S. Mbit (1985:1), when he says, “Africans are notoriously religious, and each people [society in Africa] has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so it is not easy or possible to isolate it [from other aspects of African society and culture.]” Islamic culture has successfully syncretized with the local culture and has become almost undistinguishable from the ancient traditional culture, making Islam becoming the popular culture. Yet, the political expression of Islam has been very restricted. Moderate Islamist politicians were prosecuted in Mauritania, while the context has not so far allowed the emergence of such politicians in Niger and Mali.

### *Market economy vs agrarian subsistence economy*

Free market is one of the most essential liberal principles that liberal democratic institutions are supposed to enforce and protect. Free market capitalism and liberal democracy, in fact share a number of premises and historical parallels. “Just as capitalism looks to the individual choice of consumers as the keystone for ordering the economy, democracy depends on

individual initiative and choice as the source of political decision-making. Both notions are rooted in an assumption of human rationality and self-interest, and thus rely on individual freedom and autonomy as the means for achieving their ends. Capitalism and democracy are generally assumed to be the best, if somewhat imperfect, means to achieving the overriding social goals of a nation that, ideally, is composed of a universally active, engaged, and self-actualizing citizenry.” (Owen. M. Fiss, 1992: 911)<sup>17</sup>

However, African economy is not a capitalist economy. It is rather an agrarian economy that draws its foundational structures on the social organizations, particularly the heavy influence of the notion of community over that of rational, self-interested individual. “The relative strength of community in these countries is also attributable to the relatively weak penetration by capitalist relations of production... African economies at the independence were first and foremost peasant economies over which state officials had only a limited control.” (Hyden, 2011: 56)

#### *Competition versus Consensus*

Liberal democracy is based on the idea of competition. The core of multiparty elections is the competition among different political parties. This centrality of the notion of competition in liberalism in general and liberal democracy in particular, derives according to Encyclopedia Britannica (Ibid.) “from the practice of adversariality in European political and economic life, a process in which institutionalized competition—such as the competition between different political parties in electoral contests, between prosecution and defense in adversary procedure, or between different producers in a market economy—generates a dynamic social order.” This notion of competition has no historical roots in in the Sahel. “Adversarial political culture, Thomson reports, is alien to the continent” (Thomson 2010: 113). It is often remarked that decision making in traditional African life and governance was, as a rule, by consensus... there is considerable evidence that decision by consensus was often the order of the day in African deliberations, and on principle.<sup>18</sup> In some Sahelian society like the Wolof (in Mjority in Senegal, but also in Mauritania), uneducated people interpret the word *demokaraasi* can at times mean the achievement of Agreement, *reaching consensus*. (Schaffer, 1998 cited by Schatzberg, 2001: 2010)

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<sup>17</sup> Fiss, Owen M., "Capitalism and Democracy" (1992). Faculty Scholarship Series. Paper 1335. [http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/fss\\_papers/1335](http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/fss_papers/1335)

<sup>18</sup> <http://them.polylog.org/2/fwkc-en.htm>

But even more, the fact that communal ties are stronger than individual ties makes political competition centered along ethnic, tribal, and linguistic line. Far from consolidating democratic institutions, multiparty democracy, by rehearsing ethnic animosity, could be very detrimental. For African nations that are being built out of multiple ethnic groups, raising competition and division between ethnic groups run the risk of pulling apart the nation.

### **Syncretism of liberal democratic institution with illiberal cultural norms and values**

The disjuncture between formal and informal institutions described above, certainly, constrain the normal functioning of liberal democracy in the Sahel. Yet, this disjuncture does not result in watertight categories of formal liberal institutions and principles in one side and informal rules, culture and values on the other side. The introduction of change in any society is followed by a process of adaptation during which local actors struggle to inscribe local meanings and to get maximum advantages from the new changes. Through this process of adaptation, they draw on their local values and culture to transform the new institutions and re-appropriate them to serve their interest. In other words, they engage the new institutions into a process of institutional syncretism. In this section I make the argument that the introduction of liberal democratic institutions in the Sahel was followed by a process of institutional syncretism that led to the emergence of a hybrid political system that is neither democratic nor, traditional but a messy combination of both. I start by discussing these hybrid institutions that I refer to as neo-patrimonial institutions, and then I point to the logic of “Africa’s two public” to denote the rationale behind neo-patrimonialism, and finally I explore the crisis of legitimacy and the weakness of state generated by these institutions.

#### *Syncretic institutions: Democracy and Neo-patrimonialism*

The struggle for adaptation of the new liberal democratic institutions to the local culture led to the emergence of hybrid political institutions that are democratic in their form - because they come in place as a result of more or less free and fair elections - but patrimonial in their functioning – because they are dominated by the old system of patronage, clientelism and “Big Man” rule. What is considered democratic institutions are no more than “old wine in new bottle.” The concept of neo-patrimonialism derives from Max Weber’s notion of “patrimonial authority” that characterizes small and traditional polities. Bratton (1997: 61) defines it in these terms “In patrimonial political system in which an individual rules by dint of personal prestige and power, ordinary folk are created as extensions of the “big man’s” household, with no rights or privileges

other than those bestowed by the ruler. Authority is entirely personalized, shaped by the rulers's preference rather than any codified system of laws. The ruler ensures the political stability of the regime and personal political survival by providing a zone of security in an uncertain environment and by selectively distributing favors and material benefits to loyal followers who are not citizens of the polity so much as the rulers' client".

While Weber use the concept of "patrimonialism" to characterize political system in small and isolated polities, such as Africa's villages and lineages in the past, his concepts doesn't capture the reality of today's complex polities. In fact, "patrimonial authority" for him contrasts with the modern bureaucratic authority. Max Weber did not think of polities in which large bureaucracies could cohabitate with patrimonial form of rule. This new system called neopatrimonialism is what characterizes politics in the Sahelian countries. According to Bratton (1997: 62) "Neopatrimonialism characterizes those hybrid political systems in which the customs and patterns of patrimonialism co-exist with, and suffuse, rational-legal institutions" It is in other words the incorporation of patrimonial logic into bureaucratic institutions, including such things as clientelism, personal rule, prebendalism, and the politics of the belly.

After the wave of democratization reached the Sahel in the early 1990s, local actors appropriated the concept of liberalization as a slogan to fight against the military and the single-party regimes. The concept of liberal democracy became domesticated in the sense that although political parties were created and elections were regularly organized in countries like Mali, democratic practices were the exception rather than the rule. Officials get legitimately elected, but only to come and perpetuate the old system of patronage that predated the establishment of democracy. The problem of neo-patrimonialism is considered by many scholars as one of the major concerns of African politics. Goran Hyden explains the rationale behind the emergence of neo-patrimonialism when he says, "African have no loyalty to the civil institutions of the state – what he calls the civic public realm – but instead nurture their membership in a local community based on primary social organization such as lineage, clan, or tribe. It is this primordial public realm, as Ekeh calls it, that command loyalty in African societies. The result is that the institutions that were inherited from the colonial powers at the independence are essentially milked of material resources to feed communities." (Hyden, 2011: 54)

*Africa's two publics: the rationale behind the emergence of neo-patrimonialism*

In Neo patrimonialism there is no clear distinction between the private and the public



privatization of public affairs remains an integral component of a neopatrimonial state

Peter Ekeh, a Nigerian sociologist argues that “[T]he experiences of colonialism, in Africa have led to the emergence of a unique historical configuration in modern postcolonial Africa: the existence of two publics instead of one public, as in the West. Many of Africa's political problems are due to the dialectical relationships between the two publics.” Those two public are what he call: the primordial and civic publics. The primordial public, on the one hand, identifies with the primordial grouping, sentiment and activities and draws its norms of behavior from local culture and values. As in the traditional system of governance of the lineages and tribes, the primordial public does not differentiate between the private and public realm, meaning that the frontier between the political sphere and the personal and private sphere is blurred. What is public can also be privately appropriated. The primordial public is governed by the sort of powerful moral imperative that ties the community together. The civic public, on the other hand, is the emanation of the colonial rule. It is based on civil structures such as the military, the civil service, the police, etc. The actors that dominate this realms are modern elites who got educated in western schools. The chief characteristic of the civic realm is, according the Ekeh, its lack of moral linkage with the private realm. In other words, “the civic public in Africa is amoral and lacks the generalized moral imperatives operative in the private realm and in the primordial public.” (Ekeh, 1975: 93)

One lasting pattern of the French colonial doctrine of assimilation, was the marginalization of the major actors of the primordial public, namely, the traditional chiefs, the clerics, and the traditional healers or marabouts, from the political realm and their replacement with the new westernized elite. This resulted in the complete domination of the political spectrum by the later. The westernized elite became the only political actors who operate simultaneously in the primordial and the public realm. However, while this westernized elites are favored by the new state system and the formal institutions, they lack the popular legitimacy, the kind that their traditional counterpart enjoy among the native population. What follows, is the struggle of the elites to instrumentally use the new institutions in the way that allow them to maintain power. In search for political legitimacy, holding public office became a mean to appropriate and transfer resources from the civic public realm to the primordial realm. Creating clientelistic relationship with local chiefs, and clerics became also a prominently used strategy to mobilize popular support and legitimacy. “Representative institutions may be coopted into

patron-client networks and familial structures of authority and legitimacy. This is a kind of articulation between culture and institutions— indeed, an adaptation of institutions to fit certain local, historically rooted patterns.” As a result, the imposed institutions become hybrid, or in Galvan’s terms like “broken pieces, shards of modernity, usable in fragmentary ways to mobilize political groups, pattern relations, organize power”.

Almost forty years, have passed since Ekeh made this observation, and in between the Sahelian countries have gone through different political systems, including single party regimes, military rule, and now democracy, yet his argument still remains relevant in explaining the dysfunction of modern political institutions. The persistence of the two publics is a fact of life in the Sahelian political arena, and the struggle of the civic public actors to appropriate resources and transfer them to the primordial public is ubiquitous and has maybe exacerbated with the advent of liberal democracy.

However, while the practice of patrimonial and clientelistic may appear beneficial for the individual actors involved in it, there consequence on the perception of the legitimacy of the liberal democratic institution is damaging. “In many cases, informal systems of clientelism and patrimonialism are key contributors to stifling popular participation, subverting the rule of law, fostering corruption, distorting the delivery of public services, discouraging investment and undermining economic progress.” (Derick W. Brinkerhoff, 2002: 1)<sup>19</sup>

I consider the failure of the Malian democracy to produce the expected resilient institutions that are supposed to prevent state collapse to come from the failure of the imposed liberal democratic institutions to adapt with the local realities. Instead of creating trust in liberal democratic ideals and enhance social capital among the people, the routinized elections have only further fractured the populations of Mali between a few westernized elites on the one hand, and a more traditional and religiously oriented grassroots on the other hand. The latter consider the former as largely corrupted and elections are deemed the canal by which they access to the government pie. While bad governance and corruption preceded democratization, the explosion of patrimonialism, clientelism, nepotism, and regionalism subsequent to the advent of representative democracy are widely interpreted as the outcome of liberal democracy. As consequence, democracy has become as an alien system for the grassroots or a springboard to access to government resources for personal and patronal use.

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<sup>19</sup> [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/Pnac426.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnac426.pdf)

*Neo-patrimonialism and the crisis of Islamic insurgency (crisis of legitimacy?) See Soares de Oliveira (39-45)*

The democratic transition of the 1990s happened when people raised up against the illegitimacy of the authoritarian regimes that were worn out by patronage, corruption and political violence. Interestingly, today's Islamic insurgents justify their fights against the Sahelian states by pointing to the illegitimacy of democracy. If the patrimonial practice that dominated the pre-democratic era amounted to the crisis of political legitimacy that raised up the grassroots population against the regimes, it is fair to say that democracy has only exacerbated neo-patrimonialism leading to the emergence of new claims such as the implementation of the Sharia rule. Bratton (1997: 99) makes the link between neo-patrimonialism and the crisis of political legitimacy clear when he argues that "Leaders had damaged their own claim to rule by engaging in nepotism and corruption, which led to popular perception that those with access to political office were living high on the hog while ordinary people suffered. The erosion of political legitimacy built to crisis proportions because authoritarian regimes did not provide procedures for citizens to peacefully express such grievances and, especially, to turn unpopular leaders out of office,"

## **Conclusion**

The concepts of institutions has been an important tool in the analysis of the dilemma of collective action. The rational choice theory postulates that institutions, once established, constrain and channel actors' behavior in accordance with the rules of the game" by rendering defection a lot more costly for a rational actor than obedience to the rule (Putnam 7). In this sense, the institutionalization of liberal democratic structure - such as the elections, the parliament, the independent judiciary, is supposed to constrain the individuals to accept and act according to such principles as: (1) only regular elections and the win of the majority of votes gives legitimacy to a political regime, (2) all discontents must be channeled peacefully through democratic institutions such as the parliament (3) all freedom and human rights have to be respected and protected. The more these rules are played and routinized in a country the less is the expectation of the outbreak of conflicts, coup d'états, or massive violations of human rights. Yet, it was the unexpected outcome that happened during the crisis of Islamic Insurgency in the Sahel where the country where democracy was comparatively more institutionalized collapsed under the outbreak of the Islamic insurgency while the less democratized countries remained

resilient. Democratic institutions, obviously failed to play their role properly, and the question is why? This section argues that it was the lack of congruence between the formal institutions of liberal democracy, on the one hand, and the informal culture, values and norms of the African societies that crippled liberal institutions and yield to the unexpected outcome.

In this paper, I make the argument that liberal democracy failed to produce resilient institutions in the Sahel because of the disjuncture between formal liberal democratic institutions and informal local culture and values. After twenty years of democratization the institutions that emerged are neither those of liberal democracy in their western understanding, nor those of ancient African political tradition but neopatrimonial institutions that combine the characteristics of both.

The study of the strength or weakness of democracy in Africa has mostly focused on the strength or weakness of formal institution. This paper tries has argued that while we put more emphasis on formal institutions, the problem of democracy in the Sahel may actually come for the informal institutions that we do not take into account. Institutionalists argument usually focuses on formal institutions and whether they are resilient or not. My argument tries to draw attention to the overshadowed informal institutions by stressing their ability to disrupt the working of the formal institutions.

The problem of the theory of liberal democracy in Africa is actually a problem of African political theory in general. Student of African politics tend to approach African academic puzzles through the unique lens of theories developed in the western scholarship. "When political scientists began to study African societies they brought with them a conceptual vocabulary drawn largely from those areas of the world which they had been studying over an extended period of time, namely the United States and Europe." (Michael Lofchie, 1968: 4) This seems to be the case in most of the developmentalist theories, state building theories, democratization and regime transition, political culture, and even in the postcolonial literature. "It is essential to develop a set of concepts based on African history and traditions in order to have a truly relevant and meaningful form of analysis. This is a sentiment from which few have expressed dissent; yet, strangely, political scientists have produced practically no formulations of such categories." (Lofchie, Michael 1968: 5)

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