

Klaas van Walraven (2013), *The Yearning for Relief: A History of the Sawaba Movement in Niger*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, ISBN 9789004245747, xxviii+968 pp.

Klaas van Walraven's *The Yearning for Relief* is a groundbreaking and deeply engaging historical study of Sawaba in Niger. Sawaba, a leftist political party most active during the 1950s and 1960s, is one of the most intriguing political organisations in Niger's modern political history. This book is the first in-depth scholarly study of Sawaba, which has long been overlooked in historical work on anti-colonial struggles and nationalist movements in West Africa. As van Walraven notes, Sawaba has been largely absent from official historical narratives for political reasons. *The Yearning for Relief* is thus an invaluable contribution to the historiography of Niger and the surrounding region, and to a potential public recognition in Niger of the historical significance of Sawaba.

Van Walraven traces the vagaries of Sawaba from its emergence as one of the most dynamic political forces in Niger in the 1950s, through its fall from power and the subsequent persecution that forced the party to go underground and many of its members to go into exile, to the ill-fated attempt to overthrow the regime through an armed insurgency. One of van Walraven's central postulates is that Sawaba is best understood as a modern social movement. Its members, many representing "*le petit peuple*" (people of modest means), were driven by ideological conviction and, as alluded to in the poetic title of the book, by the yearning for relief: a desire for social change. In writing about Sawaba, van Walraven sets out to write a people's history, or, a history from below that places the daily life, motivations, and destinies of "ordinary people" at the centre. The book plunges the reader into the heady days of decolonisation and political struggles. Through the careful and empirically grounded documentation of the Sawaba movement during this tumultuous period, the book sheds new light on a particularly eventful period in Nigerien history and provides important insights into the gradual formation of the postcolonial state in Niger.

The book is divided into three parts (comprising 14 chapters and an epilogue). The first part of the book traces the emergence of Sawaba within the landscape of early Nigerien party politics. Initially, Sawaba built up support mainly among the urban lower classes and through links to trade unions. However, under the leadership of the charismatic Djibo Bakary and through "an uncompromising message" (70) denouncing exploitation at the hands of the colonial power and the social and political elite, Sawaba managed to mobilise the population in both rural and ur-

ban areas, becoming the first political party in Niger to gain “genuine mass support” (70). Djibo Bakary went on to become prime minister, forming Niger’s first autonomous government (although under French suzerainty). The first part of the book ends with a captivating account of the 1958 constitutional referendum on the French Fifth Republic. For the colonies, the referendum boiled down to a choice between inclusion into the French Community (a “yes” vote) or immediate independence (a “no” vote). Bakary and Sawaba took a stand for immediate independence and, for a while, Niger looked set to join Guinea in a “no” vote. However, given the high stakes (Niger’s geographical position and new-found uranium deposits), the French intervened to block Bakary and to influence the election in their favour. Van Walraven meticulously documents the heavy-handed intervention of the French (e.g. its military presence, control over the voting process, and manipulation of the results) that facilitated a win for the “yes” side. Van Walraven even goes so far as to argue that the manipulation of the referendum together with the dismantling of Bakary’s government was the first modern coup d’état in Africa. Part one ends with the defeat of Bakary and Sawaba in the aftermath of the 1958 referendum as a new government supported by the French came into power.

Sawaba, despite its fall from power, was seen as a dangerous and potentially disruptive force. Part two chronicles the oppression and surveillance (e.g. arrests, detention, hindering of freedom of movement, house searches) that forced Sawaba to go underground and prominent members, among them Bakary himself, to go into exile. At independence in 1960, the party was outlawed. However, the movement lived on clandestinely in Niger and through the activities of party members who had gone into exile in neighbouring countries and who worked to create and maintain political alliances in the region. This part of the book also provides a fascinating account of Sawaba’s drive to educate and train cadres. Sawaba’s alignment with communist parties opened up educational opportunities for its members in the Eastern Bloc. Hundreds of cadres were enrolled in vocational and/or academic higher-education programmes in East Germany and the Soviet Union, easily rivalling the number of scholarships that the Nigerien government in power provided for studies abroad. Cadres were also signed up for military training in China, North Vietnam, Algeria, and Ghana. Van Walraven thus shows how Sawaba as a social and political movement managed to create links that reached across the globe.

The third part of the book provides a detailed account of the ill-fated Sawaba rebellion in 1964. With all other paths of return to Niger closed

off, Sawaba set out to topple the government through an armed insurgency. Previous accounts have dismissed the attempted insurgency as amateurish, ill conceived, and ill prepared. However, van Walraven argues that the insurgency was meticulously planned and that Sawaba's members were right in thinking that the regime was vulnerable in the face of growing popular discontent. In the end, the outcome of the insurgency was disastrous for Sawaba. Sawaba had hoped that the incursion would widen into a "popular insurrection"; however, the commandos were stopped dead in their tracks by villagers and by the army. According to van Walraven, Sawaba had failed to take into account people's fear of the government. Following the failed rebellion, thousands of Sawaba cadres were arrested in an "uncompromising" manhunt (795) and key cadres were subjected to torture and mistreatment in prison, leading to the final demise of Sawaba as a "social movement and as a political force" (771).

*The Yearning for Relief* is a meticulously researched book. The author draws on an impressive variety of different sources. However, it is the 100 interviews within the Sawaba community that make the book unique. The testimonies and life histories of the Sawabists give life to the story of the movement and to an important part of Niger's modern political history. By focusing on grass-roots forces that animated the Sawaba movement, van Walraven adopts a social-history approach that focuses on "ordinary people" as the drivers, participants, and witnesses of historical events. *The Yearning for Relief* is a clear illustration of the value of such an approach in opening up a more diverse and multifaceted understanding of historical events.

The book is also the result of van Walraven's personal engagement with the Sawaba community, and he clearly states that one of the main aims of the book is to restore the Sawaba movement. This is thus an impassioned, but balanced account that challenges established narratives through triangulation and a critical reading of key sources. Moreover, van Walraven's interest in and sensitivity to the meaning of "the struggle" for individual Sawaba members, giving voice to personal experiences, triumphs, disappointments, and tragedies, makes *The Yearning for Relief* a captivating and rewarding read. However, while I am fully sympathetic to his enterprise given the rich material and novel perspectives, a more direct conversation with work on African history and politics would have made the book even more accessible and obviously relevant to a broader audience. The book certainly deserves a wide readership.

- Gabriella Körling