

BOOK REVIEW

Klaas van Walraven. *Le désir de calme: L'histoire du mouvement Sawaba au Niger*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2017. 792 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. \$50.86. Paper. ISBN: 978-2753553958.

Le désir de calme: L'histoire du mouvement Sawaba au Niger is a welcome French-language translation of Klaas van Walraven's ambitious 2013 chronicle of Sawaba, a Nigerien political party, anti-colonial movement, and leftist guerilla campaign that emerged in the 1940s and made an ill-fated attempt to reclaim power in the 1960s. Even if the original English title, *The Yearning for Relief*, is more poetic than the French one, Rahmane Idrissa did a skillful job of translating this massive tome. The lengthy yet readable prose propels readers through the Sawabists' epic quest for deliverance from repression, first at the hands of colonizers and later at the hands of post-colonial autocrats who rejected Sawaba's radical visions for an independent and egalitarian society. Van Walraven set out to write a fundamentally social history, centering the voices and experiences of individual people. This translation will let his work finally reach audiences in Niger (at least in more scholarly circles where French is spoken). It is satisfying to imagine him reporting back to the aging Sawabists he interviewed for his research, reassuring them that their stories will not be forgotten.

Readers not already versed in the subject matter might consider van Walraven audacious for asking them to invest in a nearly one thousand-page analysis of an unfamiliar movement, set in an already marginalized country. Even as a scholar of Nigerien social movements, I was skeptical: "Surely," I thought, "no well-edited monograph *needs* to be this long!" But one of the powerful contributions of this book is to show, in no uncertain terms, that Sawaba is a topic worthy of such thorough treatment. For readers willing to take the plunge, the main payoff is not a paradigm-shifting theory, but rather the copious concrete details that the author painstakingly documents with secondary sources, original interviews, and previously unavailable archives. We learn, for example, about a class of prostitutes with noble roots in pre-Islamic Hausa courts, who harnessed their financial and social autonomy to become key activists during Sawaba's emergence as a political party (79).

Later passages depict Sawaba commandos on a cinematic trek to receive guerrilla training in Maoist China, weaving their way through Europe and eventually to Peking on the Trans-Siberian Railway (407). An inventory of objects they toted into battle—binoculars, medical kits, compasses (544)—recalls Tim O’Brien’s short story, “The Things They Carried,” about American soldiers in the Vietnam War. Indeed, some Sawabists connected with comrades in North Vietnam—a little-known episode of the conflict there. They also staged military operations in Ghana and Algeria, making the tale of Sawaba a truly international one.

So many historical specifics might have become untidy and overwhelming, but van Walraven avoids that problem by structuring his book into three neat sections: the first covers Sawaba’s origins, the second its underground mobilization, and the third its raids into Niger’s border zones. An epilogue summarizes Sawaba’s historical significance with respect to Niger, African social movements, and decolonization.

This is an important text, in part because it forces readers to rethink conventional categories of analysis. Scholars often study political parties and social movements separately, but Sawaba is both, blurring the lines between formal and informal politics. Sawabist trailblazers were neither upper-class nor lower-class, often hailing from peasant beginnings but having French education. Sawaba’s armed incursions resulted in relatively few casualties, questioning the meaning of war. Sawaba evaded French control before Niger became a state, challenging us to doubt the classical distinction between “colonial” and “post-colonial” eras.

As the cliché tells us, “History is written by the winners.” *Le désir de calme* provides a rare opportunity to view history from the losers’ perspective. Readers may find this revised telling of events more exciting than typical accounts that equate Sawaba’s failure with insignificance. In fact, Sawaba enjoyed notable political victories before ultimately succumbing to military assaults and imprisonments; it won the territorial legislative elections of 1957, and its charismatic leader, Djibo Bakary, served as mayor of Niamey. One could criticize van Walraven for romanticizing Sawabists’ resilience and idealism, even after resolving in the prologue to maintain a “scientific” detachment from his subjects (28). But we can forgive this, because his personal relationships with surviving Sawabists—and clear admiration of them—allowed him to succeed so brilliantly in writing a history with human beings at the center.

Lisa Mueller 

Macalester College

Saint Paul, Minnesota

lmuller@macalester.edu

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Mueller, Lisa. 2018. "Personal Politics without Clientelism? Interpreting Citizen-Politician Contact in Africa." *African Studies Review* 61 (2): 28–54. doi:[10.1017/asr.2017.131](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.131).
- Schritt, Jannik. 2019. "Well-Oiled Protest: Adding Fuel to Political Conflicts in Niger." *African Studies Review* 62 (2): 49–71. doi:[10.1017/asr.2018.19](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.19).