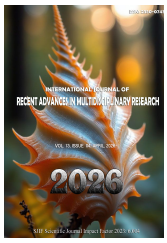
ISSN : 2350-0743

International Journal of Recent Advances in Multidisciplinary Research

Vol. 13, Issue 04, pp.12306-12311, April, 2026
https://doi.org/10.64485/ijramr.6325.04.2026



RESEARCH ARTICLE

ADMINISTRATIVE INSTITUTIONS IN THE GAABU AND MALI EMPIRES COMPARED TO FRENCH DIRECT RULE: CONTINUITIES, RUPTURES, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF GOVERNANCE IN WEST AFRICA

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:
Received 15th January, 2026
Received in revised form
20th February, 2026
Accepted 15th March, 2026
Published online 30th April, 2026

Keywords:

Mali Empire; Gaabu Empire; French Direct Rule; African Governance; Colonial Administration.

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the governance structures of the Mali and Gaabu Empires and compares them to the French colonial system of direct rule implemented in West Africa during the 19th and 20th centuries (Niane, 1965; Barry, 1998; Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000). While indigenous empires based their governance on lineage, religion, military authority, and negotiated political legitimacy (Ki-Zerbo, 1990; Dike & Ajayi, 1962), the French introduced a centralized bureaucratic system that reshaped African political cultures (Mamdani, 1996; Suret-Canale, 1971) and changed long-standing ruler-subject relations (Rodney, 1972; Cooper, 2002). Using a historical-comparative approach rooted in theories of institutional change, colonial state formation, and political anthropology (Crowder, 1968; Davidson, 1998), the study examines the organizational principles, legitimacy frameworks, and territorial management practices of each system. Results indicate that indigenous African polities relied on decentralized yet cohesive mechanisms based on consensus, kinship, and military oversight. At the same time, French colonial authorities replaced these with hierarchical administrative models aimed at labor extraction, territorial control, and the weakening of traditional authority. The analysis highlights significant continuities and disruptions in West African governance, illustrating how precolonial political institutions shaped African responses to colonial rule and why the legacy of dual administrative systems persists in modern West African state formation (Green, 2019; Hiskett, 1994; Curtin, 1975).

Citation: Mahamadou Samsoudine SADIO. 2025. "Administrative Institutions in the Gaabu and Mali Empires Compared to French Direct Rule: Continuities, Ruptures, and the Transformation of Governance in West Africa " , *International Journal of Recent Advances in Multidisciplinary Research,* 13,(04), 12306-12311.

INTRODUCTION

The study of governance in West Africa requires an examination of the political institutions that preceded colonialism and the administrative models that were imposed during European rule (Crowder, 1968; Cooper, 2002). Among the major precolonial systems, the Mali and Gaabu Empires stand out for their influential forms of authority, territorial management, and social organization (Niane, 1965; Barry, 1998; Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000). These empires developed administrative traditions rooted in lineage, military organization, and negotiated legitimacy, which allowed them to integrate diverse populations and maintain political stability over wide territories (Dike &Ajayi, 1962; Ki-Zerbo, 1990; Davidson, 1998). The arrival of French colonialism, however, introduced a radically different model of administration based on centralized bureaucracy, hierarchical control, and the logic of direct rule (Mamdani, 1996; Suret-Canale, 1971; Rodney, 1972). This encounter reshaped African political cultures, disrupted existing balances of power, and produced institutional transformations that continue to shape contemporary West African states (Cooper, 2002; Green, 2019). Grounded in theories of political anthropology, colonial state formation, and institutional change (Crowder, 1968; Mamdani, 1996; Ki-Zerbo, 1990), and drawing on a historical-comparative methodology supported by the conceptual triad of authority, governance, and state formation (Fage &Tordoff, 2013; Davidson, 1998), this article seeks to analyze how these distinct administrative systems operated and how their interaction generated deep continuities and ruptures in the region's political development (Curtin, 1975; Hiskett, 1994; Hunwick, 2003). The study is organized into three main parts: the first examines the administrative foundations of the Mali Empire (Niane, 1965; Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000); the second explores the governance structures of the Gaabu Empire (Barry, 1998; Bathily, 1989); and the third compares these indigenous systems with the French model of direct rule to highlight the transformations produced by colonial intervention (Suret-Canale, 1971; Mamdani, 1996; Rodney, 1972; Cooper, 2002).

ADMINISTRATION OF THE MALI EMPIRE

The Mali Empire, which emerged in the thirteenth century under the leadership of Sundiata Keita, developed one of the most structured and influential political systems in precolonial West Africa (Niane, 1965; Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000). Built upon the foundations of the Manden cultural world, the empire combined sacred kingship, military authority, and lineage-based institutions to govern a territory stretching from the Atlantic coast to the bend of the Niger River (Ki-Zerbo, 1990; Davidson, 1998). The legitimacy of the Keita dynasty rested heavily on ancestral authority and spiritual protection, particularly the belief that Sundiata had been chosen through prophecy and sanctioned by the custodians of Manden tradition (Niane, 1965). This fusion of sacred and political roles allowed the empire to centralize leadership around the figure of the mansa while maintaining considerable flexibility in provincial and local administration, a feature that many scholars cite as a reason for Mali's longevity (Barry, 1998; Suret-Canale, 1968). At the center of Mali's governance was the mansa, whose authority derived not only from dynastic inheritance but also from demonstrated military competence, ritual prestige, and the confidence of influential political actors such as clan elders, military commanders, and court advisers (Davidson, 1998; Hiskett, 1994).

The mansa's role included adjudicating disputes, commanding the army, regulating land rights, overseeing taxation, and negotiating diplomatic relations with foreign states (Hunwick, 2003). Importantly, the mansa's legitimacy was conditioned by adherence to the Manden Charter—a celebrated code of conduct emphasizing justice, social responsibility, and the protection of human dignity (Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000). Through this moral framework, imperial authority was both centralized and embedded in collective norms, reflecting the deeply participatory ethos of Mande political culture (Ki-Zerbo, 1990). The empire's vast territory required an administrative model capable of managing diversity, and Mali achieved this through a decentralized but coherent provincial system. The mansa delegated authority to farin (military governors) and kafotigi (local chiefs), who exercised governmental power in his name while maintaining autonomy in daily governance (Barry, 1998; Crowder, 1964). These provincial officials were responsible for tax collection, ensuring public order, supervising markets, and managing strategic towns and trade centers. Their appointment and removal depended on loyalty, performance, and their ability to mobilize local support, which helped maintain a balance between imperial oversight and regional autonomy (Fage &Tordoff, 2013). This structure enabled Mali to incorporate diverse ethnic groups—Fulani, Soninke, Mandinka, Wolof, and others—without imposing rigid bureaucratic control or disrupting established political traditions. A defining feature of Mali's administration was the prominence of its military organization. The empire's cavalry, composed largely of nobles and warrior elites, served both as the backbone of imperial defense and as a key administrative instrument in frontier regions (Dike &Ajayi, 1962; Davidson, 1998). Military commanders acted as the mansa's representatives in newly conquered areas, overseeing tribute collection, safeguarding trade routes, and reinforcing imperial law. As Rodney (1972) emphasizes, Mali's military presence ensured the smooth circulation of goods across its extensive trade networks and integrated distant territories into the imperial economy. This integration of military authority with civil administration helped maintain cohesion, particularly in regions with strong local political traditions. Local administration in Mali relied heavily on lineage-based authority and customary institutions that pre-dated the empire itself. Village chiefs, clan elders, and religious specialists served as mediators of daily governance, handling conflict resolution, land distribution, agricultural organization, and ritual responsibilities (Ki-Zerbo, 1990; Bathily, 1989). These institutions were incorporated into a multilayered governance structure rather than replaced, allowing the empire to maintain stability and legitimacy by embedding imperial authority within pre-existing social networks (Davidson, 1998). By respecting local customs while asserting a unified imperial framework, the Mali Empire achieved a high level of administrative harmony across diverse populations. Economically, the Mali Empire developed one of the most sophisticated administrative systems in the Western Sudan. Its control over gold-producing areas such as Bambuk and Bure, along with its dominance of trans-Saharan trade routes, provided substantial revenue to support the imperial court, military apparatus, and provincial governors (Curtin, 1975; Green, 2019). Provincial administrators supervised markets, monitored commercial transactions, and ensured the security of trade caravans. Taxation was collected in diverse forms—tribute in goods, labor obligations, and military service—all of which reinforced the integration of economic and political authority (Barry, 1998).

Urban centers such as Niani, Timbuktu, and Gao flourished under this system, benefiting from the stability and order maintained by imperial governance (Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000). Mali's judicial system combined customary law with hierarchical imperial oversight. Minor disputes were typically resolved by village elders and lineage heads, ensuring that community norms and traditions guided local justice (Hunwick, 2003). However, serious cases—such as inter-clan conflicts, violations of imperial directives, or disputes involving trade and taxation—were referred to the mansa or his designated representatives (Hiskett, 1994). This dual legal structure allowed Mali to maintain social harmony while reinforcing the mansa's position as the ultimate guarantor of justice and order across the empire (Davidson, 1998). The coexistence of local autonomy and imperial authority in the legal system contributed to the stability and resilience of Mali's governance. Taken together, the administrative system of the Mali Empire represented a sophisticated balance between central authority and local autonomy, military power and customary institutions, and sacred legitimacy and political pragmatism. This flexible governance model enabled the empire to integrate multiple regions and cultures into a coherent political entity that endured for centuries (Ki-Zerbo, 1990; Barry, 1998). As scholars such as Levtzion, Davidson, and Rodney have noted, Mali's institutional legacy influenced later states across the Western Sudan and Senegambia, including the Gaabu Empire, whose governance structures demonstrate both continuity and adaptation of Malian political traditions. The following section examines these developments in greater detail.

ADMINISTRATION OF THE GAABU EMPIRE

The Gaabu Empire, which arose in the fifteenth century in the Upper Guinea region, developed a political and administrative system influenced by Mandinka statecraft, frontier militarization, and the legacies of earlier Sudanic empires like

Mali (Barry, 1998; Niane, 1989). Governed from the capital city of Kansala, Gaabu inherited much of the political culture of the Mande world while shaping its institutions to fit local ecological, cultural, and military conditions. The ruling Nyanco dynasty strengthened its authority by blending hereditary legitimacy, ritual prestige, and military power, creating a hybrid political order that reflected both long-standing Mande traditions and innovations unique to the Senegambian frontier (Suret-Canale, 1971). This combination enabled Gaabu to survive for four centuries as one of the most influential polities in the region. Central authority in Gaabu was concentrated in the figure of the mansa-ba, who exercised political, judicial, and military leadership across the empire. His legitimacy stemmed from lineage seniority, aristocratic alliances, and the ability to maintain cohesion among semi-autonomous provinces that often pursued their own strategic interests (Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000). Unlike the more sacralized kingship of Mali, where ritual charisma played a central role, authority in Gaabu depended more on military prestige and political negotiation among the warrior aristocracy (Davidson, 1998). This focus on martial legitimacy reflected the empire's geopolitical position on a contested frontier, where threats from neighboring Wolof, Fulbe, and Portuguese forces required constant alertness and centralized strategic coordination.

Administrative power was exercised through a network of provincial governors known as farins or tigui, who were usually chosen from influential noble families or prominent military clans (Rodney, 1970). These governors oversaw taxation, trade regulation, military mobilization, and judicial affairs within their areas. Although formally subordinate to the mansa-ba, they enjoyed considerable autonomy and often acted as semi-independent rulers as long as they paid tribute and provided military support (Green, 2019). This decentralized system allowed the empire to include diverse populations without creating a rigid bureaucratic hierarchy and helped maintain local power structures as a key part of governance. A key feature of Gaabu's administration was the prominence of the military aristocracy, whose power influenced both political and social life. The warrior elite—made up of nyamakalaw, ton-tigi, and other military specialists—played a central role in enforcing imperial authority, protecting trade routes, and integrating conquered or allied communities (Barry, 1998). These military leaders were often responsible for establishing new settlements, negotiating peace with neighboring groups, and settling disputes in frontier zones. Their combination of administrative and military authority created a governance system where political power was closely linked to martial ability, reflecting both the empire's frontier conditions and the historical growth of Mande social organization (Ki-Zerbo, 1990).

At the village and lineage levels, Gaabu maintained a strong reliance on customary institutions. Clan heads, lineage elders, and religious specialists oversaw land distribution, agricultural coordination, and dispute resolution according to locally accepted norms (Dike & Ajayi, 1962). These leaders formed the bedrock of rural governance and provided continuity with pre-imperial political traditions. Rather than attempt to replace these structures, Gaabu's rulers integrated them into a multilayered political system that balanced imperial oversight with local autonomy. This arrangement promoted social stability and allowed the empire to govern culturally diverse populations without undermining existing social foundations (Mamdani, 1996). Economically, Gaabu was strategically located to control trade routes connecting the interior of the Upper Guinea region to the Atlantic coast. The empire earned significant revenue from the circulation of kola nuts, iron goods, cloth, salt, and enslaved people, and its administrators actively managed markets and monitored trade flows (Cooper, 2002). Provincial authorities ensured the collection of taxes, tribute, and corvée labor, which supported the royal court in Kansala and funded military campaigns. This integration of economic management with political authority resembled earlier Sudanic empires while adapting to new opportunities brought about by the rise of Atlantic commerce (Green, 2019). Justice in Gaabu operated through a dual system where local disputes were settled by lineage elders applying customary laws, while regional or imperial issues were brought before provincial governors or the mansa-ba's council in Kansala (Crowder, 1968). This judicial model maintained the cultural independence of the communities while strengthening the overall authority of the central state. Cases involving political rebellion, inter-clan warfare, or violations of imperial sovereignty were handled at higher administrative levels, emphasizing the role of the mansa-ba as the ultimate protector of justice and political stability (Levtzion, 1973).

The empire's administrative structure reflected its position as a frontier state vulnerable to external threats and internal divisions. Frequent conflicts among aristocratic families, along with challenges from coastal states, Fulbe jihads, and Portuguese invasions, demanded ongoing negotiation and military adjustments (Barry, 1998). Gaabu's political stability depended on its ability to incorporate various actors, navigate changing alliances, and secure the loyalty of key provincial elites. However, these dynamics also introduced vulnerabilities, particularly as European influence along the coast grew stronger in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Rodney, 1970). By the mid-1800s, a combination of internal conflicts, external invasions, and economic crises weakened the authority of the mansa-ba and led to the empire's collapse after Kansala fell in 1867. Still, Gaabu's administrative legacy persisted, deeply influencing local political cultures in the Senegambian region into the colonial era (Suret-Canale, 1971). Its decentralized governance, military leadership, and lineage-based authority contrasted sharply with the centralized and bureaucratic approach of French direct rule, discussed in the next section. In sum, the administration of the Gaabu Empire reflects a sophisticated and adaptive model of indigenous governance that balanced provincial autonomy with imperial coordination, military authority with lineage institutions, and inherited Mande traditions with innovations shaped by frontier realities. This system highlights the diversity and dynamism of precolonial West African statecraft and provides an essential comparative framework for understanding the disruptive impact of French colonial administrative policies.

FRENCH DIRECT RULE AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

French direct rule, imposed in West Africa during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, marked a significant departure from the indigenous administrative systems exemplified by the Mali and Gaabu Empires. Based on an ideology of assimilation and centralized bureaucratic control, French colonial administration aimed to reorganize African societies according to European standards while systematically

weakening local political institutions (Crowder, 1968; Mamdani, 1996). Unlike the decentralized, lineage-based, and militarily integrated governance structures of Mali and Gaabu, the French implemented a hierarchical system designed to enforce metropolitan authority, extract economic resources, and promote cultural change. This ideological and institutional shift disrupted traditional political practices and shifted governance toward external interests rather than native priorities (Suret-Canale, 1971). At the top of the French colonial administrative hierarchy was the governor-general, whose authority covered political, economic, judicial, and military matters across the federation of French West Africa (AOF). Serving as the direct representative of the French Republic, the governor-general held overall control over all subordinate administrators, including commandants de cercle and chefs de subdivision (Cooper, 2002). This top-down approach was in stark contrast to the negotiated authority of the mansa in Mali or the mansa-ba in Gaabu, where legitimacy depended on lineage, consensus among elders, and mutual obligations. French administrative power, however, was based on unilateral decision-making supported by coercive force (Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000).

One of the most transformative aspects of French direct rule was its restructuring of local governance. Indigenous authorities who had traditionally held political, judicial, and ritual authority—such as lineage chiefs, clan elders, and provincial governors—were either subordinated to colonial officials or replaced by French-appointed "chefs" who lacked traditional legitimacy (Rodney, 1970). This approach created artificial hierarchies disconnected from the social fabric of local communities and weakened the cultural foundations of governance that had supported empires like Mali and Gaabu for centuries (Barry, 1998). While precolonial systems integrated local institutions into imperial administration, French rule aimed to dismantle indigenous structures and impose a standardized system aligned with colonial objectives. French colonial taxation policies further highlight the break between colonial and indigenous governance. The imposition of the head tax (impôt de capitation), collected coercively and often enforced through forced labor under the corvée system, was meant to force African participation in the colonial economy (Davidson, 1998). Unlike tribute systems in Mali and Gaabu—where tax obligations were part of culturally meaningful relationships of reciprocity, protection, and allegiance—colonial taxation was impersonal, extractive, and imposed without negotiation (Green, 2019). This change fundamentally altered the social contract between rulers and subjects, replacing mutual obligation with administrative coercion (Dike &Ajayi, 1962).

The judicial system under French direct rule further weakened indigenous authority. Through the indigénat code, colonial administrators gained the power to detain, fine, or punish Africans without trial, effectively bypassing both customary courts and the limited colonial judicial institutions available to African subjects (Mamdani, 1996). While customary courts still operated in some areas, they were deprived of autonomy and placed under the oversight of French officials. In contrast, in Mali and Gaabu, customary law and lineage-based dispute resolution formed the core of social cohesion and political legitimacy, reflecting deeply rooted cultural practices (Levtzion, 1973). Another key difference between indigenous governance and French colonial rule is the relationship between political and military authority.

In the Mali and Gaabu Empires, military leadership was central to political decision-making, frontier management, and administrative enforcement (Ki-Zerbo, 1990). However, under French rule, the colonial military mainly served to suppress resistance and enforce administrative orders rather than to participate in governance. Africans were kept out of meaningful political roles, even when they served in colonial armies, highlighting the divide between administrative power and military labor (Rodney, 1970). This marked a shift from the integrated military–political systems seen in precolonial states. Legitimacy, a key aspect of political authority, was formed quite differently during colonial rule. While rulers in Mali and Gaabu gained legitimacy through lineage, spiritual authority, consensus, and their ability to maintain social justice, French authority was based on external enforcement justified by racial ideology and the so-called civilizing mission (Crowder, 1968). Colonial governance did not rely on the approval of African populations but on administrative force and the assertion of European superiority. This foreign-based source of authority conflicted with indigenous expectations and led to widespread resistance (Suret-Canale, 1971).

The philosophical foundations of French administration also sharply contrasted with indigenous political thought. The assimilation doctrine promoted a vision of transforming Africans into French citizens through cultural and legal conformity, though in practice it established a rigid hierarchy privileging French nationals over colonial subjects (Mamdani, 1996). This ideology overlooked the deep cultural roots that structured governance in empires like Mali and Gaabu, where political authority was closely linked to social norms, lineage networks, and religious traditions (Niane, 1989). French rule thus imposed an external worldview that ignored local understandings of power. From a comparative perspective, French direct rule replaced systems that were flexible, consensus-driven, and rooted in social networks with a rigid, centralized bureaucracy. Indigenous systems in Mali and Gaabu balanced central authority with provincial autonomy, incorporated military and political leadership, and governed through institutions grounded in cultural legitimacy (Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000). In contrast, French administration focused on administrative uniformity, economic extraction, and political control, leading to governance structures disconnected from the social realities of African communities (Cooper, 2002).

Ultimately, the imposition of French direct rule not only disrupted indigenous systems but also reshaped the political landscape of West Africa in ways that still influence postcolonial governance. Colonial policies weakened traditional authority, centralized administrative power, and created bureaucratic structures that were ill-suited to local contexts (Rodney, 1970). This legacy stands in sharp contrast to the resilient, adaptable, and socially grounded political cultures exemplified by the Mali and Gaabu Empires. Understanding these differences is crucial for appreciating both the complexity of precolonial African governance and the transformative impact of colonial rule.

CONCLUSION

This article aims to compare the administrative systems of the Gaabu and Mali empires with the French model of direct rule, showing that West Africa had well-structured, coherent, and

legitimate political institutions long before European intervention. The study found that indigenous governance in both Gaabu and Mali was characterized by layered authority, communal accountability, and spiritual legitimacy—features that maintained political cohesion among diverse populations. In contrast, the French colonial system established a centralized, extractive, and bureaucratic regime that displaced or weakened these organic forms of governance to tighten imperial control. The comparison revealed that while precolonial empires balanced central power with strong local autonomy, colonial rule introduced rigid hierarchies and administrative boundaries that neither reflected social realities nor respected the authority of established institutions. This disruption generated enduring forms of political alienation, identity fragmentation, and institutional imbalance that continue to shape governance across the postcolonial states emerging from the territories once influenced by Mali and Gaabu. By juxtaposing these systems, the study underscored that colonialism did not fill a vacuum of governance; rather, it replaced a functioning indigenous political order with an authoritarian model designed primarily for exploitation. This research also opens several pathways for future inquiry. More work is needed to further decode indigenous political philosophies, especially the role of councils, lineage structures, and spiritual mediators in political decision-making. Future studies could examine how hybrid institutions formed through the encounter between African empires and colonial administrations continue to shape local governance, justice systems, and conflict-resolution mechanisms in contemporary West Africa. By retrieving and revaluing these indigenous models, scholars and policymakers may find alternative frameworks for state reform, decentralization, and legitimacy-building that are more culturally grounded and historically resonant.

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