with Gallab’s call for peaceful resistance to the Sudanese government and limits our ability to describe adequately the political and religious experiences of the Sudanese people.

_The First Islamist Republic_ will likely interest academics and activists alike. Due to its highly specialized content, this work is recommended for advanced scholars and graduate students.

*Justine Howe, Northwestern University*


In 1956–57, on the eve of national independence, the Muslim preacher Asekou Sayon launched a movement to destroy anti-Islamic objects and practices among Baga people of coastal Guinea. “Fetishes,” in the form of masks, sculptures, and headdresses, were burned, tossed into the river, or sold to white traders. Sayon and his followers chopped sacred silk-cotton trees and demolished the round hermetic huts in which sorcerers were suspected of hiding with their magical possessions. Bush areas where powerful spirits dwelled and initiation ceremonies occurred were cleared and mosques often constructed in their places. Sayon held all-night, musical religious ceremonies (called _kalima_, after the Islamic declaration of faith or _shahada_) to encourage Baga conversions and impose harsh punishments on those who resisted Islam. Even the Baga’s _amanco ngopong_, the great male spirit that had been represented in masquerades by a twenty-meter construct, was demolished—or was it?

Ramon Sarró’s _The Politics of Religious Change on the Upper Guinea Coast: Iconoclasm Done and Undone_ provides an anthropological history of the events preceding and following Sayon’s iconoclastic movement. Iconoclasm entails destroying sacred objects and images in order to cleanse society of its prior symbolic resources, yet Sarró argues that the outcome of an iconoclastic movement may not be entirely destructive. Sayon’s movement eliminated some distinctive practices and characteristics among Baga people, but doing so helped prepare them for their tempered incorporation into Sékou Touré’s postcolonial and predominantly Muslim state. Sarró therefore suggests that an additional outcome of an
iconoclastic movement, beyond destruction, can be revitalization through the establishment of a new social, political, or religious order.

Around the time of Sayon’s movement in the mid-twentieth century, a majority of Baga people became Islamicized, and the rest were likely affiliated with Catholicism. Nevertheless, Sayon’s intended eradication of spirits, fetishes, and witchcraft from coastal Guinea remains to be completed. Baga masks and headdresses continued to make public appearances and have their connections to powerful and perhaps dangerous spirits debated through the 1990s. Elders explained the endurance of local spirits by noting that Sayon erred in assuming that the objects he destroyed and the spirits they represented or contained were one and the same. Spirits like the *amanco ngopong* are detachable from and more durable than their possibly re-creatable material manifestations.

A great strength of the monograph is Sarró’s placement of the iconoclastic movement in an especially broad historical context, from precolonial times through 2007, which allows him to propose several reworkings of typical assumptions about historical ruptures and continuities. To counter readers’ expectations that the Islamic movement would have necessarily produced a dramatic break from a traditional Baga past, Sarró shows that Baga had been familiar with and accustomed to resisting Islam for centuries, at least since their eradication by eighteenth-century Fulbe jihadists from the adjacent Fouta Djallon highlands. Much of what came to constitute Baga “custom” was a colonial-era invention, a point resonant with contemporary studies by historians and anthropologists of other sub-Saharan cultures. Even the idea of iconoclasm—that it was necessary to destroy Baga symbolic representations for the sake of social advancement—both preceded and followed Sayon’s movement, and was manifest in the state policies of Touré’s Guinea.

While cradling Sayon’s iconoclasm in historical continuities, Sarró emphasizes that the notions of continuity and rupture are themselves political; they are emphasized or enacted by social actors because they have real consequences for present-day distributions of status. Male Baga elders, for example, garnered power in colonial times by maintaining connections to the fetishized spirits that gave them legitimacy. Male youth, who felt oppressed by their elders and the colonial system, often joined Sayon in working to annihilate the elders’ authoritative base through iconoclastic rupture. Later, in the 1990s, a group of educated and urbanized Baga (known as *ressortissants*) tried to revitalize continuities to Baga traditions, claiming that doing so was necessary to preserve their culture and
prove its significance to the national and global communities. Rural residents were less enthusiastic about these public expressions of traditional culture. For resident youth, rupture from their traditions was desirable in order to facilitate entrance into the broader, modern world, whereas resident elders found that the semblance of rupture was necessary to keep their spiritual base of power protected and private. This difference in the youths’ and elders’ reasons for favoring rupture illustrates a second, related type of stance toward culture and history that is likewise undergirded by concerns for social status. Sarró calls this dilemma “flow” or “openness” versus “closure,” with openness to the globalized world evident in the youths’ perspectives and closure evident in the elders’. Following Jonathan Z. Smith, he notes that closure does not always lead to openness, but they can co-occur, enacted by different groups of people with different motivations.

Sarró’s methodology is exemplary; not only did he collect a great quantity of material through archival and field research from 1993 to 2003, but he compares and analyzes his material scrupulously. Much consideration is shown for language, not simply by working in a local language known as Baga Sitem, but by adapting to Baga conventions for how information is communicated or withheld in various situations. At the outset, Sarró notes that he “was more interested in knowing why someone was saying what they were saying than in searching for cultural coherence or for absolute objectivity behind the different voices or renditions” (19). While this is not an unexpected claim, he notably illustrates it throughout the text by mining his informants’ statements, in conjunction with his awareness of their social positions, for greater understanding of their cultural attitudes and those attitudes’ significances. Working in a culture where the benefits of keeping knowledge secret are readily acknowledged, his diligent, progressive efforts to build understanding offer intrigue without ever appearing exaggerated, insensitive, or especially self-oriented. Sarró was encouraged by an informant’s observation that the truth is distinguishable from lies by virtue of its appearing later in time, hence propelling Sarró to numerous significant insights about Guinea.

For Baga of Guinea, the past regularly resurfaces in the present, regardless of Sayon’s or anyone else’s efforts to relegate it to a remote and finite moment. Sarró’s observation of the inherent impossibility of leaving

traditions behind provides an interesting counterpoint to the work of scholars who are worried about cultural preservation and loss, a group he generally critiques for their lack of concern for political interests and social inequalities. Sarró is timid in his introduction and conclusion about articulating the contributions of his work to anthropological theory, although ties could be asserted to recent scholarship in the anthropology of religion on materiality and on temporality. Specialists in religion should appreciate his refusal, following Benjamin Soares, to adopt a singular perspective on what constitutes “proper” Islamic practice while working within a region of Africa with a long-standing plurality of differing ways of being Muslim. Throughout the monograph, Islam, Christianity, and “traditional” Baga religion all emanate from the actions of specific locatable and self-interested people, rather than appearing as abstract or idyllic systems. Some Catholic missionaries in the early to mid-twentieth century, for example, expressed relative tolerance towards traditional Baga religion. Like Sayon, they disapproved of the fetishes and cults, but it was their greater goal to align themselves with Baga leaders against a perceived Islamic incursion. Sarró’s close attention to how historical actors grappled with these kinds of religious and political dilemmas, often in unexpected or non-transparent ways, makes his monograph unique, compelling to read, and broadly significant.

Karen Smid, University of Texas at Austin