

## Interview – Siba N'Zatioula Grovogui

Written by E-International Relations

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## Interview – Siba N'Zatioula Grovogui

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### Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

That is a tricky question. From where I am sitting today, it is very difficult to see where the next exciting research comes from. First, because since the seventeenth century the social sciences have been beholden to certain traditions of thinking. After Francis Bacon's *Novus Organum*, his reply to Aristotle, he introduced a number of instruments for looking at the world; but it was very clear that his commitments were to monarchy, the church, and empire. Those commitments were taken up by people who followed him in creating the Royal Society in Great Britain and the Académie Française in France. The disciplines that were created after the seventeenth century differ very radically in outlook from the disciplines before. The disciplines before had to do with subject, unity, integrity. After this moment, every single discipline became about managing the new order – political science, political economy, international relations, and so on. In the new order, even old disciplines like history and anthropology were given new purposes. We are therefore located in a tradition of thought of managing an order that was predicated to be imperial, European-centred, and hierarchical. That is our legacy. Whether we like it or not, we are situated in a discipline that was supposed to be about managing empire. Empire has to go before we can actually look at the interesting questions.

Second, we have to decide whether International Relations and foreign policy are one and the same. They are not. The commitments of those who do foreign policy have to be about the foreign policies of their own countries. But our commitment in International Relations or global politics has to be about the entire universe. This is where I actually agree with Francis Bacon, Jeremy Bentham, James Lorimer, and people who followed them. Our discipline is about the global order. It should not be about our particular sympathies or attachments. And here is also where I lie slightly with Kant, that we have to dare to *know*. I don't know if Kant himself did that, but *daring to know* was one of the predicates of the Enlightenment.

If we do these things, then we will begin to imagine what our questions are going to be, but we don't seem to be there yet. We have empire, we have our attachment to foreign policy, and we have the confusions about the purpose of our discipline – whether we should be a certain tradition or whether we shall commit ourselves to knowing the world and be the handmaiden of our own future.

This does not mean there is no hope. Jean-Paul Sartre, in his preface to Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), said something very profound. He said: "Not so long ago the Earth numbered 2 billion inhabitants, i.e., 500 million men and 1.5 billion 'natives'" (p.xliii). Today the natives have become citizens. It means that we can not

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only speak *for* the natives. As Indians, Chinese, Brazilians, South Africans, etc. are setting off their own International Relations fields and are having their own conferences, we'll actually have a chance to understand how the world really, fully operates. One of our problems now is that we don't have a grasp of how the world came together; we don't have a full path before European ascendancy.

Our entire history seems to be 1492-onward, and predicated on metaphors that ought to actually scare us, ideas such as state of nature, of which we actually have no practical sense at all. It in fact never existed. We have to have more global knowledge, which takes account of all the histories of politics, power, statehood and so forth, before European ascendancy. Now, we have an International Relations not based on observation, but on some predicates that actually are very harmful, and we only form models based on that. We should commit ourselves to, *at minimum*, observe the world, to give ourselves the means to observe the world. Not just to imagine it. We are caught between imagining the world and following the norms set by empires. Hovering between the two we make this concoction we call International Relations. It's not an interesting discipline at that level.

### **How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

The Iraq War, the so-called Iraq War. Europe, with all its flaws, aspired to a post-Cold War era with a minimum degree of normativity – international law, rule of law, all of that. Europe had managed to convince the rest of the world that America was committed to that. The Iraq War is the only war in human memory, against which a group of people in every capital on this planet stood up and said, 'This war should not be fought.' Because the UN and the International Atomic Energy Agency provided credible evidence that the alleged weapons of mass destruction did not exist. That evidence was discarded by US officials. We had the war; and there was no consequence when it was found that the evidence for the war itself had been fabricated.

The war in (or on) Iraq shuttered a window of opportunity after the collapse of the Cold War; the idea that we could return to the basis upon which the new world, under the UN Charter, was founded – multilateralism, mutual coexistence, mutual respect, rule of law, everybody abiding by international law, etc. The Iraq War, for me, closed that window, and what was frightening was that in 'official' Europe there was actually no sanction at any level; nor any unambiguous condemnation afterwards by any incorporated European body: EU Council; EU Parliament; none.

All of those things have echoes. If African people can permit themselves to say, 'We don't care about the International Criminal Court,' it's partly because of Iraq. The lack of consequence for it led many to the conclusion that there was no universal justice; universal humanitarian morality; universal jurisdiction. European double-speak around the war also said a lot about European self-doubts around US unilateralism, which also caused many to rethink whatever expectations they had about the emergent role of Europe in the post-Cold War era. The debates about the fallout of the Iraq war were as much about Europe as they were about the US, because people had hoped that Europe would rally around traditions such as the Geneva Conventions, the norms around aggression, and so forth.

The impression that Europe would rally to its humanitarian tradition was given by Europe itself in its discussions about the consequences of the fall of the Berlin Wall. But US elites were clear about what that moment meant: not a new start, but the so-called 'end of history'. To be sure, the rhetoric was that the fall of 'Soviet communism' meant a new commitment to democratic principles (rule of law, international coexistence). But these professions belied US actions within international institutions and around the world. With the invasion of Iraq, we moved then from what people thought was going to be a multipolar system to a virtually unipolar system. It taught me that even a country that had the longest democratic tradition (except for the Dutch Provinces), allowed a war like that to happen: unprovoked, unnecessary, and without legal justification.

That the war occurred without any consequences for its perpetrators led me to rethink the so-called democratic peace; the idea that liberal democracies are inherently peaceful; that liberal Western societies abide by traditions and ideologies of legality, legitimacy, and normativity. Iraq led me to think anew about the compositions and traditions within so-called liberal societies that are atavistic: racism; Islamophobia; imperialism; etc., which continue to reside in

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deep pockets within Western societies. I was astounded by discourses around the Iraq War that still oozed anti-Muslim resentment going back to the Crusades. I was amazed at how related sentiments blinded so many people to simple truths, to the evidence that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. As an observer, discussions and narratives around and about the Iraq War, official and not, brought me back in time to memories of the beginning of empire: This is when liberal and progressive forces joined hands with conservative ones to commit to the colonial enterprise, all of them guided by popular sentiments and the fear of their own electorates: the demos. I have since been disabused of the notion that salvation lies in the democratic process alone. Bush went to war against the public sentiment of America because the majority were opposed to it, but he still had those core groups in the public that were *for* it and thought that they would accord him immunities and the right to re-election.

### What is the importance of Black history for the discipline of IR?

Symbols matter and so does symbolism. Black Lives Matter has brought attention to the symbols of the past. Society seems to respond symbolically through gestures of solidarity, signs of empathy, etc. Some conservatives – and even progressives – seem to want to dispense with what they call somewhat dismissively as ‘virtue signalling’. Yet, symbols and symbolism have their own materiality. They relate to our collective ability to see, to connect, and to converse. Symbolic events, initiatives and programmes create spaces and openings for us to look at the world in a new light – to use a different language, to see our neighbour (Levinas). What we have not considered, is exactly what I started with, with Jean-Paul Sartre, which is that your neighbour did not appear just today. Why wasn’t this seen before?

We all need one another and have at different times over the course of history. I take France. After June 1940, there was only one part of France that was *sovereign* in the way that we understand sovereignty today. It was French Equatorial Africa, because France proper was divided into two parts, the one occupied by Germany, the other by the Vichy regime. The governor of French West Africa pledged allegiance to Vichy, or the state as he saw it. This left French Equatorial Africa, where the governor, a Black man called Felix Eboué, had a crucial decision to make: to appeal to Africans to defend France. It was Africans themselves, many World War I veterans, who volunteered. This gesture confounded political figures at the time as well as historians today, who cannot bring themselves to imagine an ‘African humanism.’ Eboué made countless attempts to make his contemporaries aware of systems of morality and humanism in Africa. To no avail.

In short, we all hold the ability to empathise and to relate to others’ pains. But there is more. Why must we know that the African decision to fight in the war was made in Africa and did not flow from an official decree? The answer relates to how we view and understand the world. I also want to disabuse the idea that empathy, humanism, and humanitarianism flow unidirectionally from Europe (or the West) to other corners of the planet. I also wish to speak to the human condition. First, let’s start with the feeling or sentiment and actuality of powerlessness in which we all find ourselves in at times. I will go back to the Nazi occupation of France and the African response, which has always been framed in war historiography as that of a subject population to its metropole. I begin with a simple question. Which France, do you imagine, would have asked Africans to go fight for France? De Gaulle was in hiding in Britain. Could Vichy or the Germans have asked them? The decision was a profound act of humanism and humanitarianism. Paradoxically, it was Vichy’s Marshal Pétain himself who perceived it as such at the time. He wrote a note to his minister of defence and asked why in these terms: “In 1918 we were victorious; Africans rebelled against us. In 1940 we are defeated, and they want to defend France” (see Grovogui 2006, pp.243-244 fn 32). Nor have historians, apparently. Africans decided, on their own, beginning in Chad, to go and defend France, not as an imperial power, but in the name of a humanist idea and against Nazism and Fascism.

Even in France, except for lately, people have not yet digested the idea that the people they had conquered and colonised could voluntarily join in the defence of the so-called metropole. One reason might be that the story does not fold neatly in the regimes of truth and power at the heart of both historiography and International Relations. Our discipline has yet to equip itself with modes of observation, inquiry, and analysis that tell the story of the international order and existence other than ones filtered through Eurocentrism and empire. It is a tragedy for a host of reasons that cannot be listed in this space. Disciplinary realism, for instance, may be onto something. But, its stories about the human (human nature) and order (state of nature) are dubious at best. Human faculties and human disposition

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cannot be reduced to binaries – or simple dialectical relations.

In the history of African-descended peoples, liberation from empire and colonialism also meant to free oneself from resentment and like sentiment against those who enslaved, exploited, and oppressed them. The struggle has always been against the underlying systems and economies – not people, persons, or individuals. This is true of *quilombos* in Palmares, Haitian revolutionaries, and anti-colonialists and their elites: E. W. Blyden, Frederic Douglass, and W. E. B. Du Bois and, more recently, Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba, Ruben Um Nyobè, Leopold Sédar Senghor, Julius Nyerere, Amílcar Cabral, Robert Sobukwe, Nelson Mandela, and countless others. They all fought imperialism, colonialism, and racism but not whites or the nationals and citizens of the metropolises.

This is what makes white supremacy absurd and our disciplinary takes on history and the human condition equally absurd to an aspiring postcolonialist. We find wisdom in the Melian Dialogue but not in Nelson Mandela's Rivonia Speech which gave form and substance to what hope, justice, truth and forgiveness could mean as the foundation for a postcolonial order. Nor does the discipline appreciate that the practice of universal citizenship and citizenship is practice and simply aspiration in African traditions. Quilombos and Haitians proclaimed it in their constitution as a foundational act. Sadly, we are blind to the related traditions because race still remains a modulator of disciplinary epistemologies and ontologies. The place of Africans in the related spaces is merely as 'oppressed and abused to be rescued', or given the language of emancipation. The day we begin to change that situation would be a good day for the discipline of IR and for the world.

### **How has the history of your native Guinea influenced your ideas in the study of international relations and international law?**

Guinea was the first country to leave the French Empire in 1958, after a referendum. Guinea has had a very proud history of fighting both early and post-war French neo-colonialism. It also stood up for post-war and PanAfrican ideals in places like Congo, Algeria, and the then Portuguese colonies of Guinea-Bissau, Angola, and Mozambique. Progressives then and now remember the president of Guinea, Ahmed Sékou Touré, opposing De Gaulle's view of its former colonies as a 'natural' zone of influence. In this vain, Toure led the country to vote 'No' on 28 September 1958 on remaining effectively a French dominion. Guinea also stands in esteem for Touré's strenuous defence of Congo's independence and constitutional federalism. Together with Ghana and Egypt gave sense and meaning to the principle of self-determination. Analysts in Europe and elsewhere like to refer to the UN General Assembly resolution 1514 on the right of peoples to self-determination as 'Khrushchev resolution'. This view is technically correct if by it is meant that the Soviet Union was behind the resolution. But the Soviets merely reflected reality around the world from Vietnam, Algeria, to Congo. Guinea played a significant role at the UN during related debates. On the ground, Guinea and Ghana even ordered their troops to defy UN orders if they perceived them to undermine Congo's independence and Patrice Lumumba's position as the legitimate representative of the central government and the state.

I also wish to make another point about 'Western' (and disciplinary) perceptions of international morality with particular regard to the actions of Guinea. The overall sentiment at the time of the Congo crisis was that Guinea and Ghana were opposed to federalism and that they favoured centralism 'socialist-style'. This belief has endured without any attention to political traditions in Africa. The representative for Guinea at the UN at the time was a man named Diallo Telli. Diallo was from Fouta Djallon. Fouta Djallon, before the French colonisers came in, had a theocratic state of nine provinces (called *diwe*, sing. *diwa*). He knew that the idea, that the way federalism had been treated by Europeans, who didn't want Lumumba in power, was profoundly disturbing, not only according to European constitutional traditions, but also his own, because he came from the region of Guinea where you have a local balance of power and a federal tradition. Diallo could not have misunderstood federalism, but he also understood that some defence of the Province of Katanga in Western quarters were mere neo-colonial attempts to undermine Congo's independence for its resources.

It pains me therefore to admit that something went horribly wrong in Guinea. Guinea's independence was at first predicated on republican ideals. Despite all his flaws, Touré stood in defence of the republican principles of self-determination, self-rule, and international legality. De Gaulle sought to undermine them. Again, unable to view African

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actors as thoughtful agents, Guinea's no vote is often characterised as defiance. People read it as defiance, as if Guineans were children who we were annoyingly defying papa. No, it was a defence of republicanism, the right of people to self-govern; that's what we defended at the United Nations, too. It is deeply offensive that even the noblest of gestures in Africa have to be viewed as reactive and not affirmative. Why must we always scream that African people actually have thought, and that they have traditions, that they have history, which lead them to take certain positions?

For me, this history of Guinea was really imbedded in me. And then I went to law school, where somebody once came to teach international law, based on a French law text, in which they said: The Panama canal belongs to the US because they dug the canal; the Kiel Canal (formerly known as the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Kanal) is German because it is in Germany, but the Suez Canal is international, and Nasser has no right to change that status. If you want to know the truth about the day that I decided I have to pursue International Relations, it is that very day. I just said to myself, there's something profoundly wrong about how people address the world.

**With controversial elections surrounded by protests, 2020 has been a troublesome year for Guinea. Does the political impasse in Guinea teach us anything more broadly about the postcolonial state in Africa?**

Yes. We should've listened to Franz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral, Nelson Mandela, Agostinho Neto, all of them, about the postcolonial state. We made the *horrible* mistake to assume that the colonial state was an adequate instrument of governance, and that all we needed was to change the office-holders from White to Black and leave everything else intact. In the French-speaking countries of Africa, this meant the preservation of a system which is as monarchical, in terms of the presidency, as you can get, without any kind of countervailing power. This is where my Hobbes, Locke, etc. come in. We only have institutions because nobody is perfect, none of us is an angel, not White, Black, not tall or short. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, and that's what we have. What it tells us is that we *have* to change the institutional make-up of the state. If we don't do that, we are bound to go through these cycles over and over. Rather disturbingly, Alpha Condé, the man running for a potential third term in Guinea now, was the head of the student leaders in France in colonial times. After Guinea's independence, he fought against every president in Guinea for a multi-party system. Every one of his predecessors either had him arrested or put in jail. This fact gave him credibility, and no one could have suspected that it would do exactly the same as his predecessor if he came to power. He comes to power and finds out that there is little to stop him from abusing his position, from subverting democratic rules. It is now that people are realizing our institutions are weak.

For these and other reasons, I never talk about the 'postcolonial' state without quotation marks, because it's not truly postcolonial. The primary example is that in every African country, somebody will tell you that land belongs to the state, which is a negation of prior ownership of it. You know who first said that? European colonial powers that deliberately upheld the fiction that there could not be any relationship between Africans and their environment that could be constitutive of property. The colonial state claimed the land in its entirety because Africans could not rationally exploit it. The state only allowed use of the land for the colonised but not ownership. What do African leaders do when we become independent? Proclaim state ownership of the land under myriads of excuses. I am not saying that the state cannot take land away for public purposes. I am talking outright state ownership of all land which, in French-speaking Africa, comes from colonial edicts.

Those who governed us just assumed land belongs to the state, with no regard to private property, with no regard to the fact that people had actual connections to the land. What this leads to is that anytime diamond, gold or another mineral resource is found, representatives of the state come, push people off their land, and take over. We became independent by accepting an insult, that our parents did not own whatever they had. Because the colonial powers said so, it was convenient for the new elites to stick to this. Indeed, there is nothing about those states that is 'postcolonial', except that now we have Black people sitting in positions of power.

In short, the postcolonial state in the former French colonial provinces of Africa is nothing more than a bad imitation of the state created by Louis XIV for France. It has executive, legislative, and judiciary organs but the legislator is an echo chamber for the president and the legislature an instrument at his disposal to use as he (it has been a 'he' thus far) pleases. There are no checks and balances and rights for the citizens that are constitutionally protected and

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defensible in court as an absolute privilege of citizenship against encroachments by the state. Nor are there immunities to give comfort to citizens in their legitimate activities against irascible, intemperate, and corrupt officeholders. I digress.

**Your book *Beyond Eurocentrism and Anarchy* has three African native elites (*évolués*) of the French colonial empire as its protagonists. How does the study of these Black men, their political thought, and their interactions with late-colonial France, contribute to the study of IR and decolonisation?**

The book is imperfect, and in fact, when I retire I intend to write a short book on each one of these figures, because I think Africans should know what they thought at the time, what was plausible then, and what the West refused to accept. That aside, each section of this book is still divided according to some theme. One is about democracy, one is about international norms, and one is about humanism. It also tells people that the end of World War II made an opening for African intellectuals to intervene in international relations.

That opening was more concrete in France than elsewhere, because France had been defeated, and it had made the concession of having Africans in its three major institutions (the *Conseil de la République*, the *Assemblée nationale*, and the *Sénat*). Africans in those institutions were able to put forward the ideas about how they understood international law and humanism (for Felix Éboué), democracy (for Gabriel d'Arboussier), and international norms (for Daniel Ouezzin Coulibaly). People forget that there's something profoundly radical about what they were saying, because they actually had the opportunity of sitting in the front row at a time when the Empire had vanished, that is, before NATO and the Marshall Plan allowed France again to reconstitute its Empire. Before 1948, they talked about what was possible; after 1948, they had to argue against the reconstitution of Empire. I wanted to use this because a lot of people tend to talk about postcolonial possibilities in a vacuum. But what is possible and what is *plausible* is not the same thing. These three *évolués*, by contrast, actually had *plausible* scenarios in mind, it was not just utopian. I wanted to write about those plausible scenarios, about how to govern ourselves after the war, and about why those scenarios vanished.

Why we don't know much about these figures, relates to our canons. This is what I said earlier about International Relations: it's often about foreign policy, rather than about how the world came to be. We read about Jean Bodin and such figures, but we don't necessarily need to know those other people over there from 'obscure' corners of the world. Meanwhile, everything Ouezzin Coulibaly said about NATO, has turned out to be accurate. He argued that the treaty was open to abuse and that might in fact be led to support colonial wars; that it might lead to militarism and militarisation; that it would protect colonial gains in the name of security; and that security as defined by NATO was nothing but an imperial script.

His comments were not intended as an opposition to the idea of international security. They were meant to point to inconsistencies between the spirit of the Atlantic and United Nations Charter, on the one hand, and what he perceived to be unstated aims of NATO. Against this background, he pleaded for a different structure and mission for NATO. But Ouezzin Coulibaly was rightly suspicious of France's intentions. France's entry into NATO gave rise to a renewed sense of '*grandeur*' and a desire to hang on to empire, reversing wartime commitments to the colonised to gain their support for the defence of the metropole. For many Africans in the postcolonies, the betrayal of the post-war ideals (democracy, self-determination, no more 'territorial aggrandisement') occurred most spectacularly on May 8, 1945 – Victory in Europe Day. On that very day the French state slaughtered thousands of Muslims in Sétif and Guelma, to oppose Algerian independence.

So, the Africans represented in *Beyond Eurocentrism* were actually talking about things that were happening at the time and arguing it in a very profoundly philosophical and interesting manner. They considered themselves Africans, French, moderns, and humanists. They were therefore vested in the fate of humanity, much like metropolitan intellectuals. It was not just that they occupied important places in French legislative bodies. They evolved in an intellectual climate in which Europe generally harboured doubts about its own institutions and canons. This self-doubt created the space for philosophical pluralism. For instance, existentialism in France was not just a fad. Not discounting its philosophical roots, existentialism was born of real material circumstances.

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The question to ask, then, is why don't we know of these African intellectuals today? The people I don't forgive for this are actually French intellectuals. From 1944 to 1950, one quarter of the people who were engaged in debates about democracy and this and that etc., on the left bank of the Seine in Paris, were from the colonies. Where are they today? What changed in the 1950s is that NATO had been established and then France became part of the transatlantic world. France was now self-styling itself as European, as a world power again, and could dispense of its colonies. Thus, it was changing its relationship to the colonies. Those who had come to defend France, when France had been defeated, were again made to become subordinate to France. The commitment of the French elite was ultimately more to *la grandeur française*, than to a very democratic post-war world order.

It is also not an exaggeration to say that the Cold War contest narrowed the space for Africans to be full members of the UN. This was clear during the Congo Crisis, when it seems like the only role assigned to African countries was to take side. This feeling made for spirited debates not only around who was the legitimate leader of Congo under the new country's federal system, but also debates centred around the meaning of self-determination: whether it was an extension of the old colonial 'right of people to dispose of themselves' or a new right altogether. To Africans who objected to UN solutions in the Congo, Western powers supporting both the ceremonial president (Joseph Kasavubu) and the leader of resource-rich Katanga (Moïse Tshombe) was a negation of Congo's constitution and the right to self-determination. In the end, Guinea, Ghana, and others supported Lumumba's legitimacy as the chief executive within a centralised state and rejected the idea that Soviet support was an issue.

### **How have Eurocentric understandings of time and power influenced the discipline of IR, and how it perceives the position of (Black) Africa in the world?**

I go back to Francis Bacon. Bacon believed his new instrument, which he designed for the new order, did for the social sciences and humanities what Copernicus had done for astronomy: observation, measurement, calculation, and so on. This is a trick: Copernicus actually had taught us that geocentrism was wrong, that we may be smart and self-involved, but no, we're not the centre of the universe. We are simply slightly more evolved monkeys on this rock spinning around the sun like everybody else. Bacon and his followers did the reverse: They went from a world that was multi-form, multi-cultural, multi-civilisational, extracted Europe, and made Europe the centre of it. In the process, subsequent European philosophers, theorists, and literary figures invented a new past that mirrored the post-Renaissance European present. They then outline a future that was an expression of Europe's sovereign desire, will, and values. Anything outside of these strictures was outside of time, dangerous, and to be suppressed. Hegel best captures the thrust of this move in his Philosophy of History, which gave us historicism. This was not just the idea that time was linear. It was that time had a telos and that telos manifested itself in the European trajectory. What post-Renaissance and post-Enlightenment thoughts did was to eviscerate any notion of 'coevalness': contemporaneous human populations are necessary, bound together in some fashions; that our trajectories, and futures are conjoined; and the past and the future cannot be disentangled in any meaningful way, except as signposts to what we collectively want to make of ourselves. In a sense, then, Eurocentrism was actually against *nature*, at least in the way that Copernicus envisioned observation. So, all that Bacon took from Copernicus was actually measurement and his concept of time, but he *forgot* that Copernicus argued that we should let go of the ego. We are not the centre of the universe. But that's what Europe was for Bacon: the centre, and he and his followers were remaking everything else European to be in the centre.

Despite the rise of new powers, the discipline of IR has stayed hostage to such concepts because it is not a question of identity. We have been wedded, even after decolonisation, to certain concepts we – now the postcolonial – have not properly divested ourselves from that Eurocentric inheritance. Take China today. In Africa, the Chinese tell people, 'Look, we are not like those bad Europeans.' There are almost more Confucius Institutes than institutes of the *Alliance française* in Africa. If you go and listen to the Chinese there, they will say that what they are seeking in the world today is not domination. They go back to the time of Zheng He and say, 'Well, look, we had explorers, they had explorers; Columbus went to the New World, look at what happened; in our case, it was not about conquest.' If you combine that history with the Silk Road and so on, you can convince many Africans that China will be different, as a power. But that is nonsense. The Chinese are not doing anything resembling the manner in which Zheng He saw the world. What China is pursuing today is the behaviour of an old-fashioned world-power, which is predicated on everything we inherited from the West since 1492. It's no different. What China wants is actually not unsettling

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anything, it just says, 'This is how these guys came to power, we were humiliated through unequal treaties, now we get our chance to be on top.' But nobody wants anybody to be on top. That's the problem.

So, when I talk about China in Africa, I say, no, you don't get the point: we don't *want* a global power. The thing about the so-called Silk Road (the name itself was invented in the nineteenth century by a German cartographer), the network that went all the way from China to Mozambique, is that there was no one sovereign power guiding anybody. Every node on that road was negotiated locally by people who came into contact at that point. The economy was not on behalf of, or in the interest of, anybody in particular. If China really wants to talk about that moral order, then we should talk about it. But you can't just say, 'We are Chinese, we once belonged to that tradition, and therefore we are different.'

### How does this relate to the concept of sovereignty and its (Eurocentric) conception in IR?

The above does not mean that a non-Eurocentric conception of sovereignty in IR is unattainable or inconceivable. First, when I argue about Eurocentrism, I am not dispensing of European ideas. Ideas are universal; it is their instrumentalisation that I argue against. It is not that Kant is not a phenomenal thinker. I just think that if you really want to understand the power of Kant's ideas, then maybe you should actually read his counterpart in Timbuktu, Mukhtar al-Kunti. They were only four years apart, they wrote about the same phenomena, and al-Kunti seemed to me slightly more interesting. But this is not a dismissal of Europe. We cannot conceive of anything by excluding anybody. The whole problem with Eurocentrism is that it is exclusive.

Second, even in European traditions, the genealogy of the *sovereign* is not the same as that of *sovereignty*. The notion of sovereign was about the seat of power, who gets to speak, for God, for the church, for the flock. That was the essence of the coronation battle between Charlemagne and Pope Leo III, which also set the grounds for the investiture struggles later. Charlemagne controlled space, its organisation, and therefore the very lives of the Christian flock that the Pope desired to reach. Then followed a long history spanning the so-called investiture disputes, the formation of various European dynasties, and absolute monarchies in Europe. With respect to sovereignty, the question is not exactly who rules but who is the rightly possessor of the will. This question has more relevancy for modern political movements and formations – republican, liberal, and constitutional monarchies. It appears when it was no longer sufficient to pretend a mandate from above but rule on behalf of peoples. This is why it is near-unimaginable to establish a genealogy of sovereignty without talking about self-determination and modern revolutions. Whereas one does not for that of the sovereign. Sovereignty is no longer about the seat of power; it was about *what* holding power means, and on behalf of whom.

But sovereignty, the question of power, and should govern – which is in whose name – you find that everywhere in different traditions from imperial China and Japan to the Mali empire to the Persian ones. Everywhere. The debate that is new is the nature of sovereignty. This is a modern debate. It came in conjunction with questions of legitimacy from 'hordes' and 'peoples' desiring to self-government by having a say in how the sovereign behaves and what the sovereign does. This question of sovereignty is very much at the heart of much discord in the international system today, where the West effectively holds power but does not abide any idea of collective will. Western powers, not all but the hegemonic ones, would like to be trusted by the 'international community' and 'international society' even as they insist on the ascendancy of their own national interests. The irony is that these hegemonic powers identify themselves as democratic and preach to others about democracy. They are far from even contemplating global democracy in any meaningful way. It is as if democracy is what you do at home, that is where sovereignty is the will of the people. Sovereign power is what the world desires because the national interest trumps the sovereign will of the world in whose name 'international security' is enacted and performed. I say irony earlier, but this is more than irony. Yes, we can find ways of thinking about how collectively we are together and how to exercise power collectively and legitimately in the world today. One needn't be philosophically Eurocentric or politically wedded to Western supremacy to envisage such a possibility.

### What is the most important advice you would give to young scholars?

I have two separate pieces of advice. One for those who are located in the 'West', and another for those who are in



## Interview – Siba N'Zatioula Grovogui

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the postcolonies. Those who are in the postcolonies, I will tell them to reread Édouard Glissant and Aimé Césaire. The tendency in the so-called decolonial debates to want to get rid of everything Western is a terrible mistake based on a misunderstanding of how the world is, and has been, conjoined. Africans did falsafa, as Arabs did, and did so in tiffinagh and Ajami. The head of the Murid brotherhood in Senegal still quotes Al-Ghazali on an ordinary day. One may find Greek authors in the Timbuktu papers. The Greeks were closer to Africa, where many of the ancient Greek philosophers resided, than they ever were to say France or Germany. Before we make European readings of Aristotle Western, we should think of how much Greek philosophers were indebted to Africans and Africans to the Greeks. It is to concede too much to allow that Eurocentrism has any validity other than in power. The problem is that Eurocentrism is 'bunk' and that we should rediscover the human, rescue the world from the prison house of Eurocentrism, and in the process refashion the human spirit as manifest in the multiplicity of intellectual traditions around the world and the many insights that we may collectively gain from them. To paraphrase Amílcar Cabral, decolonisation was about colonialism, not even about the coloniser. In the end, after decolonisation, the coloniser who visits us, is also a citizen. Decolonisation was about the system. After that system goes away, we are all human. Consequently, the insurrection against Eurocentrism is not about rejecting all that is European – European ideas, European science, etc. – it is part of our shared cosmologies, of ways of knowing in the world. But what has been problematic is its instrumentalisation, how it was set up and deployed. It is the kind of instrumentalisation which emerged from Europe, this section in Europe that thought they controlled something nobody else had, that their faculties were superior. That is the harm done by Eurocentrism: its attempts lend credibility to empire, authoritarianism, and oppression through regimes of truths that are at best conjured up. It is *that* Eurocentrism that I am fighting against, not all things European, certainly not Diderot or Voltaire. These are human beings who thought great things and were wrong about many. Just as their African counterparts in Timbuktu and elsewhere. I disagree with some of their ideas for sure. To go back to Aimé Césaire: if Black people can see themselves as being chosen, it's only in one way: to humanise humanity.

My advice to the other side is: be careful. If you know your own history, read what happened before Vatican II. Christian ministers were standing in street corners in Africa, Latin America, Indonesia, and elsewhere, reading the Bible in Latin. No-one was paying attention to them. And so, Pope Paul VI proclaimed that the missionaries should speak to them in a manner in which they understood (that is, to vernacularise the Bible). In a similar way, have all the faith you want in your canons, but the fact is that those canons no longer speak to anyone but yourselves. (Not the texts themselves, not Aristotle, not Bacon, but the exigencies you have made of them, the assemblages you have made of those texts.) There is sight of China developing, India will develop, Brazil will, and at *some* point, we will have to be able to talk to one another. Please, please revisit your canons. They are woefully inadequate. If you don't trust me, look at the time before Vatican II. Read the Bible in Latin, nobody pays attention. There is going to be a time when nobody will listen to the way in which you articulate. Those assemblages are speaking to the rest of the world less and less, and happily – if I must say – less and less even to young Europeans.