EM TRMBUKTU TO WASHINGTON is an invitation to think about Mali and her important place in the wider world. Mali's influence in West Africa and beyond has been felt for centuries. But her regional, continental, and global connections are not just part of the past. From Timbuktu to Washington also speaks to us about Malians' ongoing interest in actively forging new links worldwide.

Mali is an independent, democratic, culturally diverse, predominantly Muslim nation, formerly part of French West Africa, that sits at an important nexus of West African culture. Many of the country's ethnic groups extend across her national borders, tying Malians in very real ways to the nations that surround her. While Malian citizenship is a source of great pride, people also remember and honor their family and communities outside the country, seeing themselves as citizens of Africa and the world as well.

Over the past 1,200 years Mali has given birth to powerful empires—Ghana, Mali, and Songhai—whose influence transcended Mali's current boundaries. In trade or by conquest, many peoples, ideas, and goods passed through these empires, over land and on the Niger River. This great waterway flowing through Mali from its southern border to the edge of the Sahara Desert is a lifeline of the country. Along its entire length, Mali's farmers grow grains and vegetables on the river's banks, animals come to drink its water, fishermen cast their nets, and boats carry people and goods to trade. The river has always linked Malians to one another and to areas beyond.

Mali's fame had already reached North Africa by the 14th century, when the Moroccan geographer Ibn Batuta traveled to Mali to see the celebrated empire for himself. The echoes of these historic cultural and economic exchanges can still be found in communities of descendants of those Malians who lived for centuries in North Africa. Malians also travel today to cities in North Africa, as well as to France and elsewhere in Europe, seeking new economic and educational opportunities.

Malian empires' embrace of Islam forged links eastward to Egypt and the Arab world. In the 14th century the Malian emperor Mansa Musa made a pilgrimage to Mecca, taking with him a large entourage and scores of camels laden with gold. His arrival in Cairo and later Mecca made quite an impression, according to the chronicles of the day. Muslim
scholars and architects from this larger Islamic world returned with him to Mali to take up residence in Timbuktu and the empire’s capital city. Today between 80 and 90 percent of Malians are Muslims. Many of them make the annual pilgrimage to Islamic holy sites in Saudi Arabia to renew and reaffirm their faith, and Malian students study at Islamic universities in Morocco, Egypt, and elsewhere.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the tragedy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade brought Malians west to the Americas by way of the Middle Passage. These men and women carried with them not only their values, aesthetics, and beliefs but also their agricultural and technological expertise. They contributed to the very fabric of American culture, and through their knowledge and labor they helped develop the American economy. Mali’s ties to the United States did not end with the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade; in the 20th century, for example, during the two World Wars, Malian soldiers fought alongside the Allied forces in the European and African theaters. Drawing on their experiences, the veterans brought new ideas about liberty and justice back to Mali, and these fed the growing movement for independence from French colonial rule that achieved success in 1960. Mali’s commitment to democracy has grown over the last decades, and Mali now stands as an important example of democracy in action for other African nations and the world.

Over the past decades, Malian students have come to study in

The Niger River is a vital lifeline in Mali, connecting peoples and communities from the desert in the north to the forest and grasslands in the south. Photo © Shawn Davis

For centuries camels have been the primary means of transporting people and goods across the Sahara. These camels are resting outside a Tuareg camp near Timbuktu. Photo by John Franklin © Smithsonian Institution

Editor’s note: In cases where ethnic groups or places are known by different names or spellings in the United States and Mali, both names/spellings are given the first time they are used in an article.
universities in the United States, and Americans have gone to study in Mali; these students have maintained bonds with people and institutions in both countries after returning home. Some Malians have immigrated to the United States and have established their families in cities throughout the country, where they also contribute to the cultural and economic vitality of the United States. Like Malians everywhere, Malian Americans retain the memory of Malian history, and they preserve vital ties to families and communities in Mali by sending money home and receiving visitors here, celebrating weddings and births, and mourning the passing of relatives and friends in both countries. In this way, connections between Mali and the United States continue to grow.

Today, more and more American schoolchildren are learning about Malian culture and Mali’s important place in world history. Malian music, which has gained an enthusiastic following worldwide, is being played on American airwaves, and more and more concert tours are coming to the United States. The Internet connects Malians and Americans to one another in new and productive ways, and increasing numbers of Americans are traveling to Mali to learn about Malian history and culture firsthand. Mali welcomes all of these global educational, cultural, and economic exchanges, just as she has in the past.

From Timbuktu to Washington has evolved over five years from a wish and an idea to a fully developed and exciting program of musical performances and cultural activities. Planning was enhanced by the previous relationships, both personal and institutional, between the Smithsonian and Malian cultural institutions and was supported by the Malian government and U.S. agencies in Mali. Malian organizers thoughtfully deliberated about what to share with American visitors and determined how Malian culture in all its diversity should be represented. We would like to recognize the dedication of all of the many Malians who have been involved in bringing their culture to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. When you have the opportunity to work with colleagues over the years it takes to plan such an event, you share their joys and sorrows, and you are nourished by their energy and commitment. You learn about each other as people. Despite many challenges and distractions, our colleagues remained wholeheartedly engaged in the planning for the Festival, and they always made us feel welcome in Mali.