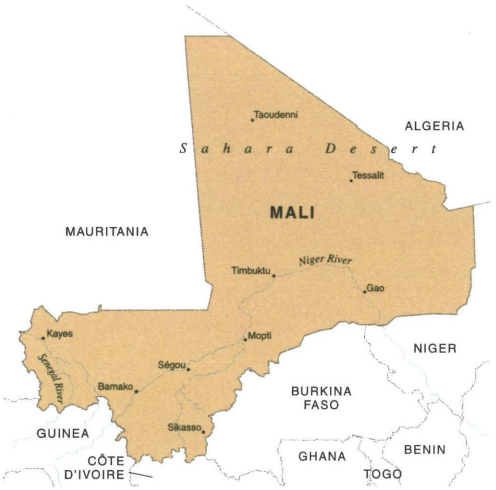
MALI *From Timbuktu to Washington*

by MARY JO ARNOLDI
and JOHN W. FRANKLIN



Mary Jo Arnoldi, John W. Franklin, and Samuel Sidibé are co-curators of the Mali Festival program. Mary Jo Arnoldi is Curator for African Ethnology and Arts at the Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History. She was the lead curator of the *African Voices* exhibition at the museum, and has been working in Mali since 1978. John W. Franklin is Program Manager at the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. He has curated three previous Festival programs, on Washington, D.C., Cape Verde, and The Bahamas. He lived in West Africa for eight years. Samuel Sidibé's article and biographical note follow.

FROM TIMBUKTU 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 Songhaï—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.

Malians recognize and embrace their national diversity, one that owes much to Mali's rich and dynamic history. The ancient city of Timbuktu (Tombouctou) was a great center of scholarship and trade that connected Malians north across the Sahara through Morocco and Algeria to Europe. 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.

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MIRROR IMAGES: HISTORICAL LINKS BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND MALI

MICHAEL TWITTY

Found at a construction site in Alexandria, Virginia, a small iron statue from the late 18th century indicates the possible presence of a Bambara (Bamanan) artisan. The statue went unnoticed by many, yet it remains an enduring symbol of contributions by the peoples of Mali to the New World.

Malians and other West Africans brought to the United States as slaves shaped the cultural landscape. The sacred knowledge they associated with blacksmithing and sculpting influenced the development of wrought-iron grillwork and skilled carpentry in Southern coastal cities, much of it done by Africans brought specifically for that purpose from what is now Mali. In the 17th and 18th centuries West Africans from what is now Mali, Senegal, the Gambia, Guinea, and Guinea-Bissau came to the Carolinas, Georgia, and Louisiana with centuries of experience cultivating rice, cotton, and indigo.

Cooks from Mali and the Senegambia region combined their own foods—particularly okra, sesame, and sorghum—and cooking techniques with those of Europeans and Native Americans to invent our first Creole cuisine in New Orleans, Savannah, and Charleston. Fulani (Peul) herders brought their knowledge of raising livestock to areas from the Carolinas to Texas. The Boso (Bozo) transferred their mastery of fishing and navigation to the seafood-loving inhabitants of Louisiana and the Carolinas. Coastal South Carolinians adopted the Bambara word *bene* for sesame seeds. To this day, benne cakes in Charleston share table space with okra stew or seafood gumbo, served over rice.

Our music was forever transformed by Malians and their traditions. The descendant of the Malian *kora* and *n'goni*, the banjo remains a centerpiece of bluegrass music. The ancestors of Southern bluesmen include the *kora*-playing, epic-singing *jeliw (griots)* of Mali. The influence of West African dance forms can be seen here as well.

African contributions to the development of American civilization have not been generic; they are specific and documented. With benne cakes and banjos and their love of life, the peoples of Mali, over 500 years, have helped to transform the U.S. into *us.* ■

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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. ■