

MIRROR IMAGES: HISTORICAL LINKS BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND MALI

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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 *benne* 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. ■