



The Future of Mali's Past

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Mali is heir to a remarkable heritage, composed of an assortment of natural and cultural treasures, both tangible and intangible; it constitutes not only a wealth of knowledge and experience that has been accumulated over the generations, but also an essential aspect of cultural identity for the different communities throughout the country. In spite of its importance, the future of this heritage (its preservation, valorization, and integration into the process of national development) is threatened by numerous factors, including the pillage of archaeological sites and even effects of globalization.

With respect to archaeology, Mali is unquestionably one of the most richly endowed countries in all of West Africa. Studies conducted for a little over a century by both national and foreign researchers have yielded important information about the country's past, unearthing the existence of cultures and civilizations that were previously either unknown or attributed to an external origin or stimulus. To cite just a few examples: early indigenous urbanization of the length of the Middle Niger (well illustrated by the Jenné-Jeno site, founded in 250 B.C.E. near present-day Djenné, which reached the dimensions of a true urban center by C.E. 1000), the culture of sepulchers (characterized by the presence of magnificent underground tombs laid out in the laterite crust, and best known by the vast necropolis at Dogo), the concentration of megaliths in the lake region (whose most important site, Tondidarou, was discovered in the 1930s and consists of over 150 raised stones), and the Tellem culture, with its numerous cliff dwellings along the Bandiagara escarpment containing an abundance of ritual and everyday objects. Besides these cultures, there are thousands of prehistoric sites that have effectively faded



A national campaign is underway in Mali to save its archaeological sites and treasures.

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(Top) Dogon masqueraders perform at a local funeral.

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back into the Sahara and Sahelian zone, countless ruins of fortified cities in the south that evidence the period of instability that followed the end of the great empires, and of course the cave paintings of Adrar des Iforas and the engravings of the “Boucle du Baoulé.”

Architecture is an important part of Mali’s cultural heritage, particularly the Sudanic earthen architecture exemplified by such famous and monumental edifices as the Djingaréber and Sankoré mosques in Timbuktu, the mosque at Djenné, and the tomb of Askia Mohammed at Gao. This architecture, born of a fruitful interchange between black Africa and the Arab-Berber world since the age of Mali’s great empires, inspired French colonists to create the neo-Sudanic style, which they used for many government buildings. Since independence Malian architects have reused and refined these older styles, and wonderful examples of these historical and new buildings distinguish the streets and squares of Mali’s large cities, notably Bamako and Ségou.

One should add to these material relics the myriad intangible elements of Malian heritage: rites of passage or initiations into *jow* (secret societies) for several ethnic groups (Bambara [Bamana], Senufo, Mianka); dances and masked performances at *dama* (funerals) for the Dogon; stories, legends, and epics (related by various traditionalists, such as the *jeliw*, or *griots*, of the Mandé); not to mention the Muslim festivals (Tabaski, Korité, and Mahouloud, the anniversary of the birth of the Prophet Mohammed) practiced throughout the country since the massive conversion to Islam in the last few decades. This fluid intangible culture gives rhythm to the life of diverse communities and expression to their beliefs and worldview.

Despite its importance at several levels (knowledge of the past, reinforcement of the cultural identities of diverse communities, the development of cultural tourism), the cultural heritage of Mali is being eroded by various factors, foremost of which is the pillage of archaeological and ethnographic objects to satisfy the demand of international traffic. This phenomenon, in existence since the collection of “*belles pièces*” by the first colonial officials in search of the exotic, has progressively developed into a lucrative economic enterprise, involving a whole chain of intermediaries from the villager (hoping for a few dollars) to the international art dealer (who gleans the greatest profit) and the merchant from Bamako, Mopti, or Djenné (who serves as middleman between the two). Originally restricted to the interior Niger Delta and Dogon country (whose archaeological and ethnographic treasures were

quickly depleted), it has progressively spread throughout Mali, looting unknown treasures such as the terra cotta figurines of Baninko and the magnificent funerary urns of Sosso. This pillage, and the illicit traffic in art objects that it supports, have contributed for decades to the enrichment of numerous Western galleries and museums. Some pieces, like the famous terra cotta horsemen of the interior Niger Delta, ensconced as they are in these museums, will certainly never be seen by Malian youth unless they travel to Europe or America.

Other factors must be added to this ravaging of Mali’s cultural heritage: the country’s widespread conversion to Islam and the negative effects of certain development projects. Thus, in Dogon country and in the southern region of the Bambara (which has long resisted Islam), the newly converted are destroying their former ritual objects and sanctuaries, which they no longer consider as part of their heritage. In several regions of the country, historical monuments have been destroyed by development projects and urban pressures. A sadly well-known example occurred in 1993, when a significant section of Sikasso’s 19th-century *tata* (an important defensive rampart, symbolizing resistance to colonization) was demolished to make way for water pipes.

This degradation has driven the country to take several measures to preserve and valorize its cultural heritage. A series of laws have been adopted since the mid-1980s to regulate archaeological digs and prohibit the unauthorized exportation of archaeological objects. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, efforts in heritage preservation were bolstered by UNESCO’s classification of Dogon country and the historic cities of Timbuktu (Tombouctou) and Djenné as World Heritage Sites. The establishment in 1993 of management structures, called Cultural Missions, at each of these World Heritage Sites has helped to sensitize local populations to the importance of their cultural heritage. In 1993 Mali and the United States also signed a bilateral accord prohibiting any archaeological objects from the interior Niger Delta or Dogon country from entering the United States without authorization for exportation. The accord is the first of its kind between the United States and a sub-Saharan African country. Finally, and truly remarkable for Africa, the Ministry of Culture has created a Cultural Map of Mali. This document, which will soon become publicly available, is the first step to establishing an inventory of Mali’s national cultural heritage. Presented as a cultural atlas, it is intended to raise awareness of the richness and cultural diversity of every region of the country. ■