

# THE GRIOT

vol XII, issue I

*the Friends of Mali newsletter*

October 2002

## Bringing It All Back Home

Mark Nilles

My name is Mark Nilles and I am an RPCV—the “R” stands for “Recovering.”

Bogolan covers walls in my family room, kitchen and bedroom. Masks stare at me with fixed expressions—spooky at first glance, comforting after time. Miniature Dogon doors, leather Tuareg gris-gris, and Peuhl hats adorn random corners. A few pictures from Mali sit prominently upon the fireplace mantel—hundreds more wait patiently on the bookshelf in cheap, plastic photo albums displaying images of Michael Jackson, Venus Williams and Mari Mar on the covers. When I bike to the grocery store I bring my goat bag to haul my loot home. After a few failed attempts at humor, I’ve stopped joking with the bagger about how hungry the goat is.

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## Welcome to the Griot!

Jumana Qamruddin

Welcome to the new, revived Friends of Mali newsletter! I would like to take this opportunity to officially say hello to everyone in the group. Since the Peace Corps celebrated its 40th anniversary celebration this past summer, the interim board has been busy getting the group off the ground.

Making contact with individuals, groups and enrolling new members among the RPCV and non-RPCV communities was our initial goal. Jeff’s hard work on implementing the website has helped us enormously to communicate easily and form a base for our membership. Ideally, we would like Friends of Mali to be a means of communication, exchange of ideas, a resource for others, and a vehicle for initiation and participation in projects related to Mali and West Africa. We have been working to form relationships with the Malian embassy and groups like the Malian Association (which includes about 1,000 Malians here in DC) to promote our group and start getting involved activities. I recently attended a Malian Independence celebration thrown by the Association and had the opportunity to introduce Friends of Mali and talk about some of our goals.

There are a couple of exciting projects in the upcoming year, “The Global TeachNet” program and the “Smithsonian Folklife Festival”. The Global TeachNet program is a NPCA effort to realize the third goal of Peace Corps by bringing experiences into the classroom. This year the DC metro area public schools have integrated the study of Mali into the school curriculum for third and sixth grades. The school boards have asked for our assistance in enhancing the course material related to Mali. This initiative has many possibilities, including implementation of similar programs in schools around the country.

Another exciting event is the 2003 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, where Mali will be the featured country! We have been meeting with the Smithsonian Institution so that our experiences and perspectives can play a role in both the planning and realization of the event. We are also planning to have an RPCV reunion during the two-week event next summer. We will keep you up-to-date on all of these projects in the coming months as our role becomes clearer and more defined.

We need your active participation in making Friends of Mali a successful and vibrant entity. Please contact us with questions, comments, and most importantly ideas and contributions on what you would like our group to accomplish. We very much look forward to hearing from you.

Your interim president,  
Jumana Qamruddin (98-00)

## RPCV Photos in African Arts Magazine



African Arts Magazine has just published a photoessay by RPCV Shawn Davis.

“While living as a Peace Corps volunteer in the Dogon villages of Dologou and Kedialy from 1996 to 1998, I had the opportunity to observe several funerary rituals, *dama*, which incorporate many of the famous Dogon masks and statuettes...The images in this essay are from three *dama* ceremonies that took place in Dologou and neighboring Kedialy.”

Shawn’s article is in the Summer ‘02 issue. You can check out the magazine’s website at [www.isop.ucla.edu/africanarts](http://www.isop.ucla.edu/africanarts), or you can look for the magazine in the Art Magazine section of major bookstores or in boutique art book stores.

Shawn’s work is also on display at the Friends of Mali website or on Shawn’s own website, <http://www.shawndavisphoto.com>.

I sen diyara cogo o cogo, I te se ka boli ka temen I yere kan.  
(No matter how fast you run, you cannot outrun yourself.)  
- reprinted from “Mande Zana ni Ntalen” by  
Kassim Gausu Kone, [www.mothertongue.us](http://www.mothertongue.us)

# Friends of Mali Membership Drive

Jeff Spivack

An organization is only as strong as its membership base. We at the Friends of Mali recognize that, and are doing our best to ensure that we serve as many members as possible. We have launched a membership drive, via this newsletter, email and our website, to try to inform potential members of our renewed existence. We are encouraging people who are interested in Mali to register and/or join at our website.

By registering with the group, which is free, you let us know where you are and how to contact you. We will keep you posted on Friends of Mali events and goings-on. Even if you don't think you're likely to become a full member, we encourage you to register so that you can keep informed and so that we can have a better idea of how many people are interested.

If you wish to join the group as a full member, for \$15 a year you will:

- continue to receive this newsletter;
- be able to look up other FOM members' contact information;
- be able to vote on group decisions;
- get discounts to Friends of Mali activities.

Your contributions will help to pay for expenses like the website, mailings, and administrative costs. As we develop our capacities, we also plan to set up partnership projects, most likely with the help of Mali PCV's, which will be funded by a portion of your dues.

In order to streamline all of this, both for us and for you, the entire process takes place online. To register, you simply need to fill in a form; you can pay for your membership by credit card online (securely, via PayPal), by mailing us a check, or by designating us as your Affiliate Group in your NPCA renewal.

Please register and/or join today; just go to the website at <http://www.friendsofmali.org> and follow the "register" link. And please help us to spread the word to your fellow Mali enthusiasts. We look forward to welcoming as many new members as possible!

- Jeff Spivack is currently coordinating membership issues for the FOM.



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Friends of Mali  
P.O. Box 27417  
Washington, DC, 20038-7417  
<http://www.friendsofmali.org>

President: Jumana Qamruddin  
[president@friendsofmali.org](mailto:president@friendsofmali.org)

Newsletter Editor: Sabrina Washington  
[newsletter@friendsofmali.org](mailto:newsletter@friendsofmali.org)

## Would you like to contribute something to the next newsletter?

Drop a line to our newsletter editor, Sabrina Washington, at [newsletter@friendsofmali.org](mailto:newsletter@friendsofmali.org). We welcome all contributions!

## Bringing It All Back Home

(continued from page 1)

These souvenirs help keep the memories of Mali and my experience as a Peace Corps volunteer a part of my daily life. I have the classic symptoms of a former volunteer who does not want his experience to end.

Like all life-changing experiences, the Peace Corps experience is meant to be shared. More importantly, I cannot relive Mali by bringing my goat bag to the store or by trying to have a conversation with my Senufo masks. Instead, I have actively sought out opportunities to share my experience with family, friends and people in my community through formal presentations, recruitment efforts and thousands of random, casual conversations. This has helped bridge the gap between Mali and home.

Specifically, I have talked to a few elementary school classrooms, spoken on the phone with potential PCVs and helped with recruitment efforts here in Tallahassee. During my first summer back in the US, I put together a slide show of my photographs from Mali. It takes about an hour to present and I've shown it on four separate occasions. Recently, my aunt and uncle invited about 20 people to their house, put some snacks and drinks on the table and let me share Mali with their friends. Even more recently, during the third week of September, a Peace Corps recruiter from the regional office in Atlanta was on campus at Florida State. I helped at two different events—the latter of which was a job fair with a sit-down lunch at noon. (I made sure to show up before lunchtime so I could take advantage of the free lunch—graduate students, like Peace Corps volunteers, are always working the angles.)

However, after helping with recruiting and only talking to those interested enough in approaching the Peace Corps table, I felt like taking a little more aggressive approach to "bringing the world home." I teach an Introduction to Education class at Florida State; when my students came to class on Tuesday, September 24, they had no idea what was coming. (The syllabus simply read, "Come enjoy a special presentation.") I held my 37 students hostage for an hour while I spoke whimsically about joking cousins and nyegens and eating tôh and brochettes and, oh yeah, all the hard work I did (almost forgot about that). I had so much fun that at times I even forgot that I was wearing a boubou.

So what does the future hold for this Recovering Peace Corps Volunteer? Well, I am one week away from a big election. I hope to become the newly elected Secretary for the RPCV-North Florida Steering Committee. Wish me luck—I (as well as the rest of the candidates) am running against the ubiquitous "Write-in." If elected, I promise to uphold the office of Secretary with all the dignity of a man who hath not shat himself once—since returning from Peace Corps. (It's not just my psyche that's recovering from my Peace Corps experience.)

# Friends of Mali Website News

Jeff Spivack

The Friends of Mali website is up and running! We plan to use it as our primary means of connection and communication; as such, we have set up a number of different resources:

- the Mali News page. Get the latest news from Mali, as collected by AllAfrica.com, or view other sources such as l'Essor, one of Mali's daily newspapers, or Malinews.
- the FOM calendar. See what's we've got planned for you—or get inspired to plan something yourself!
- the Discussion page. Talk amongst yourselves about all things Malian, ask for information, announce an event—the topic is up to you. This is also where we will be posting announcements concerning the group itself.

There are also pages with photos and stories from Mali, links to other sources of information about Mali, information about the group itself and more...be sure to see it all.

You can also using the website to register with the Friends of Mali, and to join by paying your membership fees. For more information about this, please see the "Membership Drive" article elsewhere in this newsletter.

<http://www.friendsofmali.org>

*- Jeff Spivack served in Bounguel (Mopti) from 96-98 and currently manages the FOM website*



Photo: Cheryl Turner, PC Mali

PC Mali staff and PCV's at a recent swearing-in ceremony... brings back *la nostalgie*, no?

**Have you enjoyed reading this newsletter?**

**Wouldn't you like to continue to receive it?**

Please support the Friends of Mali by joining the group as a member. Membership is only \$15 a year, and in addition to getting this newsletter, you'll be able to look up your fellow FOM members on our website, vote on group decisions, and get discounts to FOM events. More information is available on our website, at <http://www.friendsofmali.org>. Thank you!

# Update from Peace Corps Mali

Cheryl Turner

There are currently 113 PCV's serving in Mali. Here's a quick rundown on what they're doing:

## **Agriculture/Gardening**

This project helps Malians produce more nutritious food, generate income, and help protect and to utilize the fragile land resource base. The PCVs emphasize skills transfer in sustainable and improved food production techniques and nutritional education through gardening, field crops, small animal husbandry, improved livestock management, and pre- and post-harvest activities at the local level. The project has been particularly successful in working with women and youth.

## **Health Education**

Volunteers and their counterparts assist Malian communities to improve their health status and quality of life by empowering individuals and collaborative agencies in preventive and promotional health activities. Volunteers teach their counterparts how to develop and present health education lessons in areas including nutrition, breastfeeding and weaning, disease control and prevention, vaccinations, and AIDS/STD prevention.

## **HIV/AIDS Education (Health Education subsector)**

Peace Corps Volunteers in this program work with local governments and NGOs in community-targeted projects at the district or regional capital level. Objectives of the project include the promotion of HIV and AIDS awareness, prevention, testing and counseling. Trainees are being trained in developing appropriate materials, individual training techniques, workshops and community campaigns and school-based education programs.

## **Natural Resources Management**

This project is designed to increase the availability of fuel wood and slow down the damaging ecological effects of progressive deforestation. The PCVs educate the local population to understand their environment, to sustain their natural resources, and to conserve the bio-diversity appropriate to their area.

## **Small Enterprise Development**

The purpose of the SED project is to expand the small business sector in Mali by improving the management capacity of potential and existing small business entrepreneurs and increasing the financial and technical resources available to them. Volunteers provide training and counseling regarding feasibility studies, marketing surveys, inventory control, accounting and product pricing.

## **Water and Sanitation**

The project purpose is to build capacities at the local level to enable a more efficient management of limited water resources and to improve environmental sanitation through the transfer of appropriate technologies, skills and knowledge. Volunteers work in three main areas: increased year round access to water, prevention of water-related diseases and infections, and maintenance of community water sources through the transfer of appropriate skills and knowledge.

*- thanks to Cheryl Turner, current APCD for Health, Water and HIV/AIDS for this update*

# Music Review: Malian-Western Collaborations

Matthew Heberger

A number of albums released in the last several years feature collaborations between western and Malian musicians. It is heartening to see the world discover the rich musical stew I felt privileged to be immersed in. Some incredible music has come out some of these collaborations, but of course some have worked better than others. Here are my completely biased reviews of the most noteworthy.



*Talking Timbuktu*  
Ali Farka Touré and Ry Cooder  
★★★★★  
Hannibal Records, 1994

This was one of the first, and arguably the best. In fact, I bet a lot of Mali volunteers already have this in their collection. Ali Farka Touré, a brilliant self-taught guitarist and singer from the Timbuktu region, has been recording his own unique blend of traditional and modern music for the past three decades. In 1994, he became the first and only Malian musician to win a Grammy when *Talking Timbuktu* captured the prize for best world music album.

On this album, Ali Farka displays his virtuosity on the guitar and the one-stringed Peulh fiddle, the njarka, and also an incredible linguistic range, singing in Songhai, Peulh, Bambara, Tamashek, and occasionally French.

American Ry Cooder, recently propelled to widespread fame by the success of the Buena Vista Social Club, assists on several of the tracks, with his own unique style of slide blues guitar. Touré's percussionists Hamma Sankare and Oumar Toure provide wonderfully textured rhythms on the calabash and congas. A handful of other musicians also contribute on a few tracks, including blues great Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown. Overall, their distinctly American sound blends and superbly complements Touré's "desert blues".

Touré's melodies, while compelling, can become repetitive, and then Cooder's improvisation brings in an added layer of melodic interest. On the track "Soukora", the playful sound of Cooder's toy guitar makes this, my favorite song on this CD, especially memorable. Overall, this is an excellent CD—I consider it one of my "desert island disks"—and I highly recommend it.



*Songhai*  
Toumani Diabaté and Ketama  
★★★★★  
Hannibal/Carthage, 1988

This highly-recommended album features Toumani Diabaté, a dazzling and innovative young kora player, the most recent in a lineage of kora-playing Diabates. Thanks to a chance meeting at a party in London, he got together to make music with the young, flamenco-based Spanish group Ketama. They are also joined

by the talented British bass player Danny Thompson. The producer of the album writes that, "Toumani had often tried playing the kora with non-traditional combinations of musicians, but the mixture had never been totally successful until that afternoon."

On the first track, the traditional "Jarabi", Diabaté plays an intricate melody on the 21-string kora, while Ketama accompanies with blistering chords, percussion, and hand claps. The next song, the infectious, "Mani Mani Kuru", two young Malian women exchange cheerful singing with virtuosic playing on a panoply of string instruments. Other tracks, such as "Africa", focus mostly on Diabaté's playing. On a few others, like *Vente Pa Madrid* and "A Mi Tia Marina" showcase Ketama's Iberian Gypsy sound. You can often hear the echoes of North Africa and Islam in their multitextured and sensual music.

This album is short (its 8 songs only occupy about 40 minutes), but it is well worth buying (or borrowing!) to experience the chemistry that occurred when these incredibly talented musicians came together and their diverse styles. If you like the sound of the kora, or tap your feet to the Gypsy Kings, then you should like this CD.



*Songhai 2*  
Toumani Diabaté, Ketama, and guests  
★★★★★  
Hannibal, 1994

Six years after recording *Songhai*, Toumani Diabaté and Ketama reunited in Madrid to record a second album. This time, they are joined by a number of guests, and play a wider range of musical styles. Notable additions are Keletigui Diabate, a well-known balafon player who has played with the 1960's group the Ambassadors and more recently Salif Keita. He helps them kick off the first track "Sute Monebo", a rumba. This is a style familiar to both groups of musicians, due to the Spanish origins of Latin music, and the tremendous popularity of rumba and salsa in West Africa since the 1960s.

The Spanish trio Ketama returns with its gypsy sound, including the rapid-fire flamenco guitar strums, and the frenetic, joyful handclaps and castanets. Ketama shines on "De Jerez a Mali" and "De la Noche a Mañana," where Diabaté comes in halfway through the song and lays down a beautiful and intricate melody. The singer Kassémady enters the musical fray on two songs, and the purity and passion of his voice reveal why he is as highly revered as Salif Keita in Mali.

Admittedly, some songs don't work as well as others. For instance, on the slow tanguillo "Monte De Los Suspiros" the Bambara lyrics sound strained and out-of place. Overall, this album is very good—almost as good as the first. Pick up *Songhai* first—if you like it as much as I did, you'll run out and pick up the sequel regardless of what I write here!

- Matthew Heberger was a Water/Sanitation Volunteer in Wakoro, Segou Region from '96 to '98