
THE GRIOT



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the Friends of Mali newsletter

January 2003

Not Quite Like Home

Sabrina Washington

Living in a small town with no public transportation, feeling lonely when there are hundreds of people around or strangers calling their greetings out to you on from street corners or in the market would probably be familiar descriptions a typical Peace Corps experience in Mali. But would you ever expect these descriptions of an experience in the United States?

"I am in a village," says Abida Maiga of New Roads City, Louisiana where he is in his fourth year living and working as an elementary school French teacher. New Roads City, population approximately 4,950, is located in Pointe Coupee Parish, near the state's border with Mississippi and northwest of Baton Rouge. Before relocating to Louisiana, Maiga, a Malian citizen, lived in Bamako, Mali and worked as a language trainer and cultural advisor for Peace Corps from 1986 until 1999. An ocean away from his familiar cultural comforts, Maiga has faced and continues to face personal and professional adjustments in his new home in the southern United States.

Maiga is one of eight Malian nationals who have been recruited in the last few years to work as French teachers in Louisiana through CODOFIL, the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana. CODOFIL, created in 1968 by the Louisiana state legislature, is dedicated to the utilization and preservation of the French language in Louisiana. Not unlike Peace Corps volunteers, foreign teachers recruited by CODOFIL are supposed to work themselves out of a job. That is to say, the state of Louisiana anticipates that once a flourishing population of students and adults attain French fluency, the school system will no longer need to rely on teachers from foreign countries to promote the French language. According to the CODOFIL

Continued on page 4

Inside This Issue

1	<i>Interview: Abida Maiga Speaks About Adjusting to Life in Louisiana</i>
1	<i>Celebrating Mali on the National Mall</i>
2	<i>Membership News</i>
5	<i>African Rhythms</i>



Photograph by Sabrina Washington

Bassist Abdoul Wahab Berthe celebrates backstage with some RPCV friends after Habib Koite and Bamada's last night at Joe's Pub where they kicked off their 2003 US Concert Tour in New York City. Pictured with Berthe are Mali RPCVs Liz Anderson, Margie Gray, Tariq Zehawi and friend Vincent Renou. Check the FOM website for concert dates in a city near you.

Mali: From Timbuktu to Washington, D.C.

Mali has long been a major influence on West Africa, dating as far back as the 12th century. This summer, the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage will recognize Mali's pivotal role in shaping of the peoples and cultures of West Africa during its Annual Folklife Festival. The Folklife Festival is an annual celebration of international and domestic cultures on the National Mall in Washington, DC. The 2003 festival will honor the traditions of the Republic of Mali, Scotland and Appalachia on the National Mall from June 25th until July 6th. So start planning your vacation to Washington, DC for the July 4th weekend!

"Mali: From Timbuktu to Washington D.C.," is the catchphrase being used to promote the Malian portion of the festival. The Smithsonian will feature booths than explain Mali's integral role in the three great West African empires, the trans-Saharan trade and the spread of Islam. Festival visitors will also be able to experience the living cultural traditions of Mali. Visitors will see examples of sudanic adobe architecture under construction, hear music and learn the dances of the Dogon, Bambara, Fulani, and Bozo peoples. Stations will also be set up to show how mud cloth is made from hand-spun and hand-woven cotton and how to prepare a Malian cuisine.

And you can be more than a spectator! The Smithsonian

Continued on page 3



AW SAN BEE SAN BEE!

FEEDBACK

An organization is only as strong as its membership. We at the Friends of Mali recognize that, and are doing our best to ensure that we serve as many members as possible. We look forward to your continued input in order to better respond to your interests and needs. This space is for you. Letters to the editor, suggestions, announcement, comments, concerns and criticisms are all welcome.

FOLLOWUP

Bringing it All Back Home The Griot, October 2002
Mark Nilles (Kadiolo '98-'01) was elected Secretary of RPCV-North Florida Steering Committee.

CONGRATULATIONS

"Rock star" Charles Harrison Norris was born to Mali RPCV parents Jill and Aaron Norris (Diamou '99-'01) on November 19, 2002. Weighing in at 8lbs 3oz, 19 1/2 inches long, he enjoys eating, crying, and having diapers changed. Ala ka dogoni d'a ma!

ON THE NEWSSTAND

Catch Shawn Davis' (Dologou, Kedialy '96-'98) photo-essay entitled "Dogon Funerals" in the current issue of African Arts Magazine (Volume XXXV-Number 2-Summer 2002).

DOUBLE BILLING

On Saturday, February 1st, The International Visions Photography Cooperative will host the opening their first exhibit in their new home at 2629 Connecticut Avenue, NW in Washington DC. The exhibit will feature never shown before black and white photographs of Mali taken by RPCV Shawn Davis. Located across from the Woodley Park metro, the Cooperative exhibit will run from February 1 until March 15. Gallery hours: Wed. – Thurs. 11-6 p.m. Friday – Saturday, 12-7 p.m. Telephone 202-234-5112

ON THE RUN

Congratulate Michelle Dallapiazza (Bendougouba '98-'00) and Ethan Salter (Kadiolo '98-2000) for respectively completing the Chicago and New York marathons in the Fall of 2002.

NEXT FOM BOARD MEETING

Sunday, February 23 at 10:00AM via teleconference. Check out previous FOM Board meeting minutes on the FOM website at www.friendsofmali.org/en/archives.php

Miiri be nyo ke dolo ye

It is thought that turns millet into beer.
Reprinted from "Mande Zana ni Ntalen" by Kassim Gausu Kone, Mother Tongue Editions, 1995.

SPECIAL FOM EVENT

miiri be nyo ke dolo ye

NATIONWIDE HAPPY HOUR

And you thought that you were the only person in London that spoke Bambara?!? On **February 7, 2003**, take a break, have a beer and tell some bean jokes to fellow Mali RPCV. Pull out your brightest boubou and contact the hosts listed below in the city nearest you for additional information. RSVP! See FOM website for additional participating cities.

If your town is not listed, it should be!

Even where there are only two Returned Peace Corps Volunteers, it is possible to share a drink, a laugh and a story about Mali. If you are interested in hosting a happy hour in your city, contact Sabrina Washington at newsletter@friendsofmali.org. Your responsibilities: 1. Pick a bar or restaurant. 2. Spread the word. (Eating, drinking and dancing are optional ☺) *K'AN SOON!!*

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

Place: 26 MIX

Address: 3024 Mission St (between 26th & Cesar Chavez) Why? Comfy lounge with \$2 drink specials. **Time: 6pm**
Hosts: Heather McCurdy (heather_mccurdy@yahoo.com) and Kelvin Quan (enigmaticdaramane@yahoo.com)

NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK

Place: PIONEER BAR & RESTAURANT

Address: 218 Bowery (at intersection of Bowery & Rivington) Why? Irish pub with kickin mussels! **Time: 5:30 pm** Hostess: Sabrina Washington. See contact info above.

LONDON, ENGLAND

Place: BELGO

Address: 67 Kingsway (WC2) Why? Convince the naysayers that there are more than 3 RPCVs in London. **Time: 6pm** Hostess: Vanessa Cesarz; Call her at home-02087491015 or mobile-07729599657

WASHINGTON DC

Place: GHANA CAFE

Address: 2465 18th St, NW (Adams Morgan) Why? Why not? and you can get your groove on in the discotheque upstairs. **Time: 6pm.** Hostess: Jumana Qamruddin (jumanaq@earthlink.net).

DENVER, COLORADO

Place: THE THIN MAN

Address: 2017 East 17th Avenue (at intersection of 17th and Vine) Why? Do you need a reason? **Time: 6pm.**
Hosts: Elizabeth Buckius and Dave Paulson. Call them at 303-830-1907.

AUSTIN, TEXAS

Place: THE CROWN & ANCHOR PUB

Address: 2911 San Jacinto Why? Rodeo 2003! Just kidding, maybe. **Time: 6pm.** Host: Danny Buechler. Call 512-789-7881.



Photograph by Cheryl Turner

Join Friends of Mali

Interested in the history, culture, and current events of Mali? Looking for a way to keep up to date or participate in projects related to Malian economic development? Check out Friends of Mali!

Through our website, newsletter and membership base, FOM is building a network of individuals and organizations interested in international service and the promotion of sustainable development in Mali.

However, we need your help to continue to grow as a vibrant and successful entity. Join as a full member today! For only \$15/year you will be able to:

- Receive quarterly issues *The Griot*;
- Access members only services on the FOM website;
- Vote in Friends of Mali elections;
- 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 membership base and financial capacity, we also plan to help fund and set up Partnership Projects with the help of Mali PCVs from a portion of your annual dues.

If you cannot become a full member today, register your interest in Friend of Mali. By letting us know how to contact you, we will keep you posted on Friends of Mali events and goings-on.

To join or register today; go to the website at <http://www.friendsofmali.org> and follow the "Members" link. Our entire membership process takes place online. To register, you simply need to complete and submit the form. For membership, complete the registration form and submit payment by credit card online (securely, via PayPal), by mailing Friends of Mali a check, or by designating us as your Affiliate Group in your NPCA membership form.

Help spread the word to your fellow Mali enthusiasts!

Would you like to contribute something to the NEXT NEWSLETTER? DROP A LINE TO SABRINA WASHINGTON AT NEWSLETTER@FRIENDSOFMALI.ORG

staff is eager to work with the membership of *Friends of Mali*. The Smithsonian does not require visiting artists to speak English, so they depend on hundreds of volunteers to interpret and translate French, Bamana, Peul, Dogon, Songhai, Bozo and other languages during the set up and operation of booths. The artists and cultural guides will need assistance setting up booths. Cooks will need assistants (Sound tasty?). Musicians will need help moving their instruments and getting around the Festival site. And you thought you would never have the opportunity to speak Songhai again! And if you are in the market for a temporary job, the Smithsonian Institution is interviewing for anticipated temporary salaried positions with the 2003 Smithsonian Folklife Festival Programs.

<http://www.folklife.si.edu/CFCH/employment.htm>

As added incentive, *Friends of Mali* will coordinate several activities, including but not limited to a membership meeting, a happy hour and/or a picnic, the Weekend of July 4th to coincide with this Smithsonian event. *Friends of Mali* is also working with Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage to set up a booth at the festival to share the Peace Corps experience in Mali with visitors on the National Mall. More importantly, *Friends of Mali* is arranging for hotel discounts for the Weekend of July 4th for members who decide to come and be a part of the festivities in Washington D.C.


Friends of Mali is encouraging all members to be involved with the Folklife Festival; so, pencil the dates into your calendars! If you're interested in actively participating, please drop Denise Mortimer an email at folklife@friendsofmali.org. Volunteer needs are still being assessed, but the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage staff is pleased to have the opportunity to work with the membership of *Friends of Mali*. For members who will not be able to be an active part of the festival, please still consider coming to Washington DC for the July 4th weekend to enjoy the festival as a spectator and attend the *Friends of Mali's* Membership Meeting.

Keep an eye on the *Friends of Mali* website and *The Griot* for Festival Updates.



The Griot is a publication of
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 Special note of thanks to Michelle Dallapiazza for designing the graphic of Drummer appearing in *The Griot*.

website (www.codofil.org) “during the 2001-2002 school year, 210 French, Belgian, Canadian, and African teaching professionals” were working in the Louisiana school system.

Before arriving in New Roads, Maiga expected Louisiana to be similar to the hustle and bustle of New York City, his point of entry into the United States. His immediate impressions of New York City were of a densely packed city, full of noise and crowds. To his pleasant surprise and dismay, New Roads is nothing like New York and has given him an image of the United States that is not often portrayed on Malian television programs Maiga used to watch at home.

New Roads, as described by Maiga and data gleaned from the last US Census, is a town located in a poor and underserved area of Louisiana. There is no public transportation and taxis are rare commodities. According to the US Census Bureau, the median household income for New Roads City, the parish seat, is \$24,583 with 23% of families below the poverty level. Census data also indicates that 35% of the population is living with some form of Social Security Income or public assistance. New Roads is not the easiest place to live in the United States.

Professionally, one of Maiga’s biggest surprises and disappointments has been the lack of work ethic among the students. In New Roads, the students often misbehave and rarely show interest in the class material. “It is the scarce student that actually cares about learning,” says Maiga. More importantly, he observes it is not uncommon for parents to request that a teacher change a bad grade in order to prevent their child from failing or moving on to the next grade. Many of the parents are not well educated themselves. Supporting

*“I was never by myself before coming to the US, I will never get used to it.”
Abida Maiga on living alone in New Roads City, Louisiana.*

this observation, census data indicates that 32% of the adult population of New Roads City 25 years and older have not received high school diplomas. Fourteen percent have less than a ninth grade education. “Malian students work harder,” expressed an audibly frustrated Maiga and “they are ashamed if they make poor grades.”

Culturally, his greatest challenge has been loneliness. “I was never by myself before coming to the US, I will never get used to it,” says Maiga. Prior to living in New Roads, Maiga had never lived alone. His home in Mali is filled with energetic and colorful relatives, parents, siblings, neighbors and children. During his first few years in New Roads, Maiga lived alone and often cooked for himself.

However, despite his solitary living situation in New Roads, he has not been alone in his transatlantic adventure. The school provided housing for Maiga in a local hotel during his first days in town. His supervisor, Cynthia O’Meara, helped him find an apartment. Landlords Alex Palmer and his wife Nora have been and continue to be very supportive. They often invite Maiga over for dinner with their family or offer him rides into Baton Rouge.

More importantly, Maiga notes that the people of New Roads are generally friendly and quick to offer assistance.

Strangers often call out greetings to him on the streets or stop him to talk in local shops. His students and their families often stop him in the supermarket to say hello and ask questions.

His students reflect the population of the town, predominately black and white Americans and a trickle of Asian and Hispanic Americans. While, there is not much interaction among the ethnic groups beyond the classroom, he has not experienced any discrimination based on ethnicity or religion. He has a book full of phone numbers from people who have offered to make themselves available.

Maiga has also taken some of the cultural integration tools from his years of working with Peace Corps by immersing himself into the community. One can hear the smile in his voice as he recounts moments when he become a part of the rhythm or fabric that makes up the New Roads community. Maiga had the opportunity to include items on Mali in the curriculum of an adult French class he taught in conjunction with two other French teachers during his first year in Louisiana. Maiga also goes to church every Sunday. He weekly rotates his attendance at churches with different denominations or ethnic majorities. It is an opportunity to meet the parents of his students, learn more about their lives and the dynamics within the community. Churches have also been receptive forums for presentations on Mali and Africa.

And of course there are the little pieces of home. When the school system is closed for vacations or holidays, Maiga often visits or receives visits from some of the other Malian expatriates working in Louisiana. They often gather in each other’s homes to laugh, share stories or news from Mali and drink tea. More importantly, during the academic year, which began in September 2002, his wife, Binta Bocoum, joined him in New Roads City. Bocoum applied and was accepted for placement in Pointe Coupee parish through CODOFIL. Bocoum previously worked at Plan International in Bamako and was also a language instructor for several years at Tubani So. Bocoum, Maiga says, is experiencing the same culture shock that he endured when he first arrived in Louisiana.

Abida Maiga is grateful for his experience in Louisiana but does not expect to settle in the United States permanently. He misses the routine of Bamako, seeing his children on a daily basis and being surrounded by his family and tons of friends. Some of the money that he and Bocoum earn in Louisiana will go to building a house in Bamako and sending their three children to school. By his estimates, he will spend another 3-4 years in Louisiana before returning to Mali.

Abida Maiga can be reached via at abidamaiga@yahoo.com. He is looking forward to stay in touch with RPCV friends.

*Sabrina Washington was a Health Extension Volunteer in Mabina from '98-'00 and is currently serving as newsletter editor of **The Griot**.*

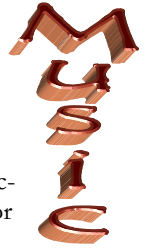
Jεε fanga ye ji ye

The power of fish is water

Reprinted from “Mande Zana ni Ntalen” by Kassim Gausu Kone, Mother Tongue Editions, 1995. For information visit www.movertongue.us

AFRICAN RHYTHMS

Matthew Heberger



So many albums, so little time and space! In the 1990's, Westerners started to realize that Malian music was ripe for musical fusion. As a result, the 1990's saw some impressive Malian-Western collaborations. Europeans and Americans have added a little spice to an already rich stew of Malian popular music. So continuing my biased selection of notable albums from this genre in the last *The Griot*, it would be remiss of me not add a few words on the works of Hank Jones,



Cheick Tidjane Seck and Toumani Diabate.

Hank Jones Meets Cheick-Tidjane Seck and the Mandinkas: Sarala (Verve, 1995)

★★★★★

Legendary jazz pianist Hank Jones, who has played with everyone from Benny Goodman and Louis Armstrong to John Coltrane and Miles Davis, declared in the summer of 1993 that “he wanted to record an album of traditional West African music, that the project was an absolute priority, and that it signified a radical turning point in his career.” The following year, he went into the recording studio in Paris with Malian bandleader Cheick-Tidjane Seck and a dozen well-known Malian musicians and produced **Hank Jones meets Cheick-Tidjane Seck and the Mandinkas: Sarala** (Verve, 1995). When listening to this CD, I am caught between reminiscing on the familiar cadences of Malian song and marveling at the virtuosity of a jazz legend.

The first track is the hauntingly beautiful and visceral “Aly ka wélé” (Aly’s call) by Peulh flutist Aly Wague. The next few tracks feature both traditional and modern instruments. The kora, ngoni, and balafon get equal billing with electric guitars and a Hammond B3 organ. Hank Jones’ piano enters the mix as a spontaneously joyful, and often subtle, sound. His playing shows the sensitivity that he gained by studying the culture and the music “for months before playing a note.” Among my favorite tracks on this album is “Maningafoly”, a long instrumental where each of the musicians is given a turn to shine, in the best jazz tradition.

One of the surprises of this album is the diverse range of pleasant, accessible vocals which are far more pleasing than the ear splitting tracks cranked up to 10 on Somatra buses. On the standout track “Soundiata”, Kassemady Diabaté sings a praise song in the classic griot style against the decidedly modern backdrop of electric instruments and jazz piano. On a trio of songs, griots Manian Damba, Fatoumata Kouyate, and Assitan Keita deliver passionate vocals. Going even further afield, the song, “Walidi Ya” features the distinctive vocals of Tunisian singer Amina Annabi.

In all, Hank Jones adapts to the Mande idiom with remarkable sensitivity and skill. If you like jazz piano and the



contemporary Malian electric-acoustic style of Salif Keita or Habib Koite, then I think you will like this CD

Kulanjan: Taj Majal & Toumani Diabate (Hannibal, 1998)

★★★★

Kulanjan brings together a veteran American bluesman with a luminary of Malian contemporary music. In April 1999, Toumani Diabaté and a cohort of seven Malian musicians went to Athens, Georgia, to jam and record an album with Taj Majal. It is worth noting that Taj Majal co-founded the innovative Rising Suns with Ry Cooder in the 1960's. *Kulanjan* draws on the same Mali-blues synergy that made Cooder's 1994 collaboration with Ali Farka Touré, *Talking Timbuktu*, a success.

However, *Kulanjan* is vastly different from *Timbuktu* and while it contains some gems, it does not always work as well. On *Timbuktu*, Touré played his own music. Cooder and the other musicians contented themselves to float above and around the music, adding flourishes and textures, but not altering the main substance of the song. On *Kulanjan*, there are a few tracks, like “Tunkaranke” or “Guede Man Na,” that are mostly unadulterated Mande music. Taj Majal's blues styling comes to the fore on tracks like “Ol' Georgie Buck” and “Catfish Blues”, an old Muddy Waters tune. On “Catfish Blues” the sound of the kora and other instruments do not completely blend together well. And even though I love the unadorned sound of delta-inspired blues, here the kora's rapid staccato sounds out of place.

One of my favorite tracks is “Atlanta Kaira.” Kaira is an ancient kora tune played by generations of griots. It became the unofficial national anthem of Mali as Toumani's father, Sidiki Diabaté, famously played this song at youth rallies in the 1940's. On this thoroughly modern version, Taj Majal plays it like it was invented for his steel guitar, while male singer Kassemady Diabate and female Ramatou Diakite offer praise to Allah and hope for peace. There are also a few tracks that are just plain fun, like Taj Majal singing praises to Diabaté's wife—whom he'd never met—on “Fanta Sacko” to a rollicking reggae beat.

While I don't think this album is destined to be a classic, the musicians sound like they had a lot of fun recording this album, and it's fun listening to it too.

Music columnist Matt Heberger was a Water/Sanitation Volunteer in the Segou Region from '96-'98 and is currently serving as Treasurer of FOM. You can contact Matt at mheberger@yahoo.com to make suggestions for future columns. Also, let Matt know about your favorite music from Mali, or if you have resources or announcements about concerts, radio shows, internet sites, etc.

Check It Out! Afropop Worldwide featured several collaborations between American, European and Malian musicians on their radio program. The program samples collaborations between Bonnie Raitt and Habib Koite, Corey Harris and Ali Farka Touré, just to name a few. It's probably too late for you to catch it on the radio, but you can see the discography for the program and read an interesting article on Malian music at:

http://www.afropop.org/radio/radio_program/ID/505