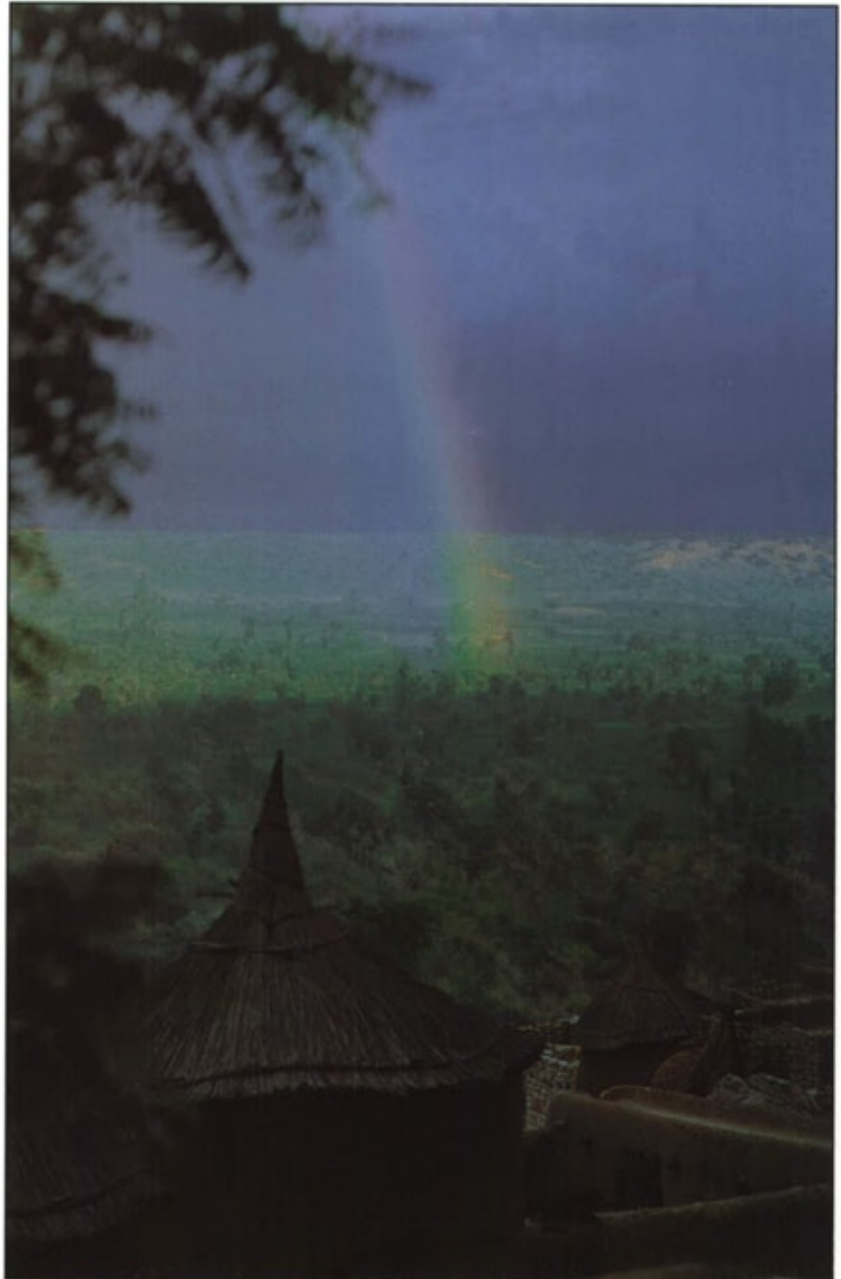


# Mali

## A Prospect of Peace?



**Rhéal Drisdelle**

**An Oxfam Country Profile**



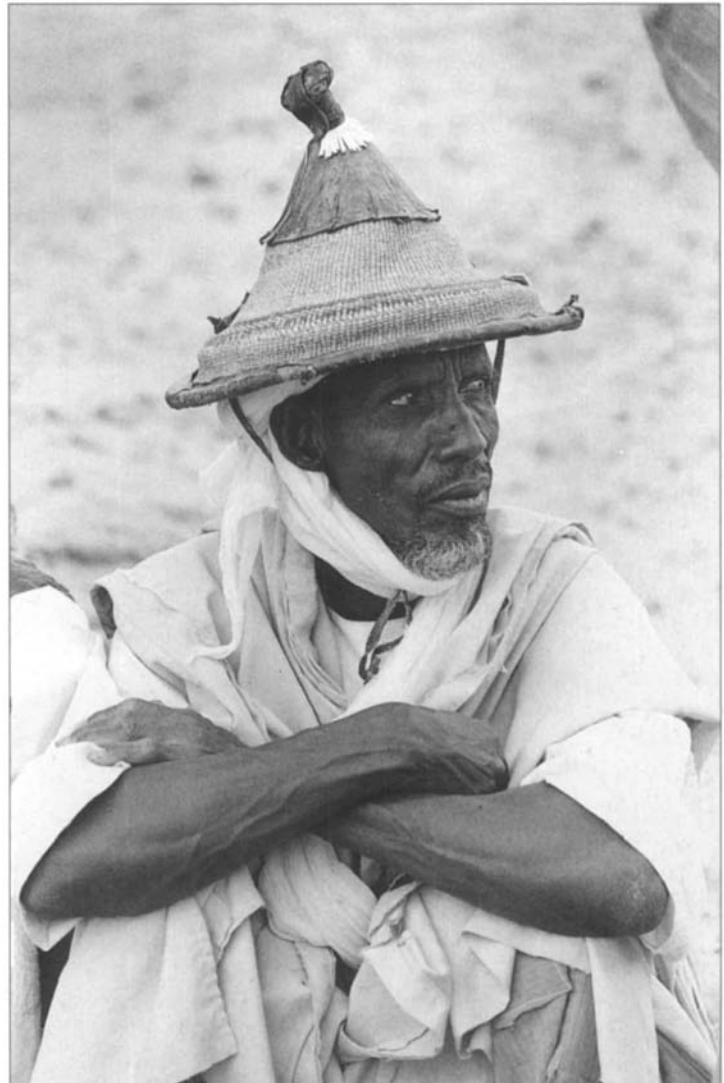
# Mali

## A Prospect of Peace?

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front cover: James Hawkins/Oxfam



Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam

**Oxfam UK and Ireland**

**Rhéal Drisdelle**

Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam



Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam

**clockwise from top left**

Tonka market, near Goundam

Touareg boys taking water from a well in Essuk village, near Kidal, Gao

River Niger at Bourem

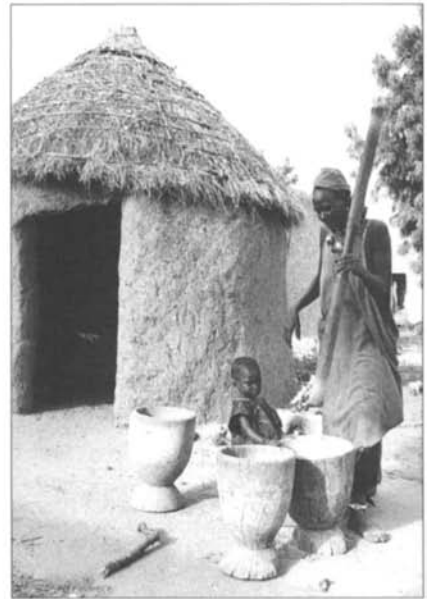
Pounding grain in Dili village, north-west Mali

Bali village, north-west Mali



Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam

Mike Goldwater/Oxfam



Mike Goldwater/Oxfam



**left** On the road from Mopti to Goundam

❖ *The situation is very difficult and very fragile. But I have never felt so sure that we have the means to resolve our problems, and that Mali holds the key to its own future. We are not asking the international community for help to walk, only to stand up: we can do the walking ourselves.* ❖

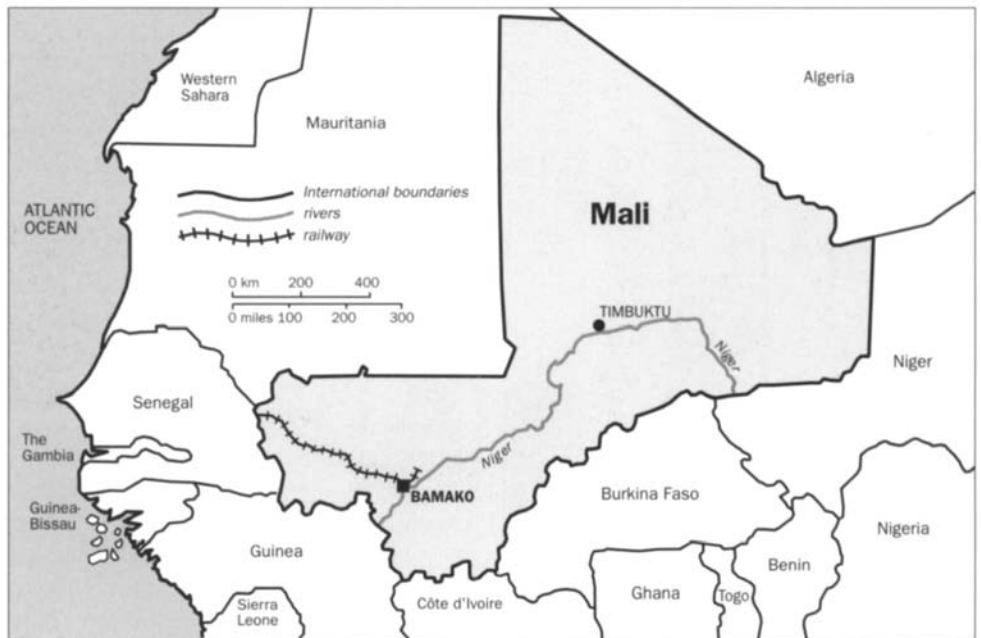
President Alpha Oumar Konaré, May 1995



Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam

**above** Touareg and Bella men gather to work on a rainwater-catchment scheme near Timbuktu

**right** A map of West Africa



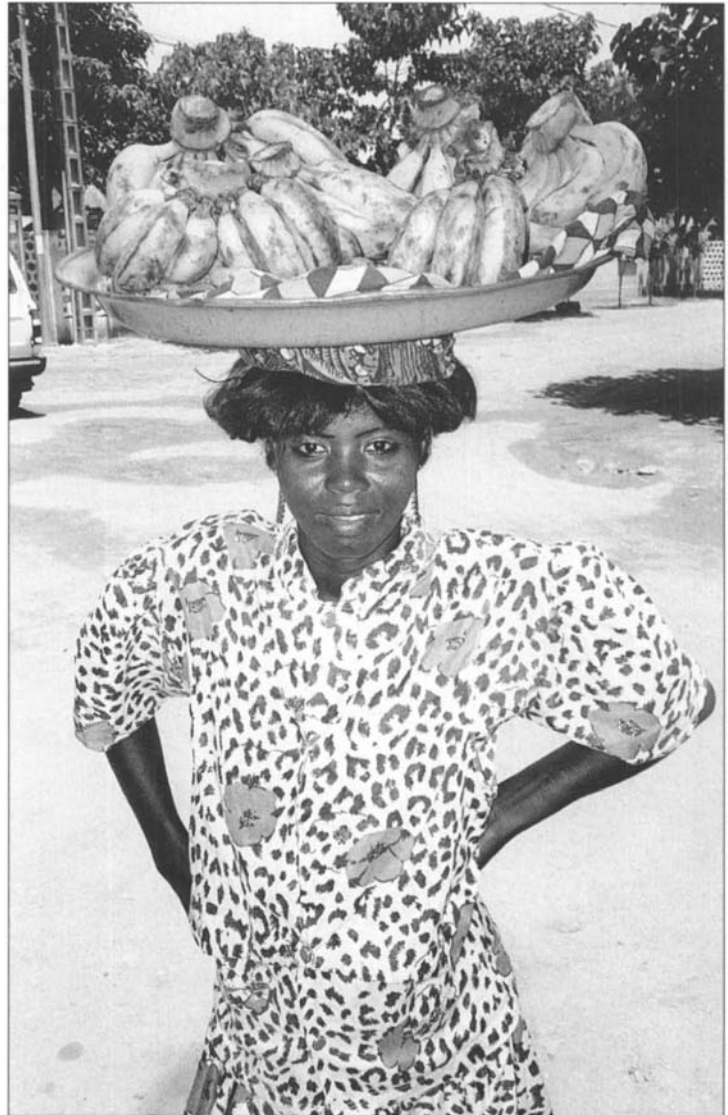
# A land of paradoxes

In purely statistical terms, it is hard to present a positive picture of Mali. This country of over ten million people — expected to have increased to 24 million by the year 2025 — is a world leader in several categories: highest infant mortality rates, highest maternal mortality rates, highest fertility rates, and highest illiteracy rates.

Mali is one of the largest countries in West Africa, five times the size of the United Kingdom. It is a country of paradoxes. Considered one of the five poorest countries in the world, it nevertheless contains some of the richest gold deposits in all of Africa. Its soils are believed to be rich in minerals, such as manganese, lithium, iron, and diamonds. Yet, because of the country's size and lack of infrastructure, such as roads and communications systems, exploration of these resources has hardly begun. Much of the land-mass of Mali — roughly two thirds — is either dry, hot, and windswept Saharan sand, or arid and severely depleted Sahelian soil. In spite of these unfavourable conditions, Mali is the second-biggest producer of cotton in Africa. It also grows enough rice and cereals to feed its own people, and a surplus to export to its neighbours.

Mali is a country of farmers, herders, and fishing communities; yet its main export to the world has always been Malians themselves. Most Malians are traders to the core, and will trade anything with anyone; but Mali does not manufacture anything much, and has to rely on imports for most of its consumer goods.

Malians are essentially a rural people. Four out of five live in the countryside; but young people in search of a living are



**above** Bananas for sale in a Bamako market

James Hawkins/Oxfam

flocking to the cities, where disease, hunger, and misery await them. This is a country where tradition rules, where male elders dominate and define the world; but as more and more young people seek work in the cities and in countries near and far, they encounter a more modern version of reality, and gaps are opening up in the traditional way of life. Women's lives are beginning to change in a society where they are still denied a voice, yet contribute most to the survival of their communities when the men are obliged to leave home to find work and money.

**below** A Touareg girl in Gao



Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam

Mali is one of the oldest Islamic nations in sub-Saharan Africa, but it has evolved its own distinctively relaxed form of Islam, while remaining very close to the animistic and traditional beliefs of earlier times. Fundamentalism might be expected to thrive in a context of severe economic hardship and culture clashes between the generations, but Malians remain wary of extremism in both religion and politics.

### **A mosaic of people**

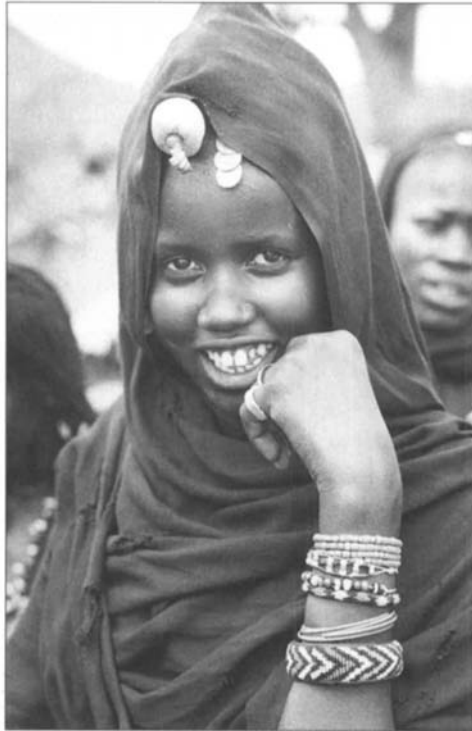
From north to south, a combination of climate, genes, ancestry, and history has forged several distinct cultural groups. In the Saharan sands and rocky terrain of the far north live the Tamasheq or Touareg people. Of Berber origin, with nomadic ways and light-coloured skin, they live on the 'fault line' between the Arab world of the north and the black African world of the south. Northern Mali also has a small population of Arab ancestry and Moorish culture who mainly live in or near Timbuktu; their origins are nomadic, but many in recent years have become traders and boutique owners in the cities.

### **Farmers, herders, and fishermen**

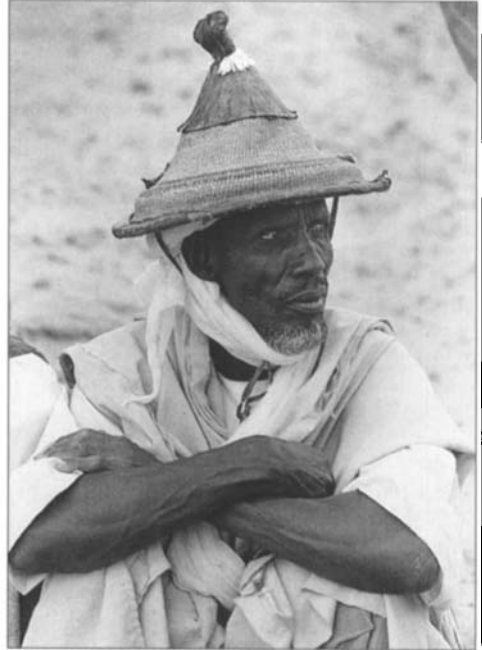
Co-existing with these lighter-skinned nomads are the Songhay, who are mainly farmers. They are the majority population in these northern expanses, but live mostly in the towns along the banks of the Niger River from Timbuktu to Gao. Although they constitute only about one tenth of the total population of Mali, they are highly influential people: with an unusually high level of education, many occupy important posts in the army, the civil service, and the political world.

The Peuhl or Fulani herders are found everywhere in Mali where large herds of cattle, sheep, and goats are grazed. Formerly a nomadic people (Fulani can be found throughout West Africa), the Peuhl in Mali have for the most part settled down.

Mike Goldwater/Oxfam



**right** A young girl in Damba village, north-west Mali



Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam

**above** A Touareg man in Gangano village, near Bourem

**left** A boy with a goat in Djenne, central Mali



Catherine Howe/Oxfam



On the Niger River, from Bamako to Gao, Bozo fishermen can be seen with their families, following the fish along the length of the river. Some still practise collective fishing, with nets that can measure more than 300 metres. Depending on the season and the type of fishing, the men may choose to leave their families behind or to bring them along. Women play an important part in marketing the fish, which in most cases is smoked.

### **The Dogon people**

In north central Mali, along the Bandiagara Cliffs, between the Niger River and the border with Burkina Faso, live the Dogon people. These hardy and courageous communities live literally on the edge of survival. The Dogon Plateau, a land of strange rock formations and steep cliffs, is a harsh and arid environment. There are three groups of

Dogon: those living on the Plateau; those who have had to move on to the plain in order to survive; and those still clinging to life on the cliffs.

The Bandiagara Cliffs run north to south for over 200 km and vary in height from 300 to 500 metres. Many Dogon living along the cliffs climb up and down the vertiginous ridges several times a day, the women often laden with children and balancing 20-litre jugs on their heads. Produce is lowered up and down the cliffs with the help of rope made from the bark of baobab trees.

Dogon culture, with its own alphabet, its five-day week, and references to stellar bodies only recently identified by Western scientists, has been the focus of numerous documentaries and anthropological studies. It has been kept alive by its isolation from all external influences; but, threatened with extermination by droughts and the degradation of their

**below** The Bandiagara Cliffs, home of the Dogon people. Caves in the cliff have been used for centuries as tombs for the dead.



James Hawkins/Oxfam

environment, the Dogons are now obliged to open themselves to the outside world, and they risk losing their unique identity. Much of their culture is rooted in reverence for their ancestors, who are celebrated with sacred masks in rituals such as the *sigui*, which is held once every 60 years. The oldest man in the community is 'retired' from the village to live in a nearby cave, where he is venerated and fed by the community and, according to Dogon belief, washed by a serpent which appears every night. The riches of the Dogon culture are in stark contrast to the barren environment in which they live.

### **People of the south**

Southern Mali is dominated by the culture of the Bambara people, who comprise about one third of the total population. Bambara is the main commercial language, spoken by most other ethnic groups and used throughout the country. The Bambara people are to be found all over Mali, but most are concentrated in the region of Ségou, where they make a living from growing cotton and cereals.

The Malinke people live in the southern-most part of Mali, as well as in northern Guinea. Famed hunters and warriors, the Malinke converted to Islam only in the twentieth century. Their traditional hunters' societies, with secret initiation rites, still thrive to this day.

The Sarakole live mostly in the western-most area, in the Kayes region on the borders with Senegal, Guinea, and Mauritania. Renowned for their trading skills, many Sarakole have had to leave this isolated region after the disastrous droughts of the last twenty years. Many have emigrated to France, where they manage to eke out a living in difficult conditions doing menial jobs, but somehow contriving to send much-needed cash to their families back home. While some have succeeded in obtaining French citizenship and bringing their

families to join them, most are only tolerated by the French authorities, and it is a common sight on Air France flights from Paris to Bamako to see manacled Sarakole men being escorted to their seats by French *gendarmes*. Those who are allowed to remain in France and elsewhere have created dynamic associations which now channel their meagre savings to be invested in community-development initiatives at home.

### **Le cousinage**

Like many African countries, Mali is a compound of widely differing ethnic groups; but Malians have learned to live together, sharing scarce resources and respecting each other's traditions. One reason is that they have developed a unique system of social interchange, which is called *cousinage*.

*Cousinage* implies, in theory if not in fact, that most Malians are related, despite the existence of more than a dozen major cultural groups. For more than 900 years, empires have come and gone; people from different ethnic groups have inter-married; former slaves and former slave owners have become intrinsically linked with one another. (Because of the vagaries of history, the same group could very well have been both masters and serfs at various times.)

Examples of *cousinage* are encountered daily. No Malian will greet another without enquiring about his or her family name, ancestral origins, and geographical provenance. Once this is settled, there follows what sounds to uninitiated ears like a series of insults: A accuses B of being nothing but a descendant of slaves; of being stupid and ignorant on account of his or her family trade; of being bone-idle because he or she comes from this or that region ... and so on. In reply, B might claim that, without his or her group's input into the economy, A and A's family — and indeed society in general — would not be able to survive.

All this is not just a social convention. It is safety valve for the release of pressure. If, for example, a person is involved in a traffic accident (an all too common event in downtown Bamako), having made sure that no one is seriously injured, one party will blame the accident on the fact that the other belongs to such and such an ethnic group and is therefore an imbecile. After a short but heated argument, one of the two will offer to accompany the other to the hospital, or to have the vehicle towed away.

*Cousinage* exists not only between ethnic groups, but between different castes within each cultural grouping. As

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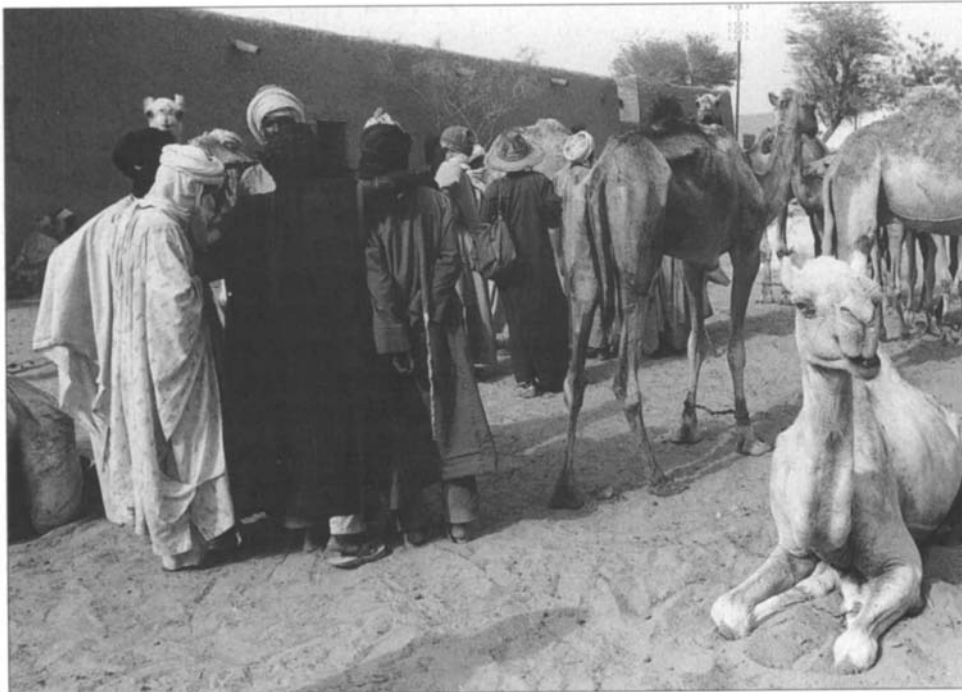
*'I grew up not seeing any difference between Songhay and Touareg. There is an affectionate term in the Songhay language which loosely means "Our Touareg". My family had many Touareg friends, who often came to the house and stayed in our compound for several days. They were like part of our family. Whenever they came they would bring gifts, things like butter, or dried meat, or cheese; and when they left, they'd take tea or other gifts from us. So there was a sort of communion between the two communities.'*

(Sada Maiga, a field worker with an international agency)

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such, if one's family name is Diabate, one is regarded as a *griot*, even if one is unable to sing the praises of others, as *griots* are expected to do. Equally, a Thiam will be considered a blacksmith, even though he has a PhD degree from the University of Oxford.

At a time when 'ethnic cleansing' and genocide are depressingly prevalent around the world, *cousinage* is an invaluable means of defusing potential conflicts. The disadvantage of the system is that people seem to be eternally identified with and confined to one particular group or livelihood. While it may not do wonders for social mobility, Mali's deep-rooted concern with its past partly explains why it has not become dragged into ethnic blood-letting of the kind we have seen in Rwanda and Former Yugoslavia. Tensions and uncertainties do exist in Mali, as we shall see; but *cousinage* permits hard truths to be aired and certain intermediaries to intervene, where antagonistic ethnic groups might elsewhere resort to violence.



**left** No Malian will greet another without enquiring about his or her family name, ancestral origins, and geographical provenance.

# Culture old and new

## The music of Mali

The power of the past in Mali is well illustrated by the survival of the *griot* tradition. *Griots* are living institutions, a legacy from the days when oral historians recounted the past glories of the group, and sang the praises of the rich and powerful. They belong to a caste system: you are born a *griot* if you belong to a certain lineage. Although story-tellers and praise-singers are present almost everywhere in west and central Africa, few would dispute the claim of Mali to be the *griot* capital of the continent.

Still today, no social function like a wedding or a naming ceremony takes place without at least one *griot* present to sing the praises of the family and the guests. TV and radio programmes are dominated by the latest recordings of over 200 professional *griots* (and *griotes*, as this is one of the few occupations open to both women and men in Mali).

But, as with many other customs, modern life and growing impoverishment have diminished this once proud and socially useful role of story-teller and praise-singer. Nowadays, *griots* are becoming the musical equivalent of beggars: anyone will sing the praises of anyone, if there is money to be made from it.

Yet the tradition persists, and along the way some remarkable singers have been elevated from the status of local *griot* to international fame, singing love songs and other traditional melodies. Singers like Ami Koita and Oumou Sangaré have performed in London, Paris, and New York, and their recordings may be bought almost anywhere in the world.



above Typical Dogon carving in the traditional style used to decorate granary doors

James Hawkins/Oxfam



above 'Monsieur Taptap', a blanket seller in Mopti

Another performer and singer who has won international fame is Salif Keita. Although not of *griot* stock, this Malinke singer has a unique and powerful voice. He has surmounted prejudice against his albino colouring to win the hearts of Malians with his lyrical poetry, mostly taken from traditional tales and legends. Based in Paris for several years, he has toured the world and shared the stage with the best and brightest in show business.

At the 1994 Grammy Awards ceremony, Ali Farka Touré became the first African to win this coveted music prize, given by his peers for his outstanding abilities as one of the greatest living blues guitarists. Born in the Timbuktu area, he has lived in New York and Los Angeles for over 20 years, though he keeps in close contact with his home country and can be seen regularly in clubs and jam sessions in any large Malian city.

## Couture, literature, and cinema

On another international stage, Chris Seydou, the great Malian designer and stylist, worked in the fashion trade in Paris and New York for several years, before returning to Mali in the late 1980s to revive a cloth-dyeing technique as old as Malian culture itself. The tradition of *bogolan* was almost forgotten before Chris Seydou rescued and rejuvenated it. He died in 1993 at the age of 44. His legacy has been to rekindle interest in the tradition, and to encourage young Malian designers and tailors to renew their links with their past.

Mali has produced many writers, historians, and poets, among them the great Amadou Hampaté Ba, 'the wise man of Bandiagara'. Of Peuhl origin, he was brought up during the French colonial era; as a young boy he worked as a translator for the French administrators. He collected traditional tales and legends during his travels — he once walked the length and breadth of West Africa — and combined this with his self-taught knowledge and acquired wisdom to compile a most amazing series of books of historical fiction, philosophical thoughts, and Peuhl initiation rites. Amadou Hampaté Ba died in 1992 at the age of 91.

Equally, Malians have excelled in the twentieth-century craft of cinema. Cheik Oumar Sissoko and Soulemame Cisse, to mention only two, have written and directed some notable films, surviving as film craftsmen in a poor country through the sheer power of their cinematic vision. Their films tell stories and denounce injustices and poverty, and have won awards in most of the international film festivals, including Cannes, where *Yeelen* was the first African film ever to do so.

## Everyday culture

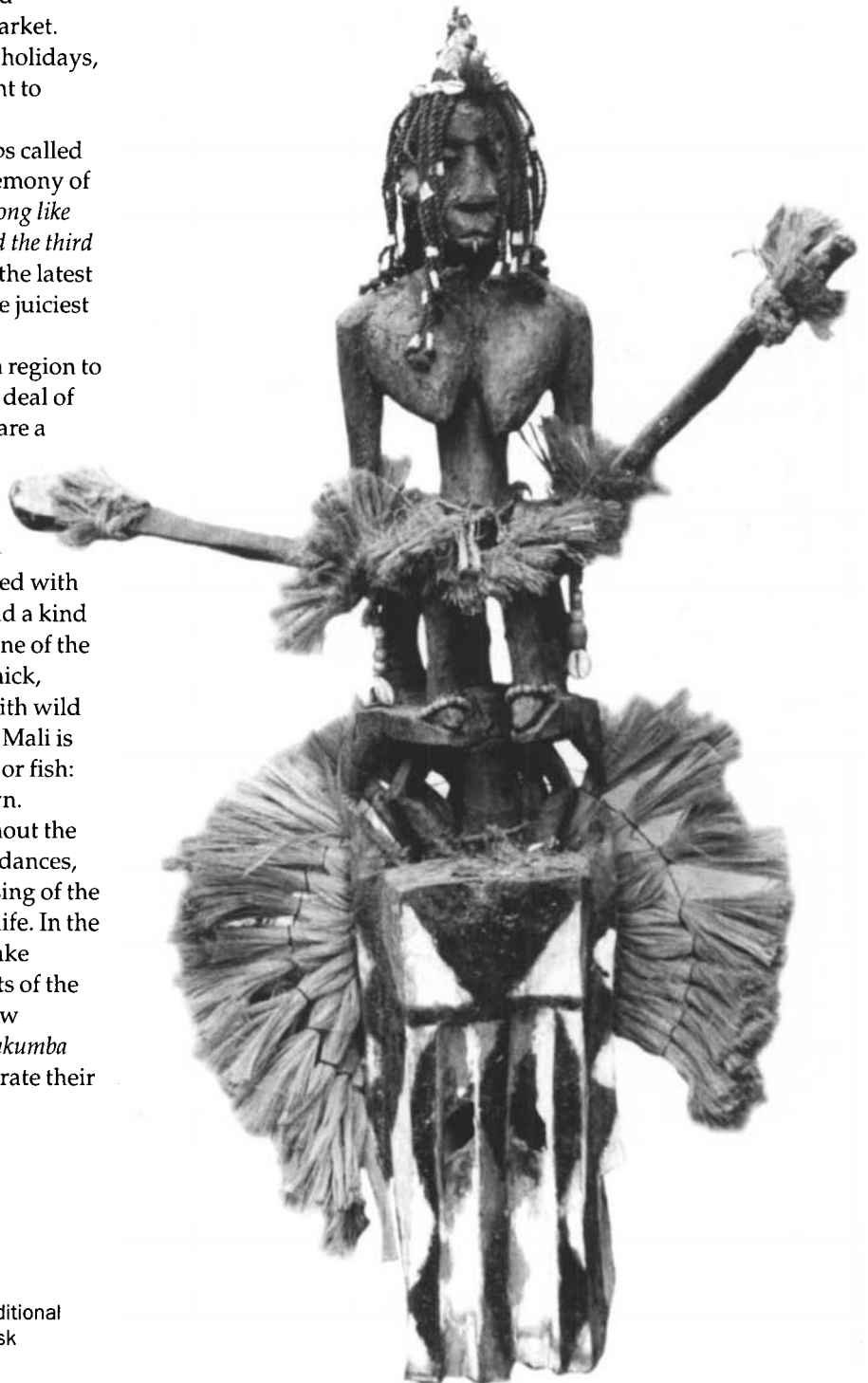
Malian culture is not the preserve of a celebrated few. It is as rich, varied, and complex as the nation's geography,

history, and ethnic groups. Most Malian men and women dress in the traditional *boubou*: a richly coloured, flowing gown which adds elegance, vitality, and decorum to any village or city market. Especially on civic and religious holidays, this flamboyant garment is a sight to marvel at.

Every day, tea-drinking groups called *grins* meet to take part in the ceremony of the three teas. (*'The first cup is strong like life; the second is sweet like love; and the third is bitter, like death.'*) They discuss the latest news in politics or sports, and the juiciest gossip in the neighbourhood.

Malian cuisine may vary from region to region, but does not offer a great deal of choice. Most southerners will share a common meal of *tô*, a pudding made from pounded millet, served with a sauce of meat and okra. Also popular is *bassi*, a couscous made from millet, served with sauces made of baobab leaves and a kind of spinach. In the north, the cuisine of the Songhay and Touareg features thick, doughy pancakes, also served with wild leaves. But no meal anywhere in Mali is complete without meat, poultry, or fish: vegetarianism is almost unknown.

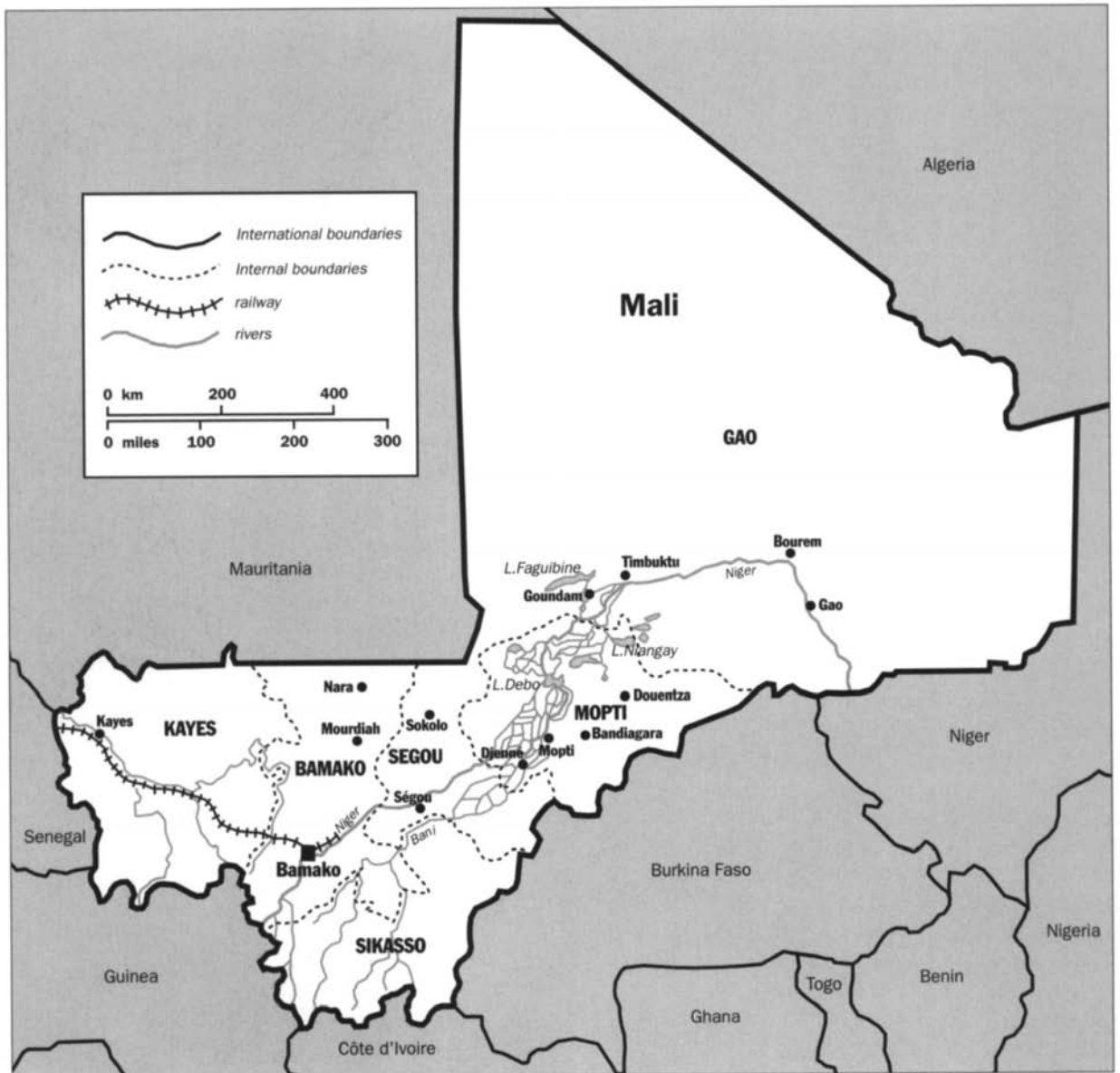
In towns and villages throughout the country, traditional ceremonies, dances, and festivities still mark the passing of the seasons and the major events of life. In the initiation rites of the secret Malinke hunters' societies, the movements of the Dogon stalk dancers, and the slow rhythmic grace of the Songhay *takumba* dance, Malians continue to celebrate their distinctive cultural heritage.



**right** A traditional Dogon mask

James Hawkins/Oxfam

**below** A map of Mali, showing places mentioned in this book



# Timbuktu and the empires



Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam

**F**ew people outside Africa can readily locate Mali on a world map, but most would recognise the name Timbuktu. This ancient Saharan city was once the centre of a powerful empire, one in a succession which ruled much of West Africa for many centuries. It is another paradox that prosperous empires flourished throughout most of the last thousand years in what is now one of the poorest regions of the world.

Yet the prosperity of former Malian empires is no accident of history. Although the country is totally landlocked, it contains three important

waterways: the Niger, which flows from the Guinean Mountains across all of western Africa; the Senegal, which opens on to the Atlantic Ocean; and the Bani, which weaves through southern Mali to merge with the Niger to constitute the rich Niger Delta. To the north of these rivers there is the Sahara Desert, which brought wealth to Mali in its position at the cross-roads of trans-Saharan trade.

From the rich soils of the river beds, the southern, sedentary, and negroid Malians exchanged crops and gold with the nomadic, light-skinned Berbers from the north, who brought salt and other exotic

**above** A camel train in Goundam



goods from the wider Arabic and Mediterranean worlds. The ancient interdependence between north and south has produced a unique culture, rooted in tradition and respect of differences, bound together by ethnic mingling and inter-marriage, united by the Islamic faith while yet keeping ancestral animistic beliefs alive.

### **A succession of empires**

Islam arrived early in Mali, through the *jihad* which conquered north Africa following the death of the Prophet Mohammed in the seventh century AD. But its influence was confined to the north of the Niger River, mainly among the Berber (Touareg) and Arab (Moor) populations. Some historians regard the arrival of Islam as a factor in the creation of cities, but the truth is that urban centres like Djenne, on the Niger River, had

existed in southern Mali as early as the third century BC.

### **The Malinke Empire**

History and myth meet with the creation of the first Malian Empire under the legendary Sundyata Keita, whose rags-to-riches story is still part of oral tradition throughout the Sahel. His empire created much of the social organisation which remains very much alive to this day. Influential from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, it reached its pinnacle during the reign of Mansa Moussa (1312-1337), whose pilgrimage to Mecca, taking with him eight tons of gold, depressed the price of gold in Mecca and Cairo for many years. It is generally believed that two thirds of the world's gold stock was then in the hands of this Malinke empire.

**below** The spectacular mosque in Mopti, built of mud-bricks



Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam



**left** A Fulani nomad herding goats beside a field of maize

### **The Songhay Empire**

However, by the fifteenth century, attacks by neighbours and the discontent of peripheral groups brought the end of Malinke power and the birth of the Songhay Empire, created by Askia Mohammed on the edge of the Sahara and the Niger River in northern Mali. At height of the Sonrhoys' imperial power around 1550, Gao and Timbuktu each had a population estimated at 100,000, and Timbuktu, recognised as Islam's holiest site, had become one of the leading universities in the world, with over 15,000 students. With the commercial city of Djenne to the south doing trade with Italy and England via Morocco, the Songhay Empire combined a rich intellectual life with lucrative commerce.

This golden age came to an end in 1590, when competition for control of the trans-Saharan trade routes brought an invasion from Morocco. Timbuktu was pillaged in 1594, the university was destroyed, and most of the academics were deported to Marrakesh.

### **The Bambara Kingdom**

The remains of the empire fought for control through the next century, but it was not until 1712 that a new force emerged to consolidate power over this immense territory. The Bambara Kingdom, established by Biton Coulibaly, lasted until 1808, sharing power during most of this period with the Peuhl (Fulani) of Macina. These two powers represented the two livelihoods which, to this day, constitute the backbone of the Malian economy: farming and herding.

Divided by rival and tribal conflicts, their empires soon fell to the invading forces of El Hadj Omar Tall, leading a *jihad* from Guinea and Senegal in the mid-1800s. Still remembered to this day for its 'convert or die' ferocity, this invasion further sundered an already divided land. The sons of Omar Tall further partitioned the territory, which became too weak to resist the last invasion of all: the French incursion from deepest West Africa.

## The French Empire

Europeans had explored parts of Mali as early as 1791, with the British expedition of Major Houghton, who was followed in 1795 by Mungo Park (the first European to set foot in Timbuktu); but a European military invasion was not in the making until the 1880s. For this ultimate invasion, the Malians created a last empire under Samory Touré, which at its height comprised most of present-day Mali, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire. This empire resisted French encroachment for a time, but the invaders finally got the better of Samory, who was arrested in 1897 and deported to Gabon, where he died in 1900. Sporadic clashes occurred until the 1920s, the last involving the indomitable Dogons.

## The colonial legacy

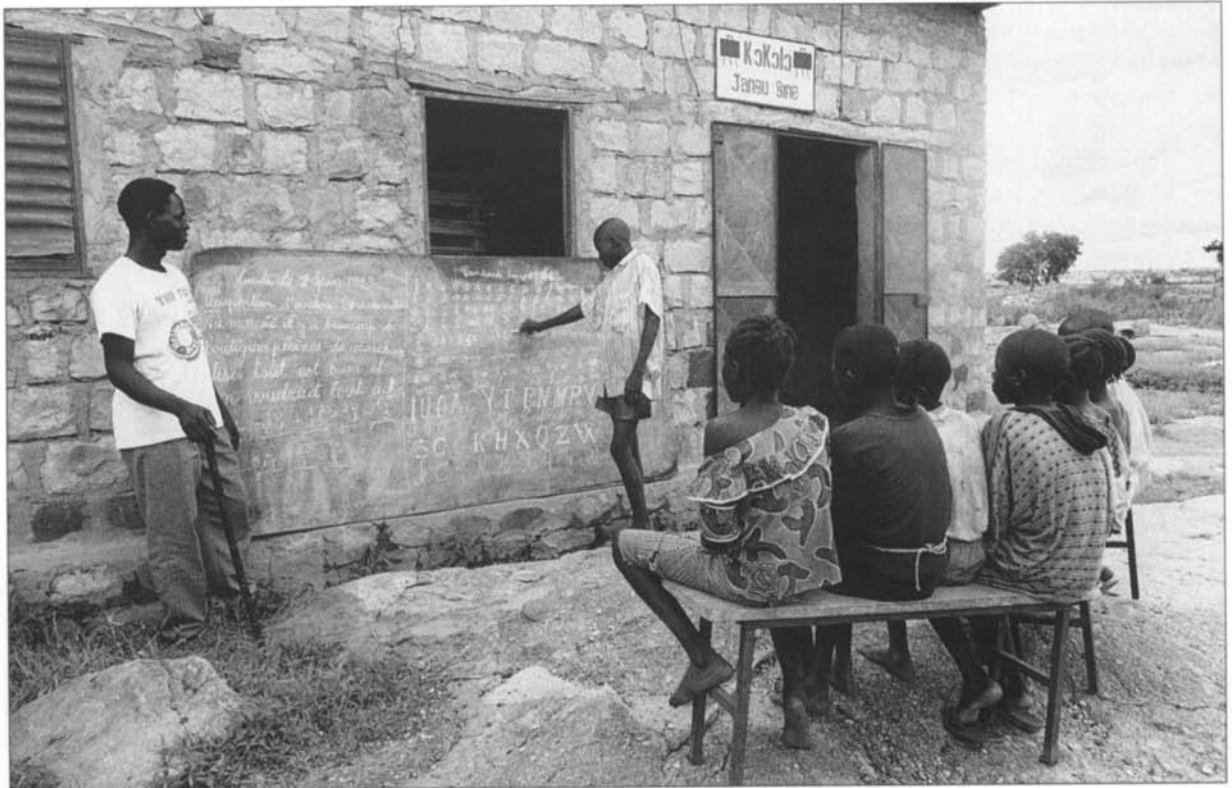
The new French rulers incorporated their newly captured land in a territory called 'French West Africa', part of a vast

conglomerate designated as 'French Sudan'. From the start, Mali was to be the bread-basket of this vast region, providing rice for French colonies along the coast, and cotton for the textile industry of France.

The French presence in Mali was marked by over-ambitious irrigation projects which used forced labour and ignored local knowledge of land use and patterns of tenure. The most famous project involved taming the annual floods of the Niger River, with works that rivalled those of the British in the Nile Basin. These works remain to this day, and the Office du Niger is the principal provider of rice for the country. In addition, the colonial power built a new capital for Mali: Bamako, which was a sleepy riverside town until their arrival.

Apart from these two singular developments, the French imperialists in Mali never achieved, or tried to achieve, the in-roads they made in countries like

**below** Children learning French in Kokolo Village, on the Dogon Plateau



Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal. This landlocked territory, with its harsh climate and stubborn inhabitants, did not offer to France any interesting features other than its strategic location deep inside the continent. No major infrastructure remains from these imperial times, other than the irrigation network on the Niger and the railroad from Dakar to Bamako.

Otherwise, Malians may choose to remember the French for four reasons. First, because they destroyed traditional customs such as the *dina*, the code of conduct by which all disputes over land tenure were resolved between the pastoralists, cultivators, and fishing communities. Second, because they forcibly conscripted Malians to fight in two world wars. Third, because to this day French is the official language of the country, although it is spoken by only a tiny minority of educated urbanites and bureaucrats. And fourth, because the French destabilised the society of the nomadic Tamasheq (Tuaregs) by their requisition of camel herds for the war effort in 1916. The effects of this last intervention are still being played out in Mali today.

In most of the country, during the 60 or so years of the French colonial era, for most Malians life continued as before. But with the end of French rule in 1960 and the creation of a new and independent Mali, dominated by French-trained administrators, ordinary Malians would find themselves thrust into the modern era with alien institutions bent on discarding traditional ways. The Malianised bureaucracy would relentlessly pursue the colonial objective of imposing its own rules, with the disdain for the peasant class which it had learned from the former French power. This legacy, too, had consequences that linger to this day.

## The disappearance of the *dina*

The *dina*, instituted by Cheik Amadou, was a complex set of rules which governed livelihoods in the Niger Delta and throughout Mali. It imposed regulations and penalties to ensure the sharing of natural resources among herders, farmers, and fishing communities. A decentralised institution which empowered local chieftains and communities, it defined the routes which pastoralists and nomads should take with their herds, and set the parameters and relationships between farmland and pastures.

The disappearance of the *dina* at the hands of French and Malian administrations bent on establishing their own influence played havoc with the country's future. The droughts, environmental degradation, and demographic growth of the last 20 years have put very severe pressures on systems of land tenure and access to natural resources. The disappearance of the ways of the *dina* and the arrival of unscrupulous administrators ready to resolve land-tenure conflicts by bribery, corruption, and intimidation only intensified the depletion of resources that was already impoverishing Mali.

**below** Swarms of desert locusts, like the one caught here by a Malian entomologist, can devastate fields of millet and maize



Mike Goldwater/Oxfam

# From hope to despair



Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam

**above** Countless animals died during the drought which ravaged Mali in 1984–85

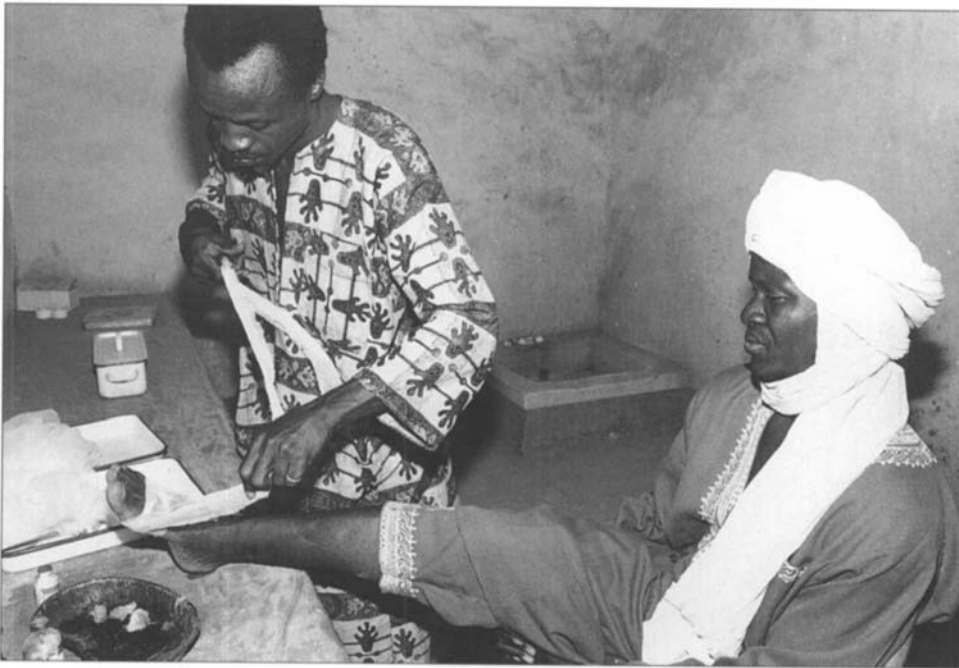
## Independence and after

The end of the European imperial age, following the second world war, brought calls for independence across Africa, and Malians were to play a leading role during this period. Led by the articulate panafricanist, Modibo Keita, Mali set out towards independence through a regional federation with Senegal, attained in April 1960. Unfortunately, this almost unique attempt to create a federative African structure to erase European-imposed territorial divisions did not last long, and in September of the same year the Federation of Mali split and the Republic of Mali was created.

Still led by Modibo Keita, Mali quickly chose to break its ties with France and become a socialist republic. Not wanting Mali to be perceived as a Soviet or Chinese puppet state, Modibo Keita played a key role, along with Presidents Nasser of Egypt and N'krumah of Ghana, in the creation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the setting up of a Third World forum, the Non-Aligned States.

## From socialism ...

The Malian experience of socialism *à l'africaine* was to prove disastrous and played a key role in Keita's overthrow by a military coup in 1968. The centrally managed economy had replaced competitive markets with State agencies, rural co-operatives, and State enterprises. By 1967, foreign debts, depleted currency reserves, and failing agricultural production forced a devaluation of the Malian franc and a re-entry into the Franc zone. Nevertheless, those years are still



**left** Rural health services, neglected during the UPDM years, are now denied funding under the terms of the economic structural adjustment programme

fondly remembered by many Malians for improvements to the education and health services, and the sense of national unity which survives to this day, rekindling hope and pride. While his policies may have been rejected, Modibo Keita remains close to the hearts of every Malian. His death in detention in the 1970s, in mysterious circumstances, only contributed to the growing disenchantment of those opposed to the rule of the military.

### **... through drought and dictatorship**

The military coup of 1968, led by Moussa Traoré, set up a military dictatorship (1968-1974) which evolved into a one-party autocratic system, the Union Democratique du Peuple Malien (UPDM), which in all lasted for 23 years. The greatest legacy of those dark years was the institutionalising of corruption, not only as a form of government but also as a way of life. Those years were also marked by two disastrous droughts, in 1973-74 and again in 1984-85. One effect of the droughts was to open up the country to

international aid — which for the most part went into the coffers of government and party officials.

The 1970s and 1980s were difficult times for Malians in general, as the effects of the droughts drove hundreds of thousands to Bamako and other urban centres in quest of new livelihoods. The droughts only accentuated a process of desertification, which had been triggered by a combination of poor management, inappropriate government policies, and the growing population's demand for ever-scarcer resources. Crop yields dwindled in the Sahelian regions, and the dismal economic situation was made even worse by restrictions introduced under the structural adjustment programme (SAP) launched in 1982.

### **... to dreams made in Washington**

The structural adjustment programme was intended to streamline government bureaucracies, match national spending with national revenues, impose financial discipline, and encourage the private sector to invest and create jobs. Most observers would agree that many of these



James Hawkins/Oxfam

**above** 'Victory for the democratic movement. Descent into hell for the bloodstained and corrupt regime of Moussa and his clan' — press coverage of the events of 23–26 March 1991

reforms were needed, but little thought was given to the social costs that would have to be paid. The adjustment programme created unemployment and further weakened the education and health services, hitting the poorest and most vulnerable particularly hard. The role of the State was weakened, but very little else was offered to fill the void.

The statistics speak for themselves: in the early 1990s, UN indicators placed Mali among the five poorest nations in the world; annual per capita income was estimated at \$270 and life expectancy at 45 years; health services reached a bare 15 per cent of the population; enrolment in primary education was at an all-time low of 23 per cent; and literacy among adults was estimated at 16 per cent.

To compound these problems, people living in rural areas (about 80 per cent of the population living) were finding it harder and harder to farm smaller and smaller plots, as population growth out-paced productive resources. Livestock used to be Mali's main export, but pastoral areas continued to shrink as desertification increased, and nomadic herders were hard-pressed to sustain a

precarious existence. In this bleak context, the nomadic Touaregs launched an armed rebellion against the corrupt and divided Traoré regime in June 1990.

### **... and the downfall of the UDPM**

Discontent was also growing in the cities, where the young educated elite, sacked from government jobs under the terms of the SAP, were becoming 'the new poor'. Inspired by democratic movements spreading throughout Africa, civil associations began to emerge in Mali, armed with independent newspapers, demanding greater political freedom, multi-party politics, and full civil rights.

With the Touaregs in open revolt in the north, and the army unable to defeat their highly mobile and well-armed opponents, the government came under pressure in the cities from mass demonstrations, as the democratic movement joined forces with thousands of students protesting against the lack of investment in education.

Events culminated in the bloody weekend of 23–26 March 1991, when hundreds of people, men and women, young and old, were killed and injured when troops fired on suicidal marches on the Presidential Palace. On the 26th, a group of progressive officers, led by Colonel Amadou Toumany Touré, toppled the regime and arrested Moussa Traoré and his notorious associates.

But the disastrous economic and environmental crisis briefly described above would not disappear with Traoré. In the years ahead, Mali would face enormous challenges. The very survival of this proud and ancient people depends on three quests: for democracy and decentralisation; for peace and reconciliation; and for sustainable development. These quests are inextricably interlinked; most observers agree that the third depends largely on the success or otherwise of the first two.