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*Mali Blues*: Director: Lutz Gregor. Country: Mali and Germany. Languages: French with English subtitles. Actors: Fatoumata Diawara, Bassekou Kouyaté, Ahmed Ag Kaedi and Master Soumy. Year: 2016. 90 minutes.

Reviewed by: Madina Thiam, University of California, Los Angeles

An early scene in *Mali Blues* shows singer Fatoumata Diawara landing in Bamako's Modibo Keita airport. As she waits by the carousel to grab her luggage, a man donning a UN safety vest is briefly filmed chatting with Malian officials. This short moment at the onset of the film is hardly trivial. It illustrates how deeply interwoven war has now become in the lives of Malians. In 2011, a secessionist Tuareg rebellion occurred in the country's northern regions, followed by a successful military coup in the capital the subsequent year, triggering a widespread crisis. The country was severely weakened, facilitating the conquest of a sizeable portion of its northern territories by jihadi groups who subjected these areas to Islamic law. Foreign military interventions ensued at the request of the interim Malian government. By 2013, a new president was elected, and the jihadi occupants were defeated; this victory came at a heavy cost for Mali's sovereignty. Today, Mali hosts one of the largest contingents of UN troops in the world, with upwards of 15,000 personnel deployed on the ground. France, Mali's former colonial power, runs its largest overseas military operations in the Western Sahel – including Mali. The country's inhabitants, particularly in the northern and central regions, still live in daily insecurity caused by bandits, terrorists, or the Malian military itself. The capital, Bamako, enjoys much more stability, save for some underlying social tensions and the three terrorist attacks that took place in 2015 and 2017.

*Mali Blues* was shot in this context. Between 2014 and 2015, German director Lutz Gregor and his team followed four Malian musicians as they were grappling with events happening in Mali, in particular, the few months during which jihadis enacted a ban on all music in the areas they occupied. This ban –proclaimed in the name of Islamic law– struck a sour note in a country that proudly boasts both a rich and historic Muslim culture, and a deep-seeded musical tradition. One must consider the wider timeline and geographies in which the events depicted in *Mali Blues* occur in order to fully appreciate the film. Gregor divides the 90-minute documentary equally between the four artists as they carry out mundane activities, voice their thoughts, or play music.

Fatoumata Diawara, one of the artists the film follows, cherishes her individual freedom as a musician and African woman. She ran away from home at a young age, escaping constraining social customs and the prospect of marriage, to pursue her music and acting dreams. Though she now enjoys a successful international career, she also spends time in Bamako. In the film, we watch her as she puts the finishing touches on the house she has been building there. She is nervous as she gets ready to perform for the very first time before an audience at home, initiating “a reconciliation between [herself] and [her] own history”. Her fierce sense of independence explains why the music ban affected her “personally”, triggering an anxiety she attempts to verbally convey: “It felt as if life was over. Us, artists, are sick people ... We need music. Music is our cure.” In 2014, Diawara had already starred in Abderrahmane Sissako's critically-acclaimed *Timbuktu*, a fictional account of the music ban and its aftermath. Her portrayal in *Mali Blues* stand as a more intimate complement to her role in Sissako's movie.

While the music ban dimmed Diawara's spirit, it threatened Ahmed Ag Kaedi's bodily integrity. In the film, Ag Kaedi, a Tuareg musician from Kidal – a desert-town in the north of Mali – is depicted living in exile in Bamako. In 2012, as he was enjoying widespread acclaim with his band Amanar, he fled Kidal as a result of the imposition of Sharia. A group of armed men came to his sister's house, destroyed his equipment, and threatened to cut off his fingers should he continue playing the guitar. Gregor's camera shows Ag Kaedi's discomfort and alienation in the capital. Bamako's hustle and bustle sharply contrast with Kaedi's home region, where "one may spend twenty days without hearing the noise of an engine." Each time Ag Kaedi appears on screen, a diffuse, melancholic mood permeates the scene. As he explains, he does not feel quite at ease in Bamako, and would never want to live in Europe or America: "Whatever war happens there, whatever government takes over, [Kidal] is still where I am from."

While a longing for home motivates Ahmed Ag Kaedi, Bassekou Kouyaté's commitment to putting an end to the ban and war stems out of a sense of responsibility. Along with his wife Ami Sacko and their band N'Goni Ba, Kouyaté is one of Mali's best-known musicians. As his last name indicates, he is also a griot –the hereditary title designating a praise singer, storyteller, and historian in the Mandé tradition. As he explains: "Our mouth is mightier than weapons. Such has been the duty of griots, for centuries." His father hailed from the city of Ségou, the historic core of the Bamanan kingdoms: "We were always the top advisors in the kingdom ... When issues arise today in Mali, griots are called upon to provide a solution. We can speak the language of peace."

"There's a big difference between a griot and a rapper," Master Soumy points out as he discusses what triggered him to write "I ka slameya fo n'yé [Explain your Islam to me]". He came up with this song as a challenge to the terrorists using a radically different interpretation of the religion they both share to justify violence. "The griot has a traditional side and praises chiefs and leaders, but the rapper doesn't. Rap music was created to denounce society's ills, to try and change mentalities and behaviors." Indeed, Master Soumy, who thinks of himself as "the streets' lawyer", is a well-known activist who uses his lyrics to enact social change. In 2017, as one of the core advocates of the "An te, a bana [We're out, it's over]!" political platform, he helped galvanize a large enough segment of Malian youth to influence president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta to withdraw a controversial constitutional reform project.

Many scenes stand out in the film. At times the characters intersect, giving rise to truly magical encounters, such as the rooftop jam session between Diawara and Ag Kaedi. One could hardly imagine two more contrasting personalities, and yet, they click. Viewers get to enjoy beautiful footage of Bamako and Ségou, where the opening and closing scenes are shot on stage during the Festival sur le Niger. This is a film about Sahelians, therefore tea –cascading down from a tiny blue kettle onto shot glasses topped-up with a thick head of foam– is heavily featured.

Beyond the music ban and the war, the film hints at other societal issues. Popular religious leader and High Islamic Council vice-president, Chérif Ousmane Madani Haïdara, makes a cameo appearance to provide a severe critique of the West's role in the Malian conflict. Additionally, Diawara makes an emotionally-charged return to Ouelessebouyou, her home village, and sings about female genital mutilation before a small, intimate assembly of women and girls. The griot she reunites with hugs her, praises her, reminds her that though ill-intended people used to call her "sunguruba [whore]" she has proven them wrong. She also wishes a good man and marriage upon her. Although the film does not dwell on these other social issues, their acknowledgement allows the audience to more deeply understand Mali.

In August 2018, Mali lost one of its best voices; singer Khaïra Arby passed away in Bamako at the age of 59. Arby, who had to leave Timbuktu for Bamako in 2012, strongly adhered to Malian traditions, singing in many of the country's languages, and never hesitated

to speak out about societal ills, notably issues affecting women. As such, she inspired a generation of younger artists, including those portrayed in *Mali Blues*. She was featured in a number of previous music documentaries, such as Kiley Kraskouskas' *The Last Song before the War* or Johanna Schwartz's *They Will Have to Kill Us First*. Within that genre, Lutz Gregor's *Mali Blues* is well-worth a watch.

**Research Africa**

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