

FEATURED REVIEWS

# Malian Women in Public History and Public Memory

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*Bamako, March 1991.* 100,000 protesters took to the street challenging Mali's military regime. Both men and women participated in six months of protests, their actions shaped by class, gender, and generation. The press, in its reporting, produced a specific, gendered, image of protest, involving young men protesters and their exceptional *mères indociles* (rebellious mothers) motivated to protest by the risk of bodily harm to their children.<sup>1</sup>

The role of women in these protests, in which several hundred Malians were killed by state security forces, is the starting point for a set of recent Malian public history projects, which seek to highlight the central role of women in Mali's national history. This includes museums and museum exhibits (such as Muso Kunda, a museum of women's history in Bamako;<sup>2</sup> an exhibit at the Centre Nationale d'Information sur la Femme et l'Enfant; and a 2010 exhibit on women in Mali and as immigrants at the Museum of Brittany, France, subsequently published as *Mali au féminin*, by Françoise Berretrot);<sup>3</sup> academic and popular histories (Ophélie Rillon's *Le genre de la lutte: Une autre histoire du Mali contemporain (1956–1991)*; a 2016 book-DVD duo *Mars des femmes, 1991: chronique d'une révolution malienne* by Ramata Diaorué, Oumou Traoré, and Seydou Koné; and Madina Thiam's 2020 'Women in Mali'),<sup>4</sup> newspaper articles and documentaries, public presentations (often scheduled to commemorate 8 March, International Women's Day, and 31 July, Pan-African Women's Day), and archives.<sup>5</sup> Echoing early works of gender history, these projects seek to recuperate public memory of Malian women's political participation and re-narrate who and what deserves to be part of the national historical narrative of Mali.<sup>6</sup>

Many of these initiatives rely on biography as a central method.<sup>7</sup> An exhibit at the Centre Nationale d'Information sur la Femme et l'Enfant (CNDIFE), a gender-studies library created by

<sup>1</sup>O. Rillon, *Le genre de la lutte: Une autre histoire du Mali contemporain (1956–1991)* (Lyons, 2022), 172–8.

<sup>2</sup>Muso Kunda Museum, website, <https://musokunda.org/>.

<sup>3</sup>F. Berretrot, *Mali au féminin* (Rennes, 2010).

<sup>4</sup>Rillon, *Le genre*; R. Diaorué, O. Traoré, and S. Koné, *Mars des femmes, 1991: chronique d'une révolution malienne* (Bamako, 2016); M. Thiam, 'Women in Mali', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, 27 Oct. 2020; <https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-530>. A slightly older text is B. Sanankoua, 'Femmes du Mali', *Esprit*, 317:8/9 (2005), 212–18.

<sup>5</sup>Muso Kunda website, <https://musokunda.org/>.

<sup>6</sup>On memorialization in Bamako, via state constructed public monuments, see: M. J. Arnoldi, 'Bamako, Mali: monuments and modernity in the urban imagination', *Africa Today*, 54:2 (2007), 3–24; R. De Jorio, 'Narratives of the nation and democracy in Mali: a view from Modibo Keita's memorial', *Cahiers D'études Africaines*, 43:172 (2003), 827–55.

<sup>7</sup>Biography also roots a new encyclopedia of African activism: Notice Présentation du Maitron Afrique, 25 Jun. 2014, <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article160245>; F. Blum, 'Le "Maitron Afrique": dictionnaire des mobilisations et contestations africaines', *Hommes & Migrations*, 1332:1 (2021), 223–5. See also B. Florian and S. Maky Madiba "Sur tout qu'elle ne meure pas". Du fleuve Sénégal au cap de Bonne-Espérance, les combats d'une militante, féministe et journaliste panafricaine (années 1970–1990). Entretien avec Eugénie Rokhaya Aw', *Revue d'Histoire Contemporaine de l'Afrique*, 4 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.51185/journals/rhca.2023.entretien05>; and a family biography of Gabriel d'Arboussier based on his unpublished memoir, see F. Blum and O. Rillon, 'Mémoires, correspondances, photographies, entretiens: à propos de Gabriel d'Arboussier', in



Mali's Ministry of the Promotion of Women, Children, and the Family, highlights specific political leaders, primarily those who ascended the echelons of various government agencies. Several journalistic projects have also centered on public figures, from short biographies of Malian women musicians, politicians, and public figures published by the online platform Maliweb in 2017, to a documentary about teacher and militant Sira Diop produced by activist-journalist Fatoumata 'FC' Coulibaly, to a soon-to-be released video interview with the intellectual Bintou Sanankoua, by historian Madina Thiam and videographer Fatoma Coulibaly.<sup>8</sup> One of the first methods underpinning academic works of African gender history,<sup>9</sup> biography was also the primary tool of one of the foundational texts on women's history in Mali: Adame Ba Konaré's *Dictionnaire des femmes célèbres du Mali* (1993).<sup>10</sup> The emphasis on biography reflects the public visibility of certain women, and modes of memorialization (for example, a common practice of inviting public figures to speak at annual Women's Days). Biography is also an organizing structure of the *Projet Archives des Femmes* (PAF), an archive of the papers of Malian women activists, co-led by Oumou Sidibé, Madina Thiam, Gregory Mann, and myself.<sup>11</sup> This archive developed from the oral histories conducted by Sidibé during her MA and PhD work on women in Mali's independence movement, and now operates in partnership with the CNDIFE and a digital archive hosted by the [UCLA libraries](https://www.library.ucla.edu/). It is one of a growing number of projects to conserve private, organizational, artistic, and non-state archives in Mali.<sup>12</sup> PAF conserves and digitizes the personal papers of women involved in Mali's independence movement, national women's groups, associations, and social movements, with the intention of creating a resource for research by Malian students, scholars, and journalists.<sup>13</sup> Because PAF conserves personal paper collections, it follows the individual professional and activist trajectory of each collection creator.

The emphasis on biography can lead to repeated attention to certain individuals. Nationally and internationally, Aoua Kéita has appeared as a synecdoche of women in Mali's independence movement.<sup>14</sup>

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N. Kouamé, E. P. Meyer, A. Viguier (eds.), *Encyclopédie des historiographies: Afriques, Amériques, Asies: Volume 1: sources et genres historiques (Tome 1 et Tome 2)* (Paris, 2020), 1177–87, <https://books.openedition.org/pressesinalco/27204?lang=en>.

<sup>8</sup>De la période des empires à nos jours : Ces braves femmes qui rappellent le Mali', *Aujourd'hui-Mali*, 27 May 2017, <https://www.maliweb.net/histoire-politique/de-periode-empires-a-nos-jours-braves-femmes-rappellent-mali-2277292.html>; F. Coulibaly (dir.), 'Sira Diop: un fleuve intarissable', documentary film, CIRTEF / ORTM (2010).

<sup>9</sup>E.g. S. Mirza and M. Strobel, *Three Swahili Women: Life Histories from Mombasa, Kenya* (Bloomington, IN, 1989).

<sup>10</sup>A. Ba Konaré, *Dictionnaire des femmes célèbres du Mali* (Bamako, 1993).

<sup>11</sup>Website, <https://www.archivesfemmesmali.com/>; online archive, <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/catalog/ark:/21198/z1131jkv>.

<sup>12</sup>These include Aissatou Mbodj-Pouye's preservation of the sound archive of the Radio Rurale du Kayes, <https://meap.library.ucla.edu/projects/the-sound-archives-of-radio-rurale-de-kayes-mali/>; see also A. Mbodj-Pouye, 'Radio and the road: infrastructure, mobility, and political change in the beginnings of Radio Rurale de Kayes (1980–early 2000s)', *The Journal of African History*, 62:1 (2021), 125–49; and the *Archive of Malian Photography*, <https://amp.matrix.msu.edu/>; and multiple projects to conserve manuscripts from northern Mali, especially Timbuktu, <https://artsandculture.google.com/experiment/the-timbuktu-manuscripts/BQE6pL2U3Qsu2A?hl=en>. A number of projects have also sought to digitize or publish institutional archives, including the Youtube channel 'Vision de Modibo Keita et de ses compagnons', which publishes archival footage from the state-run Office de Radio et Television du Mali, <https://www.youtube.com/@visiondemodibokeitaetsesco4329/videos>. See also projects supported by the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme, including: 'Preserving the memory of the colonial past in Dogon country. A survey of historical collections of the endangered archives of Bandiagara (EAP764)', <https://doi.org/10.15130/EAP764>; 'Recovering the rich local history of Kita (Mali) through the salvaging of its archival heritage (EAP1085)', <https://dx.doi.org/10.15130/EAP1085>. Unfortunately, some of these efforts have not succeeded; the Kayes region archives were burned during a protest, see M. Rodet, A. Mbodj-Pouye, M. Sène Cissé, and M. Coulibaly, 'Retours sur l'incendie d'un fonds d'archives à Kayes (Mali): enjeux sociaux, scientifiques et politiques', *Sources. Matériaux et terrains en études africaines*, 2 (2021), 239–48, <https://www.sources-journal.org/426>; M. Thiam, 'Struggle, neglect, and archives', *CODESRIA Bulletin*, 5&6 (2020), 21–3.

<sup>13</sup>The collections conserved to date include the papers of Aoua Thiero, Bassata Djiré, Bah Tounkara, Assa Diallo, Mafouné Sangaré, Kadia Togola, Oumou Coulibaly, and Oumeissa Maiga.

<sup>14</sup>This ranges from the public naming of the Centre Aoua Kéita, a women's center in Bamako, to A. Joseph-Gabriel, *Reimagining Liberation: How Black Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire* (Urbana Champaign, 2020).

The collections of the *Projet Archives des Femmes*, for its part, represents a narrow social class — women educated in French, most of whom were also employed by the postcolonial state and/or were members of the national women's parties. Currently all of the collections feature women who lived in Bamako; other activist women, those living in small towns for example, are not (yet) visible in this mode of memory making. Yet as a group these archival collections do highlight initiatives at a range of scales (from national departments to small associations) and topics (from national literacy programs to small business development for snack foods and Muslim women's groups). As records like these are not conserved in Mali's national archives, these documents reveal Malian women's multifaceted investments in national and social projects, including histories of environmental interventions, literacy projects, pan-African feminist organizing, and Muslim women's organizations.

An alternate method to balance historical attention to public figures and daily life is present at Muso Kunda, a museum in Bamako created by historian, public intellectual, and former first lady Adame Ba Konaré. Muso Kunda reopened in 2019 after renovations and a multi-year closure. Via its wall-text, the museum is framed as a companion piece to Ba Konaré's 1993 book *Dictionnaire des femmes célèbres du Mali*, yet whereas large portions of the book are biographical sketches of different women, the museum is especially interested in 'women' as a social category. 'In addition to celebrities' it seeks to celebrate 'the silent heroine of household life' and 'her knowledge and skill'.<sup>15</sup> Two exhibits address women's involvement in more formal political movements, including a memorial to women victims of the state repression of pro-democracy movements in 1991, but several of the museum's fascinating exhibits focus on women's material culture — women's clothing (see Fig. 1 below), some based on archeological evidence; photography of women's hairstyles; sculptural incense burners; and objects which narrate the experiences of marriage and cooking.

Essentially the museum is trying to redefine elements of women's daily life as worthy of historical study, and as the sites of action, craft, skill, power, authority, and indeed, politics. When I visited in August 2023, a special exhibit on woven blankets, which form an important part of a bride's trousseau, included several examples from Mali's independence era which celebrated independence and the AirMali airline.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, some new academic histories, like Rillon's *Le genre de la lutte*, effectively frame biography with other forms of analysis, in order to, per its very title, retell the history of Mali through a focus on gendered forms of contestation.<sup>17</sup> The book traces the history of Malian women and men involved in formal and informal protests against the state via three themes: women's presence in

See also J. Turrittin, 'Aoua Kéita and the nascent women's movement in the French Sudan', *African Studies Review*, 36:1 (1993), 59–89.

<sup>15</sup>Muso Kunda Museum, 'Le mot lumineux d'Adame Ba Konaré, Présidente-fondatrice du Musée de la femme Muso Kunda', introductory exhibit panel, viewed 30 July 2023.

<sup>16</sup>The attention to women of different levels of public prominence is reflective of Ba Konaré's career. In addition to her scholarship on Mali's precolonial history and historical memory, she has written a book centered on biography of prominent figures and a history of incense, a feminine product for the household, beauty, and eroticism. E.g. A. Ba Konaré, *Dictionnaire*; A. Ba Konaré, *Parfums du Mali: Dans le sillage du wusulan* (Paris, 2001).

<sup>17</sup>Rillon, *Le genre*. This book can be situated within a set of recent scholarship on feminist activism in Africa: R. Dieng; T. Haastrup, and A. Kang, 'Centering feminists and feminism in protests in Africa', *Politics & Gender*, 1–4; R. Ndengue and S. C. Kaplan, 'Deprovincializing the feminine/feminist Cameroonian nationalism of the 1950s: the UDEFEC and pluriversal Black feminism', *Journal of Women's History*, 35:3 (2023), 62–80; J. A. Boittin and J. Couti 'Debout & déter / standing up & determined: Black women on the move, Black feminisms in French (post)imperial contexts', *Journal of Women's History*, 35:3 (2023), 9–18; E. Jacob, 'Militant mothers: gender and the politics of anticolonial action in Côte d'Ivoire', *The Journal of African History*, 63:3 (2022), 348–67. It also connects with new work on Malian political repertoires/political cultures — a recent special issue of *Africa Today* includes two articles focused on Malian protests about gender, specifically the same 2009 mobilizations against revisions to the family code. S. Diallo and D. E. Schulz, 'Fragments of legitimacy: symbolic constructions of political leadership in twenty-first-century Mali', *Africa Today*, 70:1 (2023), 12–37; S. Wing, 'Coups d'état, political legitimacy, and instability in Mali', *Africa Today*, 70:1 (2023), 74–100; B. Whitehouse, "'When a father speaks, the child cannot answer back": patriarchal anxiety, gender equality, and Malian state authority' *Africa Today*, 70:1 (2023), 54–73. See



**Figure 1.** Selected examples of women's historical dress  
Source: Muso Kunda Museum, 'Permanent exhibit on mannequins and statues', photographed by author, 30 July 2023.

Malian mass movements; how and why their presence was erased or limited to certain tropes; and the relevance of gender (including both masculinity and femininity) in the experiences and forms of protest and resistance to the Malian postcolonial state. Fundamentally, the book is a history of gender and social movements, not of women and social movements. However, like the public history projects, and in explicit conversation with many of them, Rillon's book identifies evidence of women's presence where it has been obscured in popular narratives, media, or academic history. She recovers the vital involvement of women in a range of twentieth-century Malian political

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also O. Koné and A. E. Calvès, 'La mobilisation des organisations féminines en faveur du Code de la famille au Mali: autopsie d'une défaite', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 242 (2021) 331–54.

movements, from the Tamashek rebellion of 1963, student strikes of the 1970s–80s, and the 1991 anti-dictatorship protests, which ultimately led to the end of a 23-year military regime. In some cases, Rillon demonstrates, the absence of women from historical narratives was due to gendered repression. For example, during market protests in 1962–3 over the Union Soudanais-Rassemblement Démocratique Africain's economic and monetary policies, Rillon effectively suggests that the absence of women from the historical narrative was due to arrests which targeted men, rather than the composition of the protest 'crowd' (*fouille*), as women would have been very present in markets, as both vendors and consumers. In other cases, this reflected the modes of protest which developed from men and women's social roles, as Rillon demonstrates via interviews, opposition press, and memoirs. During a period of vigorous student activism from 1977–80, in the face of intense state repression, including torture, models of male leadership developed within student organizations because of young men's capacity to move around Bamako and meet in *grins* (social clubs). Finally, Rillon examines how tropes shaped public memory of contestation, highlighting the rise of the figure of the *mère indocile* motivated to protest by the risk of bodily harm to her children. This figure framed all women's political action as an outgrowth of maternal feeling. In the student movement, this was embodied via the person of Coumba Camara, mother of Abdoul 'Cabral' Camara. By 1990, the figure of the protester's mother galvanized public sentiment during anti-regime protests, was highlighted in opposition media reporting, and was sometimes used by activists to mobilize public sympathy. Rillon challenges tropes of women's activism in part through her use of non-state archives; indeed personal, familial, and organizational archives are the source for many recent works which center women and gendered histories of decolonization, protest, and social movements.<sup>18</sup>

Although they operate in different genres, collectively, these projects raise questions about how we construct the public history of women in Malian history and social movements. The first concerns how the memorialization of 'social movements' or 'women's activism' as a single category produces historical works (be they museum exhibits, archives, or monographs) which bring together women with different politics. Many of these projects take a broad category — women's activism, or gendered activism, or women's lives — as their organizing theme. This strategy can open up interesting connections (for example, the patterns of activism in Rillon's work), but it also can produce some internal paradoxes. For example, PAF includes archival material from activists with different positions on political topics — for example, women who sought to ban excision (also called female genital mutilation or FGM) and those who supported the practice.<sup>19</sup> This combination reflects the archive's mandate to collect the papers of 'women activists' and also reveals the real complexity of the trajectory of some collection creators, who held different political positions across their lifetimes. For example many of the same women were active in Mali's socialist and then military governments, such as Aoua Thiero, whose husband was the Malian ambassador to the US under the Modibo Keita government and who then became a close companion of Mariam Traoré, wife of Mali's military leader. Rillon's book also uses an expansive understanding of 'forms of contestation' and by taking a broad view of mass mobilization and resistance, crosses between different political crosscurrents and brings together social movements which might not be 'equivalent' — did the Tamashek rebellion of 1963 have the same politics as student protest movements under military rule?

Secondly, these projects should push us to reflect on the effects of structuring public history along national lines, and the limits of national frameworks in preserving the history of gender-based activism in West Africa. A range of scholarship has emphasized the pan-African and international

<sup>18</sup>E. Bouilly and O. Rillon, 'Editorial: relire les décolonisations d'Afrique francophone au prisme du genre', *Mouvement social*, 255:2 (2016), 3–16, 9.

<sup>19</sup>M. Thiam, D. Golaszewski, M. Beïdy Tamboura, O. Sidibé, and G. Mann, 'Le projet Archives des femmes: archiver, numériser et diffuser les luttes des femmes Maliennes', *Revue d'Histoire Contemporaine de l'Afrique*, 14 Oct. 2023, 8, <https://doi.org/10.51185/journals/rhca.2023.stc03>.

work undertaken by Malian women activists in collaboration with their peers in Guinea, Senegal, Haut Volta/Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and beyond.<sup>20</sup> Many public history projects include material which crosses these borders, following the actual networks and mobility of West African women activists. The archives of Senegalese magazine *Awa*, published between 1964 and 1973 (and preserved online and during a 2017 exhibit at Dakar's Musée de la Femme Henriette Bathily) contain many articles about women in other West African countries.<sup>21</sup> The interview series 'Passarelle' conducted by the Senegalese think tank WATHI highlights individuals like the late Tamaro Touré, who was born in Mali (Soudan Français).<sup>22</sup> In Mali itself, one of the most active groups memorializing women's activism is the association Fondation Femmes d'Afrique et Culture – Mémorial de Rufisque/Comité National du Mali (FAC-MR/CNM), whose members include women who studied at the École normale de Rufisque in Senegal, and their children; the association has a public space, has published books, and regularly holds events on Malian women's history.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, these projects raise questions about how histories of women's activism and social roles relate to contemporary women's activism. Many young Malians are committed to engaging in reflections on women's contemporary roles in Mali, from the online media platform Benbere's series on gender, sexual health, and related topics and cultural spaces like Espace Walaha which facilitate public discussions on contemporary social issues.<sup>24</sup> For most of the initiatives discussed here, historical and contemporary women's actions are thus interlocking strands of a shared project in which history is a usable tool in the construction of contemporary feminist political action. The Muso Kunda museum is framed as an action taken in response to histories of gender-based exclusion. PAF has held conferences and summer intensive courses for women university students in Bamako, which have the explicit aim to make this history visible for new generations as inspiration for action. These initiatives seek to produce gendered public history of Malian initiatives, social movements, and political visions to support an equitable future.

<sup>20</sup>Amongst others, see P. Barthélémy. *Sororité et Colonialisme. Françaises et Africaines au temps de la guerre froide (1944–1962)* (Paris, 2022); P. Barthélémy and S. Panata, 'Militantes africaines et organisations féminines internationales dans la guerre froide. Un pragmatisme stratégique (1947–1963)', *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire*, 57:1 (2023), 23–45; S. Panata, 'Citoyennes nationales et panafricaines. Le congrès de "la Femme africaine" à Ibadan en 1960', *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire*, 53:1 (2021), 71–99. Beyond the francophone world, see Y. Kiazolu, "'All the women are meeting": the National Council of Negro Women, emerging Africa, and transnational solidarity, 1935–1966' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 2020).

<sup>21</sup>*AWA: la revue de la femme noire*, online archive, <https://www.awamagazine.org/>; Le Musée de la Femme Henriette Bathily, <https://www.mufem.org/>.

<sup>22</sup>WATHI, 'Tamaro Touré, première femme inspecteur du travail et fondatrice de l'association des Villages d'Enfants SOS au Sénégal (I-IV)', *Passerelle* (30 Oct. 2016 – 3 Jan 2017), <https://www.wathi.org/passerelle/>.

<sup>23</sup>M. Gagny Traore, '8 mars 2020: La Fondation Femmes d'Afrique et Culture–Mémorial de Rufisque/ Comité national du Mali (FAC-MR/CNM), sensibilise sur la Résolution 1325 des Nations Unies', *Nyeleni Magazine*, 13 Mar. 2020, <https://nyelenimagazine.org/8-mars-2020-la-fondation-femmes-dafrique-et-culture-memorial-de-rufisque-comite-national-du-mali-fac-mr-cnmsensibilise-sur-la-resolution-1325-des-nations-unies/>.

<sup>24</sup>Benbere, 'Femmes', <https://benbere.org/tag/femmes/>; Benbere, 'Ladamour', <https://benbere.org/ladamour/>. LAB-TaP / New Espace Walaha, Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/labtap223/>.