Alisa LaGamma (Ed.): *Sahel: Art and Empires on the Shores of the Sahara*

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Introduction

The book *Sahel: Art and Empires on the Shores of the Sahara* is an “artwork” in itself, a beautiful volume richly illustrated with maps and 277 color photographs. It is the result of a cross between an exhibition that took place at The Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York City (the Met), from January 30 to May 2020, and an editorial project that assembled contributions from nine authors. The project was initiated, led, and brought to fruition by Alisa LaGamma, the Ceil and Michael E. Pulitzer Curator in the Department of Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas at the Met.

The Met exhibition presented a selection of African (Sahelian) art objects obtained from different institutions (in France, Germany, Mali, Mauritania, Netherlands, Niger, Senegal, Switzerland, and the USA), private collections, and the museum’s African art collections. It is, accordingly, a commendable international collaborative venture. In the words of Max Hollein, director of the MMA, one of LaGamma’s top priorities “was to examine Sahelian history through visual forms of expression contemporaneous with events as they unfolded on the ground” (p. 7). In other words, the goal of the initiative was to bring to light the long-term cultural and political evolution of Sahelian societies through the prism of their visual arts creations—a laudable and ambitious goal. How did it work out? The book

is in three parts, each with three contributions. Each of these triptychs is anchored on an art contribution as the core leitmotiv.

The Initial Stages: Orality and Material Culture

To trace and unwrap the long-term history of Sahel societies, Alisa LaGamma sets the stage in her introduction by outlining the structure of the volume, which is both thematic and chronological. The book features the “visual imagination” of the western end of the Sahel, a land of three rivers: the Gambia and Senegal in the west, and the Niger as the main artery from southwest Mali to south-central Niger. The time range under consideration stretches from “Ancient Ghana in the fourth century to the fall of Segou in 1861” (p. 15). This foray into the western Sahelian past is necessarily a multi-disciplinary endeavor, mobilizing oral traditions, archaeology, architecture theory, Islamic history, and philosophy. Material culture is at the core of the narrative process; objects made of clay, wood, and metal, as well as buildings, are interwoven with the concepts and ideas they materialize, rhythmized by the pulse of Sahelian people’s long-term history. Contemporaneous and successive social formations emerge, expand, peak, shrink, and collapse. The names of these core social entities vary depending on academic or historical traditions. They range from camps, villages, towns, and cities, to chiefdoms, states, kingdoms, and empires, with differential patterning from one core period to the next. It is well known that “the name is not the thing.” Terminological disputes are,

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therefore, irrelevant. What matters is a working “operational definition.”

After the editor’s introduction, forays into the initial stages of Sahelian history include three contributions that make use of oral traditions, archaeology, and art. The West African Sahel is well known in scholarly circles for its rich and diverse oral traditions. David C. Conrad first analyzes local perceptions of early times in what he terms “odes to Sahelian Empires.” His narrative is segmented into four successive periods corresponding to key formative steps in the Sahel’s sociopolitical history: Wagadu (also known as Ancient Ghana) for the initial stage (ca. AD 300–1200); Mali (ca. AD 1230–1450); Songhay (AD 1450–1600); and, finally, Segou (AD 1712–1861). There are different versions of the same story in each segment: 17 versions of Soninke oral traditions on the Serpent Bida for Wagadu; other variants of Sunjata Epic for the Mali Empire; the Timbuktu chronicle for Songhay; and, finally, the Segu Epic for the Bamana kingdom. These oral narratives feature kinship, social intrigue, cooperation, and alliance, as well as rivalry and competition. They convey and support social memories and act as social and political charters.

R. J. McIntosh and Mamadou Cissé explore the materiality of the grand narrative in Conrad’s chapter. The title of their contribution, “On the Shoreline of History: The State of Archaeology in the Sahel,” is unfortunately misleading for two reasons. The first phrase “On the Shoreline of History” is an echo of Hegel’s “The Reason in History” infamously rehashed in the speech of the former president of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, on July 26, 2007, at Cheikh Anta Diop University (Dakar, Senegal), in which he summoned Africans to “enter history” (Hegel 1995; Collective 2009). The second phrase, “The State of Archaeology in the Sahel,” is a misnomer because the archaeology of the Sahel is not limited to “West Africa during the Iron Age (ca. 800 BC–AD 1000)” with case studies from Senegambia and the Inland Niger Delta (p. 49). The Senegambian megaliths and tumuli (m’banar) and urbanization in the Inland Niger Delta are indeed spectacular cultural developments featuring original social organizations in a “vibrant landscape of craft innovation, migration, sustained contact between distant communities, and original experiment in city life and territorial polities” (p. 49). However, it is erroneous to assert that “at Wanar, stratified deposits have yielded evidence of consistent if discontinuous occupation going back to the late second millennium B.C.” (p. 53). So far, the site of Wanar is dated to the

twelfth-thirteenth century AD (Laporte et al. 2012). The stratified deposit with late-second millennium BC material, alluded to in that quote, is Monument 25 from the Ngayene II complex containing a lower level of four burials dated to 1362–1195 al BC (Dak-1457) (Holl and Bocoum 2017, p. 188). For the Jenne-Jeno complex, the reiteration of contrasts between this and different world civilizations does not help clarify the sociopolitical and economic organization of Jenne-Jeno. If the ancient African political economy can teach us anything, it is the variability of power and its material correlates. Hence, the absence of a palace at Jenne-Jeno cannot be unilaterally equated with an absence of rulers. This chapter seems to give significant currency to alternative reality with cases of “alternative polities” (p. 51) and “alternative urbanism” (p. 60).

Alisa LaGamma’s chapter on pre-Islamic artistic patronage takes the reader through a deep history of artistic traditions and their corollary sociopolitical formations, from the Later Stone Age “Thiaroye Woman” (instead of “Venus”) circa 2000 BC to the Middle Niger masterpieces of Bura cemetery (eleventh-thirteenth century AD). There are, however, very few early artworks in early West Africa Sahel. Indeed, artworks only became an integral part of Sahelian social systems from the mid-first millennium AD onward. The elaboration of visual arts was synchronous with increasing social complexity and accelerated urbanization as illustrated by objects from the burials of high-status individuals in the tumuli of Koy Gourey and El-Oualedji, and the stone-carving and megalith-shaping traditions that emerged and developed in the “sacred landscapes” of central Mali at such places as Tondidaru. An equestrian tradition, pointing to marked social differentiation, took root in the Middle Niger in the late first to the early second millennium, while supplicants and kneeling figures characterize the Jenne-Jeno tradition. The latter, dated to the penultimate centuries of the Inland Niger Delta urban cluster in the mid-second millennium, is suggested “to enlist the intervention of a divine audience to redress and dispel an unknown but looming existential crisis” (p. 107)—in this case, the likely collapse of the Mali Empire.

Islam Expansion and Its Implications

The advent of Islam and its implications are addressed from the perspectives of epigraphy, architecture, and extensive population movements impacting art

traditions. Paulo F. de Moraes Farias looks at the advent of Islam in West Africa: (1) as a foreign imposition geared to civilize pagan nations and (2) as free and deliberate adoption by ancient Sahelians. He appears to favor the second scenario and asserts that “for Sahelians and South Saharans, the adoption of Islam was a deliberate tuning in to and reaching out across a vast intercontinental domain symbolically centred on Mecca” (p. 111). It is, however, difficult to ignore the views of towering scholars such as Ibn Khaldun (1994 [1377]), who considered Africans as infra-humans. Here, the conversion of Sahelian elites to Islam expanded and instituted enslavement because “unbelief” could be used to enslave Sahelians and Zanj. The *Dar al-Gharb* (Land of War), antithetic to the *Dar al-Islam* (Land of Islam), was open to raiding and plunder. In West Africa, in contrast to the Near East and North Africa, Islam did not spread initially through waves of the holy war; it blended with different elite ideologies to support trans-Saharan trade in enslaved West Africans for centuries—Islam was successfully “Africanized.” For example, the Almoravids carved an Afro-European kingdom along the western margin of the *Dar al-Islam* in the eleventh century. Muslim merchant diasporas settled in the Sahelian cities of Ghana and Gao. Early Arabic inscriptions, featuring male and female elite members, were found clustered in the Tadmekka-Essouk cemetery. Timbuktu emerged as a beacon of Islamic sciences and scholarship. And, Mansa Musa of Mali made a memorable pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324–25. Today, the Sahel populations across the continent, from Senegal to Ethiopia, are predominantly Muslim.

Giulia Paoli focuses on public architecture through the successive presentation of four Sahelian landmarks. The first is the Djinguerber Mosque of Timbuktu (1325–1330), which was built in four main stages. The second is the Friday Mosque of Jenne, which has an intricate and complex architectural history of three main stages. Initially built in the thirteenth century, it was rearranged and expanded in the first half of the nineteenth century, and its present state is the result of work carried out in 1906 during the Colonial period. The third is the tomb and Mausoleum of Askia Mohammed located in Gao, which was completed shortly after his death in 1538. It includes the truncated pyramid burial, a Mosque, a cemetery, and an open-air assembly space, though it is unknown if the Songhai Emperor is buried in “his tomb.” The fourth and last

landmark is the Nande Mosque in the Bandiagara escarpment. Possibly built in the twelfth century, it is a powerfully expressive building, a “sculptural monument” with emphasis on asymmetry. According to the standard narrative, Mansa Musa hired and brought back the Al-Andalus poet and architect Abu Ishaq al Saheli (1290–1346) from his Mecca pilgrimage. Al Saheli is claimed to have “authored” the Sahelian Architecture style featured in the four cases presented above. Recent research challenges that narrative, and it is now recognized that the “Sudanese [is] an architectural style unique to its place” (p. 138).

In the third contribution of this second triptych, Alisa LaGamma examines the impacts of sociopolitical reorganization, following the collapse of ancient Ghana, on the dynamics and diversification of arts and crafts traditions in the West African Sahel. The demand for gold reached its peak. Soninke people relocated in different regions of the western Sahel, and new Madinka polities emerged in the Niger headwaters. The defeat of the Sosso army led by Soumaore Kante at the battle of Kirina (1235) opened the gate to an unchecked expansion of Mali from its southern core. The new state, through alliance and conquest, set in place a large multi-ethnic empire stretching from the Niger Bend in the east to the Atlantic Coast in the west. Mansa Musa’s extravaganza during his pilgrimage to Mecca (1324–1325) gave rise to the “worldwide” reputation of Mali as the land of gold. West Sahelian societies were arranged in stratified “caste-like” communities; some narrowly specialized in specific crafts and/or activities (e.g., *nyamakalaw*). The Mande metal scepters, repositories of *nyama* (vital force) and emblems of authority, are exclusively made by blacksmiths. The craftsmanship is remarkable: “To smelt iron and forge it into two-dimensional forms is difficult enough; to do so in three dimension and give shape to a convincing human representation requires an even greater degree of skill and finesse” (p. 151). The embrace of Islam and the collapse of Mali triggered a population boom in Bandiagara, leading to the emergence of the Tellem and later Dogon cultures and the development of weaving, fabric production, and ancient western Sahel fashion in this region. In Dogon societies, too, devotional sculptures, abundantly illustrated in this chapter, were made by blacksmiths. Because of its topographic characteristics, the Bandiagara plateau finally emerged as the repository of Mali’s creative history and a power center.

From Ancient Mali to Foreign Intrusions

The third and final triptych focuses on post-Mali developments, from the rise and collapse of the Songhay Empire to the fall of Segou at the hands of French Colonial troops led by Colonel Louis Archinard in April 1890. Yaelle Biro and Ibrahima Thiaw's contribution is anchored in archival research that brings to light those involved in collecting western Sahel's material culture, particularly textiles. For example, Paul Soleillet (1842–1886) collected textiles at Segou in 1878–79. Victor Schoelcher (1840–1893), the French abolitionist, also collected textiles from different parts of West Africa. And, Frantz de Zeltner (1871–1930) did the same. They all donated their collections to the Trocadero Museum. The “Segu Treasure,” now in the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, reveals another facet of “collecting,” this time the appropriation of the Segu rulers' jewelry by Colonel Louis Archinard after the capture of the town in April 1890. “Ethnographic collecting” was a third process, conducted by the Mission Ethnographique et Linguistique Dakar–Djibouti, funded by the French government and led by Marcel Griaule from May 1931 to February 1933. The expedition “collected 3,600 objects, 300 manuscripts and amulets and made 6000 photographs and 200 recordings” (p. 208). The fourth collecting tactic was archaeological excavation. Lieutenant Desplagnes explored and excavated sites in Gundam, south of Gao in Mali and the Bandiagara. His excavation at the El-Oualedji tumulus, published in 1907, is still the only source of information for that site. It produced “448 archaeological and ethnographic objects,” all donated to the Trocadero Museum. It is axiomatic that museums and their collections construct views of peoples' cultural histories, but depending on the chosen orientations, these can be either integrative or divisive.

Alisa LaGamma explores trends in artistic traditions along an evolutionary trajectory, starting with a weakening Mali and emerging Songhay Empire in the fifteenth century and ending with Segou's capture in April 1890. While Gao on the Niger River developed in parallel with Kumbi Saleh as the political center of the Wagadu kingdom, it grew richer and more populous in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Around 1430–1450, the balance of power shifted east with the emergence of Songhay ruling dynasties, while Europeans arrived along West African coasts in the 1490s. The city of Timbuktu, with its three principal

mosques—Djinguerber, Sidi Yahya, and Sankore—flourished as an intellectual and cultural metropolis. Songhay troops were crushed by a Moroccan expeditionary force led by Djouder Pacha at Tondibi in 1591. Large-scale social and political re-alignment characterized the post-Songhay collapse years. Enslavement, both continental and Atlantic, drained the continent of its youth. Segou emerged as the political center of a new Bamana kingdom in the early eighteenth century. The Segou *Jo* association initiated arts patronage, commissioning “some of the most monumental figurative wood sculptures known from sub-Saharan Africa” (p. 226). During the nineteenth century, the fame of Segou grew through painting with mud and vibrant textile industry, producing the *Lomasa* fabric used for luxury garments.

In the last chapter, “Praying for Life,” Souleyman Bachir Diagne infers philosophical and theological lessons from the long-term history of the western Sahel. For him, despite outbreaks of jihad and bursts of iconoclasm, the production of art objects was an essential dimension of the generative process spelled out in the book. The cosmology of vital forces—*nyama*—did not only “survive islamization, it integrated it” (p. 22).

Conclusion

This volume is an innovative addition to the library of African history, focusing on complex and intricate historical processes. It is an excellent complement to *Vallée du Niger* (Devisse et al. 1993). It is, however, surprising that there is no single reference to the Mande Charter, also known as *Kurukan Fuga* (Cissé 2003), listed as UNESCO Intangible World Heritage; this was supposedly the bedrock of governance in the Mali Empire, proclaimed after Sunjata Keita's victory against Soumaore Kante at Kirina in 1235.

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