

1968: A Global Perspective

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Artists, National Belonging, and State Patronage in Postcolonial Mali

In 1963, Mali's socialist government sent ten young musicians to Cuba for conservatory training. The goal was to establish a cadre of musical educators to service the cultural institutions of this newly independent West African nation. By 1965, these students had formed a group, *Las Maravillas del Mali* (The Mali Marvels). On vacation in 1967, *Las Maravillas* arrived in Mali to popular acclaim, culminating in a gala performance for President Modibo Keita. For these expatriates, the "nation-state" was no empty concept; it was a homeland to which they hoped to return, a patron they aspired to serve, and an ideal they were called on to represent as cultural ambassadors. Witnessed from abroad, the 1968 coup cast such hopes, aspirations, and callings into doubt.

In 1970, the ten *Maravillas* left Cuba and returned to their native land. This time the welcome was not as warm. Under military rule, group members were suspected of having communist sympathies and complained of being disowned by the state that had once foreseen important roles for them. In this paper, I examine the shifting experience of national belonging and state patronage at a crucial juncture in Mali's postcolonial history, the 1968 coup. By focusing on the story of ten Malian artists, I present a personal account of the ideals of nation building and the realities of state control in an African postcolony. I also reveal music to be a significant means of national policy for state patrons, and, for their clients, political claims-making.