



Catherine Rielly at the East Village Fair

This work led to consultancies with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) projects, and ultimately to a post advising Mali's first democratically elected president, Alpha Oumar Konare.

In the early 1990s, said Rielly, "Mali was held up as a beacon of hope for democracy in Africa." Money from aid and tourism flowed into the country, and in 1994, an energetic widow and mother of seven children, Fatoumata Kanakoma, known as "Tanti (Auntie) Bogolan," started an all-women co-operative to produce bogolan for the then-booming tourist market in the UNESCO Cultural Heritage site of Djenne.

That market vanished practically overnight after a military coup in 2012, and continuing attacks by jihadist insurgents and al-Qaeda-linked militants. "Income from tourism has completely dried up, malnutrition and poverty are on the rise, and the survival of the artists and the ancient mud cloth tradition is at risk," said Rielly. Inspired by the dignity, generosity and artistry of the Malian people, she determined to do something to respond to their economic crisis. Rubia's previous work with women in conflict zones provided a blueprint.

FROM AFGHANISTAN TO MALI
 Since 2000, Rubia's mission has been to empower impoverished women in developing countries by bringing their handwork to the US market and developing literacy projects, Rielly explained. Under the guidance of Rubia founder, ethno-linguist and artist Rachel Lehr, the group's earliest ventures supported hundreds of Afghan women to practice and pass on their traditional embroidery skills, and sell their work at home and in the US.

Thanks to her years of experience in Africa, and Mali in particular, Rielly had the network and connections to identify and reach out to groups of artisans in former tourist towns. After a research trip to Mali in 2014, involving bone-shaking rides along hundreds of miles of dirt roads, Rielly and her Rubia colleagues chose two organizations to work with. One was Tanti Bogolan's Women's Association, the only all-women co-operative in Djenne, which thanks to the tourist drought had a stockpile of exquisite unsold fabric. The other, based in Segou, was the Ndomo Workshop and Conservatory of Natural Dyeing. Work from both groups will be on show at Cary Library.

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Tanti Bogolan Cooperative and children, Djenne, Mali

From Mali with Hope

African Textiles at Cary Library

An introductory presentation on the new exhibit **Malian Mud Cloth: Cultural Heritage and Survival**, will be given by Rubia Executive Director Catherine Rielly at 7:00 p.m. on November 8, at Cary Memorial Library, followed by an opening reception and gallery tour.



Rubia rubiahandwork.org
 Find out more about Rubia's work and browse their online catalog on their website.



Catherine Rielly with artist at Ndomo workshop, Segou, Mali

Boubacar Doumbia, founder of Ndomo Workshop

By Jane Whitehead

An introductory presentation on the new exhibit **Malian Mud Cloth: Cultural Heritage and Survival**, will be given by Rubia Executive Director Catherine Rielly at 7:00 p.m. on November 8, at Cary Memorial Library, followed by an opening reception and gallery tour.

Lexington seems far-removed from the ancient cities of Djenne and Segou in Mali. Over four thousand miles, culture, language, economic opportunities and political circumstances separate Massachusetts from the West African republic, where radical extremism and separatist rebellion have disrupted people's lives and livelihoods in recent years.

Reaching across this divide, Lexington-based non-profit Rubia has built partnerships with Malian textile artists from Djenne and Segou to support their craft and bring their work to a wider audience. The result is an exhibit of traditional and contemporary Malian bogolan (mud cloth) textiles, on show in Cary Library's Pierce Gallery from November 3 to the end of December.

With its rich earth tones and intriguing symbolic designs, "bogolan has become a symbol not only of Malian culture but also of African heritage," said Rubia's Executive Director Catherine Rielly in a recent interview. The exhibit includes photographs showing how artisans dye locally produced cotton fabric with fermented mud made from grape bark or n'gallama leaves, and apply patterns by hand, using toothpicks and small brushes, leaving the finished cloth weighted with rocks to dry in the sun.

"Mud cloth" may not sound glamorous, but the beauty of bogolan has attracted the attention of museum curators from Washington D.C. to Paris, fashion designer Oscar de la Renta, and Michelle Obama, who was photographed wearing a bogolan jacket in 2015.

HOPE, INTERRUPTED

Rielly's connection with Africa stretches back thirty years, to her time as a Fulbright Scholar in Cameroon where she studied informal credit organizations and how they enable women to control their own finances, for a Ph. D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard's Kennedy School.

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ALTERNATIVES TO POVERTY AND VIOLENCE

Both Tanti Bogolan's co-operative and Ndomo are committed to a high standard of artistry and the importance of passing on traditional dyeing methods to the next generation. But there are significant differences, Rielly pointed out. The 40 women aged 18 to 59 in Tanti Bogolan's co-op specialize in traditional bogolan colors and designs. Many have never been taught to read and write, so they place a high value on their children's education and use their income from the co-op to pay for school fees, as well as food and home repairs.

Renowned bogolan artist Boubacar Doumbia founded the Ndomo Workshop in 1990, to preserve traditional crafts and provide employment for uneducated young people. With well-established sales networks in Europe, Ndomo houses and trains around 30 young men and women in craft skills and traditional Malian values, more in the spirit of an African family than that of a business enterprise. Their designs are more contemporary than those produced by Tanti Bogolan's co-op, and they use a wider range of dyes than those found in traditional bogolan.

Recently, Ndomo's mission has become more urgent. "By pouring money into new mosques in Segou, extremists from Gulf nations are trying to recruit vulnerable youth to become violent jihadists," said Rielly. In a place where unemployment and poverty leave young people with few options, she said, "Ndomo offers a peaceful alternative; training and employment as textile artists."

THE LEXINGTON CONNECTION

If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a team to bring bogolan from Mali to Lexington. Rielly credits fellow Lexingtonians and Rubia board members Mary Rose Scozzafava, Susan Foster, Sasha Roth, Jessica Antoline and Algerian-born Nabila Baba-Ali with shaping and steering the project.

"It's difficult to help from the US, because of safety conditions and not being able to travel to Mali," said Baba-Ali, a physicist and consulting engineer who has lived in Lexington since 2012. The exhibit, she hopes, will encourage the Malian artists' trade. "That way, they're not depending on handouts, they're not depending on charity," she said. "We sell the goods on their behalf, and we return as much of the proceeds as possible."

Rubia's fair trade ethic is a key reason why he supports



Above, Tanti Bogolan

energy expert and specialist in US-Africa trade and investments, who has advised Rielly and helped Rubia with connections in Mali. He also points out that opening new markets for bogolan benefits not only the textile artists but also a whole supply chain, as the cotton they use is grown, harvested, ginned, spun and woven by Malians.

"If even half the households in Lexington end up getting some bogolan cloth in whatever shape is appealing to them," said Savogado, "that would make a tremendous difference for whole families and in fact for whole communities, and keep alive a form of art that has supported many people through the years."

