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Associate Professor of French Sarah Buchanan receives grant for Mali research trip

Summary: Buchanan is a Francophone specialist.

(May 9, 2011)-A University of Minnesota Imagine Fund Award recipient, Sarah Buchanan, associate professor of French at the Morris campus, will use the grant to support a June research trip to Mali for her project “‘Nyama,’ Creation and Destruction in Souleymane Cissé’s *Yeelen*.” Buchanan is a Francophone specialist in the [French Discipline](#), which means that she researches and teaches the cinemas, literatures, cultures, and histories of the countries and places where French is spoken, but not usually those of France itself.

In Mali, Buchanan will study the Bambara and Dogon ethnic groups for an article on Malian filmmaker Souleymane Cissé’s 1987 film *Yeelen* (Brightness). Highly allegorical and densely coded with cultural references, *Yeelen* “is one of the most beautiful African films, but it is also one of the most difficult to understand,” says Buchanan. In her article, Buchanan will examine the cultural intersections between the Bambara and Dogon groups, particularly their connections through a shared belief in the concept of nyama.

“Nyama can be loosely defined as the powers of creation and destruction inherent in the spoken word,” says Buchanan. “The danger of this power explains why only select individuals in Mali are designated as keepers of the word, the griots, whose job it is to control its force. I plan to interview various Bambara and Dogon griots about nyama, what it means to them, how it can be wielded, and what connections it may have to their ethnicity’s genesis stories.”

Buchanan will conduct five to fifteen interviews with the griots and will use the results to explain the ways in which the power of words to create and destroy is represented in Cissé’s film. The trip’s research will in turn be the basis of a larger study that will compare nyama with the Arabic concept of “baraka,” particularly as it is manifested in Morocco.

“Both nyama and baraka focus on the divine power of creation and how it can be tapped by humans through art, music, and storytelling,” says Buchanan. “I will research how these two concepts differ, how they manifest themselves in Moroccan and Malian cultures, and where their points of intersection are.”

One example is the gnawa musicians in Morocco, known as mystics with the ability to exorcise demons and heal psychological wounds.

“Because they trace their roots to West Africa, I intend to study whether they blend nyama and baraka. Similarly, in Mali, 90 percent of the population is Muslim, meaning that they will be familiar with the Arabic baraka.

Buchanan is “absolutely delighted” to have received an Imagine Fund Award, as it makes in-country research trips such as her’s possible.

“As a specialist of West African cultures, I find it quite expensive to travel to the places I research, so I am grateful for the investment the University of Minnesota has made in my work. The research trip will enhance my previous experiences in Africa, adding depth and dimension to my knowledge of the cultures, histories, cinemas, and

literatures/oratures of the region.”

In addition to strengthening her project research, Buchanan’s experiences in Mali will enhance her teaching in her classes, which include West African Francophone Cinema, Mondes francophones, and Contes francophones.

In addition to Sub-Saharan African cinema and orality, Buchanan specializes in Moroccan orality and immigration in France, with additional research on the French Caribbean.

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