

A Day in the Life of Salif Romano Niang

Salif Romano Niang is co-founder and Chief Impact Officer of Malô, a Mali-based social enterprise that creates and sells affordable, culturally appropriate rice-based products that enhance the health of mothers, children and the planet. He explains his vision to turn the brand Supermalô into the ‘Uncle Ben’s of Africa’.

Sight and Life (SAL): *Salif Romano Niang, you are a citizen of Mali, you were born in Italy and you grew up primarily in Ethiopia. What do these three countries mean to you today?*

Salif Romano Niang (SRN): I was born in Rome, because my parents were living there at the time. My father was a livestock economist at the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organi-

zation (FAO) in Rome at the beginning of his career. When my mother was pregnant with me, everyone expected me to be a boy, so I was referred to even before my birth as *il bambino romano* – ‘the Roman baby boy’ in Italian. That’s why my middle name is Romano.

My father was subsequently transferred to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa in Addis Ababa. This was at the time of the Ethiopian humanitarian crisis of the mid-1980s. I attended the International Community School of Addis Ababa, which is why I speak English with an American accent – something about me that often surprises people when they meet me for the first time. Ethiopia was synonymous with famine when I was growing up, and I had firsthand encounters with people dying of malnutrition – something that made a deep impact on me.

Salif Romano Niang (left) former US President Bill Clinton following Malô’s Commitment to Action in New York City, September 2013

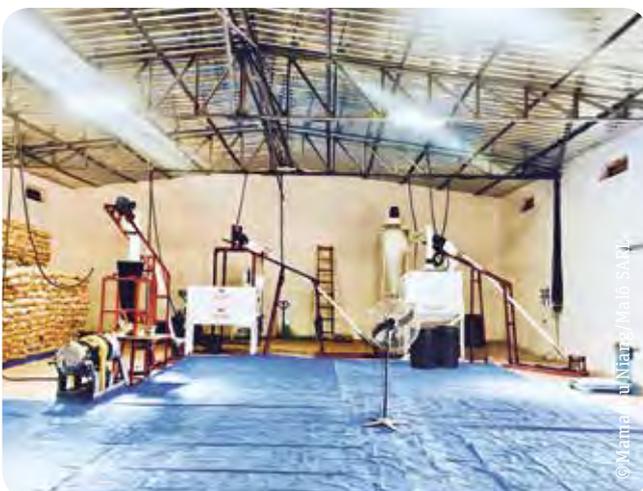




Faso Jigi's storage warehouses. Malô's rice fortification line is installed in the building on the left and unfortified rice is stored in the building on the right. (Ségou, Mali)



Salif Romano Niang with his father, giving a tour of the fortified rice storage space in Malô's Ségou facility to the board of Faso Jigi, Malô's partner and host in Ségou



Malô's rice cleaning, grading and fortification line (Ségou, Mali)

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As for Mali, the country from which my family originates, my parents were always very keen for my siblings and me to return there during the vacations, and so I would spend several months of every year living a normal life in the local villages among my extended family.

SAL: *In 2002 you relocated to the United States, where you studied over the course of the following 11 years. In what ways have your academic studies influenced your current thinking? And what is the influence on the USA on your life and worldview today?*

SRN: I attended Purdue University in Indiana to study agricultural economics at my father's insistence: he had won a USAID scholarship to pursue graduate studies there himself. He wanted all his children to follow in his footsteps but I was the only one to study agriculture. Purdue was quite a culture shock for me at the outset because I had grown up in a very international environment on account of my family background and schooling and I had a very international outlook. My fellow students at Purdue were all drawn from the local population and I initially struggled a little with the lack of diversity.

I also struggled with agricultural economics, a subject about which I knew nothing. I had always taken a keen interest in politics and current affairs and so, after a while, I switched to international relations (with an emphasis in international law). That was a subject I really enjoyed. Agriculture plays a central role in feeding people, and studying it from this perspective fascinated me. I'm especially interested in how demography, and large youth cohorts in particular, influence national power, conflict risk, governance and economic development.

So studying at Purdue turned out to be a great experience for me in the end, allowing me to explore what really interested me and also to make many excellent contacts. I received a Bachelor's in Political Science, French and Economics, and a Master's in International Relations and Comparative Politics.

SAL: *You embarked on a PhD but temporarily suspended your studies in 2011 to set up Malô. What does Malô mean, by the way?*

SRN: It means 'rice' in Bambara, the most widely spoken of the many languages of Mali and West Africa.



Salif (right) and his brother Mohamed Ali Niang with Bill Gates Sr after winning the Judges' Choice Award, March 2010

SAL: *And what was the inspiration behind the creation of Malô?*

SRN: My father's work with the United Nations put him at the forefront of food security in Africa when he was younger and this was a subject that we would often discuss. I observed the world food crisis of 2007/2008 with keen interest, as food price spikes triggered food insecurity, then food riots, then wider unrest, and eventually political violence in some countries. The World Bank estimated at the time that 100 million people fell back into poverty, given rice's key position in total household budget expenditure. In Mali itself, poor storage and inefficient milling were leading to wastage of a large proportion of locally grown rice and, by 2012, 81% of children under five in the country were anemic.

My brother Mohamed Ali Niang and I founded Malô to help address this situation. We conceived it as a social enterprise. We searched online for studies by USAID, picked the brains of professors, emailed our business model and financial projections to seasoned entrepreneurs for them to deconstruct, and video-chatted with technology providers in Argentina and China to put together a business plan that was to eventually win over US\$130,000 in prize money and awards. With these funds, we returned to Mali in 2011 to conduct a pilot study that culminated in the marketing of locally produced fortified rice in Africa for the first time, selling an initial volume of 10 tons even though the product was completely new to local markets. Although I had initially been granted a sabbatical from my PhD studies in order to set up Malô, I eventually found it impossible to return to them. Malô required too much of my attention.

SAL: *What challenges have you had to overcome since first establishing Malô, and what challenges still exist?*

SRN: Funding itself was not an obstacle at the beginning because we had the prize money to get the business off the ground. We also received external funding from patient capital investors, who have supported us financially at critical times over the past seven years: Halloran Philanthropies (a family foundation based in Pennsylvania), Suzanne Salomon (an angel investor from New York), Open Road Alliance, Oikocredit (a Dutch nonprofit organization), and LuxDev. The coup of 2012 slowed our progress enormously, however, making it time-consuming to obtain the necessary government/administrative approvals for our activities and impossible to access further external funding. Our business plan had to be put on hold for a while. It was clear to us that we were going to lose either a lot of money or a lot of time.

Fortunately, however, my brother Mohamed and I were in the position of not having to support our parents financially, and the family had some real estate, so we were able to use the time to refine our plan and make maximum use of the seed funding we had been given. In retrospect, I think this actually helped us avoid many mistakes that we inevitably would have made if we had launched Malô according to our original timescale.

SAL: *Malô produces the fortified rice Supermalô. You have gone on record as wanting to develop Supermalô into 'the Uncle Ben's of Africa'. What does this ambition mean, in concrete terms? And what would achieving it mean for Africa?*

SRN: Uncle Ben's parboiled rice was first launched in the US in 1943 and is a global brand today. The technique of parboiling rice was developed in the early 20th century as a means of retaining more of the nutrients in the rice grains. When I speak of turning Supermalô into 'the Uncle Ben's of Africa', I am not thinking of personal commercial gain – my brother and I have made no money ourselves from Malô; that is not the object of the enterprise. Rather, I am envisioning an environmentally and socially conscious consumer brand that brings high-quality, safe, affordable and nutritious rice to the population of Africa – a brand that everyone knows and trusts.

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SAL: *The fortification of rice is technically more challenging than the fortification of certain other staple foods. What have you and your colleagues in Malô learned from rice fortification programs in other parts of the world?*

SRN: Yes, staples such as flour, salt and sugar have been fortified for a long time but the fortification of rice presents greater

Samples of unfortified rice, fortified kernels and fortified rice collected by a technician from the *Laboratoire Nationale de la Santé* (National Health Laboratory)



Salif meeting with members of a farmers' cooperative in his home village of Kéniéba, Mali, January 2015

technical challenges. We now have the technology to overcome these difficulties but we are still challenged by the dysfunctionality of the milling sector in countries such as Mali, where most milling is done using small village machines pulled by donkey carts. We're currently working with equipment donated by GAIN (the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition) to enable us producing fortified rice kernels in Mali. Between 90 and 95 percent of the content of fortified kernels is rice flour, which is a by-product of milling, and the vitamins for fortification are not expensive, given the low dosage rates. It's important to position fortified rice not as a therapeutic food for people who are sick but as a healthy food for everyone.

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SAL: *What are your hopes for Africa, Salif, and what initiatives beside rice fortification hold promise for the continent?*

SRN: The overall direction of Africa's development is positive but I feel that our leaders need to do more to keep up with the pace of change. My hope is that the next generation of Africans will be the most educated ever. Africa is in many ways still virgin territory in terms of business creation and we have the op-

portunity to create new businesses from scratch here that have the right values.

SAL: *Do you have a favorite recipe for a rice-based meal? Could you share it with our readers?*

SRN: I've lived in lots of countries and I like many dishes, but my personal favorite is jollof rice (zamá in Bambara). It's an African comfort food comprising fried rice with vegetables and seafood, similar to paella in Spain or jambalaya in Louisiana. I'm glad to see that people are starting now to pay more attention to cooking as a component of food security and nutrition. Africa needs examples of healthy, easy-to-prepare dishes.

SAL: *Your work is multifaceted and international in nature. Do you still find time for hobbies?*

SRN: My great love is soccer. I don't play as much now as I used to, but I've been an FC Barcelona supporter since 1994 and I try to watch them as often as I can. I'm also very interested in music. I don't play an instrument myself, but I have many friends in the music industry in Mali. The local musical talent in Mali is incredible and I'm keen to support it. Food and fun are essential to life!

SAL: *Where do you feel most at home today?*

SRN: I'm very happy in Mali right now. I like it very much – especially the town of Ségou, to which I moved a year ago. I'm looking to put down roots here. That said, I could imagine living abroad again at some point in my life, perhaps in Rome or Barcelona.

A popular rice dish (zamá) made with rice fortified by Malô



Salif (left) and his brother Mohamed Ali Niang with US President Obama during Feed the Future Agricultural Technology Marketplace in Dakar, Senegal, July 2013

SAL: *Is there a figure in your life who has been a particular inspiration to you?*

SRN: My mother and father have always been a great source of inspiration to me, and they instilled in me a deep sense of the importance of serving the community. Barack Obama, whom I was fortunate enough to meet in Dakar in 2013, is also someone I greatly admire. He's immensely intelligent and at the same time very humble and approachable. Meeting him in person, I never would have dreamt that he was President of the United States.

SAL: *Any other message for our readers?*

SRN: I'd like to say that I'm optimistic for Malô, but I'm also optimistic for Mali and for Africa in general. I've met some amazing people in the course of the past eight years – people who have been generous with their time, their resources and their advice, and who have helped us as entrepreneurs to create the conditions for other entrepreneurs to succeed as well. We need to get more people into the food sector in Africa and, to do that, the economic opportunities have to be available.

SAL: *Thank you, Salif, and the best of luck with everything you do!*

SRN: Thank you.

Salif Romano Niang was interviewed by Jonathan Steffen