

# *The way we live together*

par Baptiste Gerbier

There are three countries in which I lived during several years: France (my home country), Burundi and Mali. Over the last years, these countries experienced hard times. Indeed, these last years are likely to be the hardest ones each country has experienced for decades.

In 2015, when problems were especially acute in these three countries, it really moved me. I needed to react. This led me to give a political dimension to my art work. I am here using the term political as Greeks did during Antiquity. To get involved in *politics*, it is about living in the same *polis*, which was the word Greeks used for city.

What makes us belong to the same city ? What make us *citizens* ? How do we live together in 2017 in France, in Mali and in Burundi, while social tensions escalate ? Do we actually live together when cleavages are more and more numerous and when gaps are deepening ?

Obviously, issues differ from one country to another: terrorist attacks, rise of far-right ideas, violences against refugees, demonstrators and policemen in France ; terrorist attacks, putsh, instrumentalisation of ethnic feelings in Mali ; murders of political opponents, journalists and human rights defenders, instrumentalisation of ethnic feelings in Burundi. But in each country, violence is no longer insidious: some people and institutions use different kinds of violence and they even sometimes kill, either in the name of the way they think society should work or for private purposes.

In Burundi, state violence plays a major part in the crisis the country currently face. Even in France and Mali, it happens that state violence goes way beyond what it is usually accepted as « state monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force »<sup>1</sup>.

So I needed to speak about what was going on in my countries. Many other countries face acute problems, but I had to work on my countries. I needed to paint what jeopardize the way we live together in those places. I built three works: each one deals with one of my three countries and pictures the flag of this country, either in a direct way (for Mali) or in a suggested way (for France and Burundi). Colors of each work come from colors of a flag.

On these three works, there are pieces of newspapers. This highlights the way some medias deal with some countries.



Les collines (2017)



Maliba (2017)



Déchéance (2016)

<sup>1</sup> See *Léviathan* by Thomas Hobbes (1651) and *Politics and Science as a Vocation* by Max Weber (1919).

# Déchéance



150 x 70 cm (2016)

“*Déchéance*” reminds us that at the end of 2015, French Government aimed at passing a constitutional reform which would have allowed to strip French nationality from French people condemned for terrorism if they had another nationality, even if they were born French and had always lived in France<sup>2</sup>. This was part of government response to attacks which killed more than 130 people in Paris region on November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015. More than 400 people were also injured. Thousands of families were stricken.

Everyone, including those who drafted this reform, acknowledged that such a reform was very unlikely to have any influence on people thinking about preparing a terrorist attack. With any doubt, this proposal was a political move from French executive power to raise a symbol and thus weaken political opposition and gain popularity. As if *the way we live together* did not matter. As if it did not stigmatize binationals.

Indeed, when this debate arose, French law already allowed to strip some binationals of their French nationality<sup>3</sup>. Under specific circumstances, this has been possible since 1998 for binationals who gained French nationality, whereas it has never been possible for binationals who were born French. In other words, there are several categories of citizens today in France. The reform project drafted at the end of 2015 aimed at making it possible to strip nationality from a new category of binationals.

During months, this project of reform was at heart of public debate. “*Déchéance*”, made of pieces of articles from newspapers, reflects the place this issue took in media. Such media coverage was in my mind consistent with what was at stake.

The text was voted by French national Assembly without reference to binationals on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016<sup>4</sup>. This vote had no constitutional power. In the end, contestation among French citizens and parliament members was so high that government did not try to pass this constitutional reform. When the French President stated that he would not run for a new mandate in 2017, he said: “I have only one regret, having proposed to strip nationality. I thought that it could gather us but it divided us”.

Today, the Civil Code still allows to strip nationality from a specific category of binationals<sup>5</sup>. This has never been challenged by French Constitutional Council. However it seems clear to me that this rule does not respect the 1<sup>st</sup> article of French Constitution which states that the Constitution “shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin”. The European Court of Justice has not challenged this rule either. Interpretation of law is sometimes tricky...

In my mind, equality before the law as stated by the Constitution 1<sup>st</sup> article implies either the opportunity to strip nationality of all French citizens, either the removal of current rules allowing to strip nationality from some binationals. The first option would not hurt me. Stripping nationality from all people convicted of terrorism is coherent with Ernest Renan’s definition of nation as “a daily referendum”<sup>6</sup>. But creating apatrid people raises serious problems. Under these circumstances, it seems to me necessary to change article 25 of the Civil Code.

« *Déchéance* » advocates for such a change. It calls for a strict interpretation of the French Constitution 1<sup>st</sup> article. It claims for a full equality before the law.



Detail of *Déchéance* (2016)

<sup>2</sup> [www.elysee.fr/conseils-des-ministres/article/compte-rendu-du-conseil-des-ministres-du-mercredi-23-decembre-201/](http://www.elysee.fr/conseils-des-ministres/article/compte-rendu-du-conseil-des-ministres-du-mercredi-23-decembre-201/)

<sup>3</sup> [www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichCodeArticle.do;jsessionid=EDC385E59677588461310744D52C0E3E.tpdila09v\\_2?idArticle=LEGIARTI000006420133&cidTexte=LEGITEXT000006070721&dateTexte=20160210&categorieLien=id&oldAction=](http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichCodeArticle.do;jsessionid=EDC385E59677588461310744D52C0E3E.tpdila09v_2?idArticle=LEGIARTI000006420133&cidTexte=LEGITEXT000006070721&dateTexte=20160210&categorieLien=id&oldAction=)

<sup>4</sup> [www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/scrutins/detail/\(legislature\)/14/\(num\)/1231](http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/scrutins/detail/(legislature)/14/(num)/1231) et [www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/documents/notice/14/ta/ta0678/\(index\)/ta](http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/documents/notice/14/ta/ta0678/(index)/ta)

<sup>5</sup> See n<sup>o</sup>2.

<sup>6</sup> [https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Qu%27est-ce\\_qu%27une\\_nation\\_%3F](https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Qu%27est-ce_qu%27une_nation_%3F)

# Maliba



110 x 220 cm (2017)

« Maliba » means Mali, in Bambara, the most spoken language in the country. This naming is a way of celebrating the country.

Since 2012, Mali has experienced its hardest times since independence (1962) : putsch, counter putsch, terrorist attacks, secession of Northern Mali under influence of various groups which had various and changing motivations (independence, contraband, religious radicalism...)... Living in Mali from 2010 to 2017, I have followed closely this rise of tensions.

« Maliba » is made from press articles, released by French and Malian media. These articles deals with various issues and try to show Mali's complexity and the issues Malian have to cope with.



Detail of *Maliba* (2017)

## *Les collines*



70 x 100 cm (2017)

Burundi is said to be Rwanda's twin brother : current borders defined before colonization, similar landscapes, almost the same language, same faith, similar social tensions during decades... Since their independence, these countries have taken different paths but both experienced massacres caused by instrumentalised ethnic feelings.

I lived in Burundi from 2006 to 2008. With hindsight, these years were among the most appeared there since 1993. Civil war was raging from 1993 to 2004, then tensions were more or less down for a few years. From 2009, government directly attacked people it regarded as its opponents. Many political leaders, journalists and human rights defenders were murdered, especially since 2015.

This work represents Burundi's flag with its three stars, as well as Burundi's hills. Hills appear at the foreground (where press articles are teared) and at the background (where cardboard is carved). The title of an article appears clearly: «Avec le lui le chaos». It refers to Pierre Nkurunziza, President of Republic since 2005, who seems ready to intensify terror and violence to keep power. No article from a Burundian media was used to make this work because I have not come back to Burundi since 2009.

Whereas « Déchéance » and « Maliba » are fully covered by press articles, « Les Collines » is not. This shows that very little attention is paid to this country in French and Pan-African media.



Detail of *Les Collines* (2017)