

Ensemble gives voice to traditional Malian culture



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A Starbucks in Emeryville might seem like an odd place to feel the hot, dry wind of the Sahara, but watching a video of Tuareg women swaying while seated in a semi-circle, pounding out a loping dance rhythm with mortar and pestle *tinde* percussion while a veiled and turbaned man executes a series of agile break-dance like moves from a squatting position, the desert breeze was almost palpable.

The video came courtesy of Mali-born Issa Mohamed, director of the Timbuktu Heritage Institute, who filmed the celebration on a recent trip to his hometown. It's the kind of celebration that will be taking place on stages around the Bay Area next week when the group Ensemble Tartit arrives as part of a U.S. tour meant to raise awareness of Tuareg culture.

Desert lifestyle

Hailing from the same region in northern Mali as Mohamed, the five women and four men who make up the ensemble perform dances, chants and songs embodying a desert lifestyle that has survived for thousands of years in the unforgiving Sahara. "You really have the feeling you're sitting around a Tuareg encampment," says Alison Loerke, the tour's manager. "It's not just the music but the subtle hand and eye movements, which are so evocative."

Ensemble Tartit makes its West Coast debut at Kuumbwa Jazz Center in Santa Cruz on Tuesday as part of the University of California-Santa Cruz's Global African Music and Arts Festival/Symposium. On Wednesday, the group joins with Mohamad for a workshop on Tuareg culture at Ashkenaz in Berkeley in a benefit for the Timbuktu Heritage Institute. And on April 18, Stanford Lively Arts presents Tartit at Dinkelspiel Auditorium. A free pre-performance conversation between Mohamed and Thomas K. Seligman, director of the Cantor Arts Center, takes place at Dinkelspiel at 6:45 pm, exploring the astonishing history of a people little known in the United States.

For centuries, the Tuareg were rulers of the Sahara, nomads who traversed the vast desert expanse forging longlasting cultural and economic links between west and north Africa. While the great empires of Mali arose in the 11th and 12th centuries, the

Tuareg, or Kel Tamashek as they call themselves, helped make Timbuktu a thriving university town, where some of the world's most advanced scholars wrote treatises in mathematics, physics, medicine and Sufi-inspired Islamic spirituality.

Related to North Africa's indigenous Amazigh (or Berber) peoples, the Tuareg resisted French colonialism into the late 19th century, earning a reputation as fierce and wily desert warriors. With the end of French colonial rule in the 1960's, Tuareg society found itself divided by the borders of five new countries: Algeria, Libya, Niger, Mali, and Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso).

"Most people say it's a loose confederation of people speaking a similar language with somewhat similar cultural practices," says Seligman, who has worked with the Tuareg community in Niger for 30 years. "What's interesting to me is that the Tuareg are liminal people who exist in transition between people typed as Berber, Mediterranean and African. They are part of both, or neither or all of the above."

Dispersed by drought

A devastating drought in the 1970's and 80's almost wiped out the Tuareg way of life, killing off camels and goats and forcing most Tuareg to settle in cities. A rebellion against Mali's military government in the early '90's further dispersed the Tuareg, leaving many exiled in refugee camps in Mauritania, Algeria, and Burkina Faso. Fadimata Walett Oumar, Ensemble Tartit's founder, was working with the United States at a Burkino Faso refugee camp when she assembled the group for a music festival in Belgium in 1995.

"I think of myself as an ambassador of Tuareg culture," Oumar says in France, with Loerke serving as translator. "I love to sing and I love to dance. It's normal, everyday breathing thing we do."

A peace accord in 1996 allowed many Tuareg men to join the Malian army, leaving many women to fend for themselves. Ensemble Tartit has helped raise funds to support education and micro-enterprises. The group recorded a gorgeous CD, "Ichichila" (Network), which features both traditional songs and new pieces addressing the Tuareg's present-day situation. The seemingly simple instruments are small and easily transportable, including the *imzad*, a one-stringed violin made from a gourd, and the *tinde*, a wooden mortar used to grind grains that becomes a percussion instrument when covered by a goatskin.

While Mali has produced some of Africa's best-known artists, international stars such as Ali Farka Toure, Oumou Sangare and Habib Koite, Ensemble Tartit has performed across Europe with a startlingly beautiful sound that's unlike the better-known Malian groups. "It's a sound that's really a result of the exodus that the Tuareg have experienced," says Mohamed. "This is a new wave. They were feeling the pain of separation. They were saddened with the conditions of the Tuareg. We had become destitute. It put us in a state of shock. We are part of Mali. We contributed to the political, commercial and social development of Mali. When you listen to these songs, it makes you want to go back to the Sahara, to the Tuareg life. The music is a way of preserving what makes us Tuareg."