

Fadimata Walett Ouman

Nomadic Voices

Interview by Julia Varley

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Please tell me something about yourself and about the group with which you are participating in the Festival of Women's Voices of April 2000.

I am a Touareg from Mali and the group is called Tartit. We make traditional music from the region of Timbuktu in the north of Mali. Our group was created in 1992 in the refugee camp between Mauritania and Burkina Faso. We were four women and one man at the beginning, but since December 1995 we have toured in Europe with nine people, five women and four men.

As is traditional for us Touareg, we women dance and sing at the same time as we play the *tendé*, a percussion instrument, and the *inzad*, a small violin with only one cord. The men play the *tehardent*, an instrument with three cords, a traditional kind of guitar. We also use the modern guitar, but we sing traditional songs with it. Nowadays there are many Touareg groups made up of men who play the modern guitar and sing at the same time.

Our group started when Manuela Varasso, who works for Médecins sans Frontières, visited our refugee camp. We had an association of women refugees and Manuela told us about a friend, Brigitte Kaquet, who was organising a Festival of Women's Voices in Belgium, and who wanted to invite some Touareg women. Manuela asked us if we could do something. We gladly accepted the invitation to form a group as we were aware that the traditional music was disappearing and we knew that through music we could let our cause be heard in the world. Some of us were in Burkina, others had gone back to Mali and others to Mauritania, so the group met for the first time in Liege, where we trained for two days and on the third day we gave a wonderful concert. We have been together since then. Only Saouda no longer works with us because she remained in Burkina to help with a Touareg association that takes care of the women who did not want to go back.

Right now I don't live as a nomad, but in the capital of Mali. For a long time I lived in both ways, partly nomadic

and partly in town, because I was working. Now I visit my family or my husband's family, who are nomads, for holidays. When my husband finishes working at fifty-five or sixty years old, and we are pensioned, we will also live as nomads. I will stop singing and we will go back to the bush and sing there.

Did you sing before joining Tartit?

I liked singing a lot, but it was not my profession. I worked as a cultural operator in an UNICEF project and later as an assistant on a research project on traditional medicine with the cooperation of an Italian concern. I liked music, dancing, singing and playing the *tendé*. During the feasts I would sing and dance both to entertain others and for my own pleasure. When the group formed I was the organiser, the person who took care of the administrative side of things and I was functioning as a cultural operator. But I always sang and so I ended up being a singer, organiser, cultural operator and dancer in the group at the same time.

Do you consider yourself to be a professional dancer and singer?

I don't know what you call professional. At home I am professional. I am a professional of my place. I know how to dance my dance and how to sing the songs from my country. I also know how to organise my group.

How did you learn to dance and sing?

I learned during the feasts. We do not have a school. As children, we sat beside the old women when they sang and that is how we learnt. If we wanted to learn a song, we asked our mothers if they knew how to sing it. Our mothers, cousins or friends would teach us. We listened for a time, and then the song was there, already registered.

I have a daughter who is two and a half years old. I teach her to sing and she likes it, she already plays and dances. She often sings words that I have not taught her, she learns by herself, as I did. My mother did not sing and I learnt from others much to her dissatisfaction because she says I am away too much on tour and leave her.

What is singing and dancing for you personally?

It is something very important for me; it is all my life. Even if I am not with the group, even if I am not touring, I spend all my time dancing, taking part in feasts. If I don't dance I am ill. I love to listen to people singing. I don't like the spirit of sadness and places where people don't talk. I like chatting and discussing, understanding what the others do and letting the others understand what I am doing. This is tied to music for me.

So are dance, song and music the same thing for you?

Yes, for us music is song, and dance is there immediately with music. During our concerts usually the stage is completely occupied by dancers. It is a feast and we always need many people to make a feast. We do not have microphones in the desert, but our own voices and our *tendé*.

What do the songs that you share amongst the different tribes of Touareg mean for a nomadic people?

For us it is very important. Music-song-dance is a therapy for us; it is like a medicine. We always want to sing. Each time we move camp we make a feast. In fact we make a feast every evening, even if we do not move camp! We are not many and music brings us together. In the camps there

is a tent here, one there, one further away, but when we make music we all come together to sing and dance. It is a feast. It allows us to forget our political problems. I think music is necessary for all, but especially for the nomadic people, who do not live in a community, but are very isolated one from the other. The feast reminds them that they belong to the world. When they feast, they see others come, the different camps join and we meet each other.

Do you think that the quality of your voices is influenced by the landscapes where you live?

Yes, our voices are more beautiful in the desert than here in the European cities where we sing with microphones. When we sing in the evening at home our voices can be heard with a beautiful echo from far away. If we sang without a microphone here in Belgium, we would not be heard, our voices are raucous. We have problems with our voices abroad. In the desert life is very healthy; and in the traditional, natural context, the songs, and our voices are nicer to listen to than when we tour the world eating differently and being subjected to different climates that change our voices completely. We made our first CD in Belgium and it is good, but we did a second CD at home in Mali that will come out in July, and I think that it will be even better than the first.

What is a beautiful voice for you? How can you describe it?

It depends; there are very deep voices, high-pitched voices and zig-zag voices that are beautiful. There are voices where you hear a secondary sound that is beautiful. I have to listen to a person singing in front of me to say that I like that voice. I like sweet voices as if it were night-time, as if you were

listening to something which is very far away that comes out and walks around a little and comes back.

For you as a Touareg are there particular voices that are beautiful or is it different for each person?

It does not depend on the person, but on each rhythm. The different rhythms determine the quality of the voice. There are some songs you must sing inside the throat, others outside the throat and others where the tongue decides.

Of what do the texts of the songs speak?

Generally the songs speak of love, of the beauty of women, of the courage of men, of the elegance of camel riders, of the charm of animals, of camels and goats. They also speak of peace, war and exile. We sing lullabies for the children. The political songs speak of the union of the Touareg, because we are divided in different countries. Since Independence we cannot meet as before, because there are borders, so we sing of being united despite the borders.

Is the Touareg language the same in the different countries?

The language is the same, but there are different dialects. In Niger there are tribes that we understand very well, but in Mali there is a tribe that we cannot understand. We live in the same country, but we do not understand each other.

I listened to how the Touareg of Niger sing. The style and rhythm are a bit different from our traditional rhythms. But nowadays also amongst the Touareg there is a new rhythm accompanied by the modern guitar that is the same everywhere and the young boys use it to sing about revolution. In the

traditional songs we can have different rhythms from one region to the other, even within Mali itself, but the *emzed* is the same everywhere because it represents authenticity and there is always something common in the voices. We understand what we all say, because we share themes, although the pronunciation and rhythm can be slightly different.

When you dance or sing, are the words that you sing important, or are they just forms?

There are words that just give good sounds and there are important words. There are songs where you understand the words and there are songs... Well, we always understand! There are songs where one speaks nonsense just to get people to dance and others that have a meaning. Often the songs



Saoudata Aboubacrine of Tartit Photo: Philippe Gielen

to listen to, those where one should understand what is being said, the sense, are slower, sweeter and you can hear the instruments and the voices together, while the songs for dancing are very fast and hot. The young always like songs that have a good rhythm and the older people prefer the authentic songs that remind them of the good old times.

There are songs with very important themes. Certain themes determine a certain kind of music and they provoke certain movements in the dance. Foreigners who don't understand what is being said like them, but we who understand them like them even more. This is why I always translate a little during our concerts abroad, so people don't remain in total darkness and they can understand a bit of what is being said. I give the sense of the song, without going into the details, although the details are more important still. Then the people can imagine the content: if I say "my love", people will dream about the good things of love.

Of the songs that have a story, is there one that you like most?

I like the Abok Abok song that Sufi, my grandfather six generations back, sang. He wanted to retire, to dedicate himself to the Muslim religion, not to be in contact with people, and not make music, but in the end when he started to speak, he would sing and dance. It was stronger than him, he didn't want to, but in the end he danced.

Are you writing new songs?

Yes, we are writing many new songs now. First we make the rhythm, and then immediately we start creating the text on the rhythm. I like composing texts. I have made texts for the union of all the Touareg, for peace in the world, for women, for the



Fadimata Walett Ouman Photo: Jean-Louis Bruyère

Festival of Women's Voices. About women I say: "Shetma -which means my sisters- hand in hand let's found an association, let's leave racism aside, let's work together so that the world can advance, because it depends on women, and afterwards we will feast."

Tell me about the Touareg women.

Woman is the balance of the Touareg society. We say that the woman is the trousers of the men. The man brings in the food, but the woman does the planning, the most difficult thing. Woman educates the children, she knows how to receive people, everything depends on her in our society.

Is it important for you to come to this Festival of Women's Voices?

Yes, it is doubly important. It is not just the music that I like in this Festival, it is meeting women from all over the world. This year, we even met other nomads like us for the first time; we got to know some gypsies. We met women from Rwanda and from all over Africa and we found out that we have the same problems and suffering as they do. We have talked with women from Chile about their missing family members. It is good that people meet and get to know each other. Certainly some people had never heard of the Touareg before and now they know that we exist. We are a minority, and we have the same problems as other people in the world. When I speak with other women I feel myself present immediately in their words; it is as if I am speaking myself.

My husband is not always happy about my going on tour because I often leave him alone. But I fight for the rights of my people and I cannot abandon this to dedicate myself to my husband.

I remember during the Festival, I think about five years ago, there was a meeting of African women and every time one of them spoke, the reaction came through song. It was as if the applause, the agreeing or disagreeing passed through the song. Do you think that singing can say more or less than speaking?

Singing can say more than speaking. We

speak among ourselves here and it is very limited, while when you sing, you address everyone, you go from country to country and meet new spectators. If a group of women talks among themselves it is good, because they will speak to others, but I find that singing is more important than speaking. If people understand the words, the song reaches further than the spoken word.

Do you think that the voice is an important expression for a woman, more than for a man?

Of course, because the women are better heard and followed than men. Even if people say that women come second, when a woman sings everyone listens to her and looks at her more than if she were a man. Touareg people prefer to hear the women sing rather than listen to the voice of a man. We say that the songs are for women, not for men. In our tradition we say that the beautiful voices are women's voices. I don't know why. This is how we see it: women sing better.

Translated from French by Julia Varley

FADIMATA WALETT OUMAN (Touareg) is from the confederation of Kel Antessar and, after being a refugee in Mauritania for many years, she now lives in Mali. In 1995 she was invited to Liege to take part in the third Festival of Women's Voices, creating the Tartit Ensemble for that occasion. Following the Festival, Tartit recorded its first CD and participated in the Marché des Arts du Spectacle Africains. Fadimata tours extensively in Europe, Africa and the USA.