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The rhythm of the sands

The Tuareg group Tinariwen formed in a paramilitary camp in Libya. Alex Duval Smith is entranced by their rebel songs

05 March 2004

Just a few bars into any song by Tinariwen, it is easy to understand why this African group has been described as the world's most exotic band. Into your imagination sweeps a cloudless sky from which the sun pounds its rays on to a dunescape. In this desert, a footprint doesn't last the time it takes to lift your foot off the ground; the human voice seems to carry barely further than your own ears. The mind furnishes the scene with a human presence - a spot on the horizon that develops into the lone figure of a Tuareg nomad, draped in indigo robes and riding a camel.

As well as the human voice, traditional drums, and flutes, Tinariwen use electric guitars played in a hypnotic rhythm that is linked to the ambling pace of a camel. It is via these guitars that Tinariwen has, for the past 20 years, sent messages of solidarity to Tuareg clans scattered across three and a half million square miles of Sahara sand. The same sound has now awakened the senses of the world's rock cognoscenti, and that is why Tinariwen start a week-long British tour in Manchester on Wednesday.

Tinariwen founder member Ibrahim Ag Alhabib, who is 44, has the well-worn look that western pop legends spend years refining through sex and drugs and rock'n'roll. But he is a veteran of the Tuareg guerillas.

Just off the plane from Mali, he huddles in Manchester in his grimy blue winter jacket as though it were a shelter from the intimidating environment of electricity and Western affectation in which he finds himself. You can tell he would much rather be that man in the heat haze - though in his case it would be on his Yamaha motorbike - than the focus of probing questions that demand pithy answers.

So we talk about *Amassakoul* ("Traveller"), the group's new, second, album. It has reached European CD players via a process that started in a Libyan guerilla training camp in the early 1980s. At that time, the Tuaregs were waging a campaign of resistance against Mali - whose boundaries infringed on the nomads' traditional terrain. Meanwhile, in Libya, Colonel Gaddafi, was nursing dreams of creating a grand Saharan state. But Ag Alhabib stresses: "Our music is not about making war. It is about calling on the Kel Tamashek [speakers of the language of the desert nomads] to wake up to their situation, to take pride in their heritage."

Seven hundred years ago, the Tuareg were the wealthiest people in Africa. Only they had the courage to cross the Sahara desert with caravans of salt from Egypt, which were traded pound-for-pound for gold at Timbuktu, in Mali. They were also slavers, serving Arab masters, and were feared by the black peoples of West Africa. Tuareg cattle herders clashed constantly with sedentary farmers over grazing land and water holes.

Malian independence from France in 1960 - the year of Ag Alhabib's birth - marked the start of pay-back time. Centralised taxation and land demarcation policies were imposed by the government in Bamako and the Tamashek "language of the bandits" was banned. In 1963, the Tuaregs - who had also suffered a decade-long drought - launched a rebellion.

Ag Alhabib's father, a mason and arms runner for the rebels, was killed by Malian soldiers. Ag Alhabib says the early years of his life left him with particularly painful memories. "They were killing our people and our animals. Because of the attacks and the drought, my family found itself with just one old cow left. We decided to move north, towards Algeria, but the cow - our last cow - died on the way.

"It was a very sad period. In combination with the drought, the violence changed the prospects of an entire generation," he says.

Ag Alhabib and others who reached adulthood in the late 1970s became known as the *ishumar* - jobless drifters - bereft of prospects in cattle-herding or even of starting a small business. "I went to Oran in Algeria and became a carpenter. It was also in Algeria that I started singing. My mother stayed in Mali and I travelled back regularly with money for her."

After criss-crossing the Sahara to feed his family, and writing songs to nurture his exile's soul, Ag Alhabib drifted to Libya and Gaddafi's "camp for the edification of the people". He learned to use a Kalashnikov but also a Stratocaster. He helped create Tinariwen and its songs were distributed by cassette as part of the rebels' propaganda efforts.

The title track, "Amassakoul'N'Tenere", heads up an album of songs of struggle, pain and longing - though to Western ears they sound more languorous than sad. "Amassakoul' explains my feelings of being in the desert but also my

knowledge of it. I wrote the song, alone, after a long ride on my motorbike. It is something I like to do, often. I suppose I am a quite melancholy person.

"Our songs are sad. They are about the hardships of a life without water and wealth, such as I knew when I was young. Life has improved a lot since peace in 1997. Now the charities have arrived and there is water, cars and work. There is a cattle market in Kidal [in north-eastern Mali], where I live, and there are jobs in the army."

Even though the Tuaregs have new concerns - the effects of desertification being principal among them - Ag Alhabib says Tinariwen continues to focus on reinforcing the nomads' identity. Ali Farka Touré - the first Malian to sing in Tamashek - has become their untiring ambassador. In 2001 he helped them create an annual "festival in the desert" which is now a must-attend date for world music aficionados. Last year, Robert Plant, the Led Zeppelin singer, endured the 30-hour bumpy 4x4 journey to reach it. But more importantly, the gathering has helped reunite branches of the Tuareg clan that became divided during the rebellion. Ag Alhabib believes the struggle-spirit of the tracks on *Amassakoul* continues to help unite the scattered nomads. He wrote the words of "Chet Boghassa" ("Women of Boghassa village") in 1990, in the hours after he had taken part in a raid on a military post. "The raid failed and many people died - maybe 30 or 40 - so I wanted to reassure the women of the village that we would be back."

There is an almost constant mood of longing on the album. "El Massina Sintadoben" (God is the one who can") speaks of the pain of exile, of the need to leave a world "in which we're just not alive... It's not because I don't love you". In "Alkhar Dessouf" ("Feeling a shock of worry and nostalgia"), which Ag Alhabib wrote while in Algeria, he compares his heart to a piece of wood hollowed from the inside by an insect.

Oppression and exile made the Tuareg melancholy, but they are also a contained people, who are strangers everywhere and at home nowhere. The man on his camel, cutting through the heat haze of the dunes, has a lot of time to think, and the music produced by the members of Tinariwen invites thought.

I wondered what it is about Tinariwen's sound and message - never urgent but always full of perseverance - that is so soothing to my cluttered western brain? It must be that the sound takes me back to something that is lacking in my hurried city life.

And why is it that Tinariwen's combination of vocals, drums, handclaps and electric guitar comes across to me as the reflection of a tranquil landscape when in fact it expresses the pain of exile? The answer to that question must be something to do with the universality of beauty; after all, it is possible to enjoy the language of the First World War poets without being repulsed by the horrors they describe.

I also wondered what it is about the indigo-draped Tuaregs that - like the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert or the Aborigines of south-east Asia - is so appealing to us? Most of the Tuaregs, now, live in domestic settings because war, climate change and the sheer realities of modern life have effectively already killed off their ability to wander. The nomads of the Sahara are no better or worse than European gypsies. In fact, unlike the Tuaregs, the gypsies of Europe - who have a rich musical heritage - have never gone to war against anyone. Yet we see them as cluttering up caravan parks, not as having a lifestyle we feel affection for. The answer, I suppose, has to do with mystery and distance: one man's nomad is another man's nuisance.

Be that as it may, Tinariwen undoubtedly do what music should do. The group crosses boundaries, both geographical and emotional, and their music just happens to be beautiful.

'Amassakoul' is out now on Independent records; Tinariwen's UK tour begins on Wednesday at Band on the Wall, Manchester (0161-834 1786; further tour info at www.sasamusic.com)

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