

Dirty Linen

Ensemble Tartit

Dinkelspiel Auditorium, Stanford University, Stanford, CA

April 18, 2003

Seated on the floor of a bare stage in a semicircle surrounded by their handmade instruments, Ensemble Tartit's nine touring members positioned the Stanford University Lively Arts audience to complete a *griot* song and storytelling circle. This same core group had recorded its debut CD *Ichichila/Resist Under-Development* on Germany's Network Records label in 2000, and it had a booklet chock full of translated lyrics and interviews with the band members. Beginning with "Democracy" (not on the CD), a staggered-meter handclap rhythm opened a seam in time, transporting the circle to a Saharan refugee camp in eastern Mauritania. This was the sanctuary where European humanitarian aid workers found Tartit, which means "union" in the suppressed Tamasheqt language native to North Africa. The Kel Tamasheq, or "Free Peoples," had been driven from their ancestral rangelands across northern Mali, the Niger River basin, and southern Algeria, a vast land known before French colonial mapmaking as Azouad, or "The Hot Place." Mellow strummed and plucked tones from the gut-string griot's lute (named the tehardant) spun off from the woman-led call-and-response song that ritually reaffirms Kel Tamasheq's 3,000-year traditions of social equality across Tamazgha, or native North Africa.

In this nearly ethnically cleansed parallel universe that includes the Sahara and its southern fringe, watered by the Niger River delta, it is the men who are veiled and women who celebrate divorce and safeguard the oral literature in the Tamasheqt tongue. Men and women both write poetry, journals, and Tamasheq history in the outlawed Tifinagh alphabet of 36 letters. The buoyant "Democracy" was followed by a four-song seated set that seemed sluggish as an over-tapped stream. Tartit spokeswoman Fadimata Walett Oumar kept her remarks to a minimum, occasionally calling into the audience for translation help from Issa, a representative of Northern California's hosting Timbuktu Cultural Heritage Center. Tafa Walett's prelude on imzad, the single-stringed bowed fiddle traditionally played by women in Tamasheq and Amazigh (Berber) culture, eddied and meandered through a plaintive melody. Her muse began to spiral with intensity prior to being joined by griot (singing storyteller and social critic) Issa Amanou on his tehardant. Griot Amanou picked lead lute lines that underscored his verbose rebuke following the imzad's musical fantasia. Yet, in a true dialogue, the griot allowed the inspired diva fiddler to

speak melodically and lyrically defended whoever or whatever in the village the griot was, in fact, rebuking. Moreover, Walett had the backing of all the women in the vocal chorus!

Five hand-drummers played tindé, mortar bowls used for food preparation that are later covered with goatskin drumheads. They added oracular oomph to the Tamasheq chorus. A highlight of the evening was "Amal Haoui M'lo" as the lead handclapper sectioned the Stanford audience into a wobbly counter-rhythm section that nailed its groove after some unsteady fits and starts. Ensemble Tartit filled the auditorium with birdsong vocalizations that swooped down from both ends of the semicircle, darting away from sliding fingerpicked runs on gutsy tehardant. Veiled warrior-dancer Ag Aboubacrine gathered up the slack in the folds of his loose burnoose, transforming himself into a winged mythical creature. The individuated chorus morphed from birdsong to slithering hisses with members riding on their haunches downstage, using limbs and feet to mime from behind the scrim of the indigo male veil. The ancient Greeks who first encountered Kel Tamasheq and named them (as they did all non-Greek speakers) "Varvaroi" or Berbers, must have nonetheless felt a familiarity on their southern Mediterranean forays into North Africa as the Tamasheq mythos seeped out of their cultural exchanges.

Later in the set, one woman chorus member rose in an avian manner while vocalizing gull caws, her billowy white robes extended at angles beneath a shimmering coffee-colored tunic overlaid with reflecting silk smock. Remarkable, even before her unbroken body movement gently rolled into a loose step dance traversing the proscenium arch. I don't know if these worldly wandering native North Africans have been listening to Tuvan throat singers, or whether this, too, is yet another revelatory aspect of traditional Tamasheq culture. But the second set closed with the group's sole acoustic guitar (used for the inimitable Malian high desert blues) put away and eight of the nine members stepping in place around a double tindé arrayed like bongos on the floor and played by a dervish of a hand-drummer. The men vocalized deep didgeridoo-like drones countering the desert throatsong vibrating like celestial music of the spheres in Saharan night skies. Called back by a clearly stoked audience for an encore, Walet Amounine Mama and Fatoumata Haidara invited any "femmes Bèrbère" in the house up onstage to join in a festive "Hamoye (A Haoua)" step dance jam. Griot Amanou kept trip-hoppy time on the waterwheel lute, while a stage filled with singers and vocalizers animated the herdsman's landscape with a symphony of creatures come to slake their thirst.

— Mitch Ritter (Concord, CA)

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