

## **THE FESTIVAL IN THE DESERT**

Laudatio

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Ladies, gentlemen and fellow Womexicans...

On the third of January this year, Ansar Eddine, one of the three armed Salafist groups who ruled over the northern two-thirds of Mali and imposed a brutal form of shari'a law on its people, issued what they called their 'political platform'.

In many ways it's an extraordinary document, of a high intellectual and literary standard, written in French and posted on a website with a Belgian domain name. It opens with the words "In the name of Allah the most merciful..." and goes on to give a succinct history of northern Mali and its grievances since independence.

The platform decries the machinations of succeeding governments in Bamako and the Machiavellian games they have played to keep the north of Mali isolated and divided. It pours scorn on the few northern leaders who have accepted prestigious government posts and strut around with hypocritical self-importance.

"Meanwhile," - and here I'm quoting directly from the text -, "Poor herders are executed without trial for no other reason than their ethnic origin. Children die like flies from easily preventable diseases. Mothers die in childbirth. Entire families survive thanks only to foraging, soliciting, begging and foreign aid. Infected water in ponds and wells causes irreparable damage."

“And also, during this time,” the text continues, “DUMBFOUNDED TOURISTS arrive daily to revel sadistically in the agony of a people who are on the road to oblivion.”

Dumbfound Tourists revelling sadistically. I’m sure you’ll agree, that’s quite a stark and arresting statement.

I happen to empathize with one of those dumbfounded tourists, because he’s standing right here in front of you today. And although I bear a grudging respect for the intellectual skills of the Ansar Eddine propagandist who wrote this political platform, and, with all honesty, find myself agreeing with some of the points he makes, I cannot accept the portrait he paints of me and of the many thousands of men and women who have travelled from the four corners of the earth to Northern Mali and the Festival in the Desert over the past decade or more.

I consider myself blessed to have been present at the very first Festival in the Desert in 2001. I arrived as a tourist, and – yes - I was dumbfounded. Put simply and bluntly, the desert blew my tiny mind. First, there was that backdrop of vast skies, endless level horizons and that bountiful sense of space and time. But very quickly after that, it was the people that seduced me: their hospitality, their resilience, their skill, their love of laughter and companionship.

And of course, I did see poverty. You couldn’t avoid it. It confronted me with that margin that separates survival from desperation, as thin as the line that divides the earth from the sky. I became acutely aware of the psychological effect that my presence sometimes had on those I met and, although it was never aggressive, I came to recognise the unmistakable envy and confusion in the eyes of some as they asked themselves: “How come fate has blessed this man from afar with so much and condemned me to so little?”

But, hand on heart, I can't remember ever revelling sadistically in any kind of agony. Quite the opposite. The desert taught me more than I ever could have expected about the nobility of which the heart is capable. It forced humility on me and challenged all my notions about fate and man's relation to it.

The Festival in the Desert itself provided me with a small island in that vast desert on which I could feel safe and welcome and where the incomparable wealth of a millennial culture was laid out before me, not in any fawning or solicitous way, but with a fierce pride that seemed to say: "This is our life and our history. Whether you like it or not is your affair. Either way, you are welcome to come and go in peace."

On that little island I met the musicians from Tinariwen with whom I was to work as manager for 8 unforgettable years. But of course, I'm far from being the only one who owes a portion of their destiny to the Festival in the Desert. Quite apart from groups like Tamikrest or Etran Finatawa whose international careers were launched thanks to connections made at the Festival, countless other alliances, exchanges and friendships have germinated on the silky white dunes of Essakane, or within the city limits of Timbuktu, and blossomed over the years.

Of course, the Festival wasn't created primarily for outsiders, but rather as a place where desert peoples could meet and talk to each other. And, perhaps even more importantly, as a place where southern Malians could go to discover the northern half of their country, and see for themselves that those seemingly forbidding deserts aren't populated by demons or slave drivers, but by people struggling to preserve their culture and live a better life. Just like people everywhere.

In bygone days that fundamental need to meet, to talk, to exchange and understand was met by the traditional desert gatherings that used to occur after the annual winter rains in every corner of the southern Sahara. There nomads, isolated for most the year, would come together to parlay, to show off the beauty and swiftness of their animals, to mix and marry and revel in both their tangible and intangible wealth.

But that entire system of social interaction was severely disturbed by the rebellions and ethnic conflicts of the early 1990s. The desert needed to heal itself, Mali needed to heal itself, and the Festival provided a new form of medicine, one based on music and culture, rather than politics.

The idea of adding an international dimension to that process of healing was inspired. Quite a few Touareg friends have confirmed to me that many of the traditional desert skills were fading fast in the late 1990s – tent making, leather working, old instruments like the imzad fiddle or the stunningly elegant silver jewellery made by hereditary silversmiths. Desert culture needed the wonder of new eyes and the desire of new hearts in order to grow stronger and survive. The Festival in the Desert has done so much to provide those new eyes and new hearts.

And now, after the tragedy of 2012, the desert needs to heal itself again. It needs to recreate that spirit of welcome and security in which desert people – Touareg, Arabs, Songhoi and Peul, so many of whom still languish in refugee camps over the border – can feel safe to return and begin to tend to their social wounds. A place in which southerners and northerners can face each other and talk openly of their fear, their bitterness, their anger and their hopes. A place to which new eyes and hearts can come and revel, not sadistically, but humbly and respectfully, in the beauty of a culture that has so much to teach us in the west about simplicity and freedom.

Little wonder that both the newly elected president of Mali, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and the United Nations have stated that the Festival is a priority in their strategy for reconciliation in the north. We all fervently hope that peace prevails long enough in the Timbuktu region for the Festival to return home in January 2014. But we must also remember that music was recently banned in that land where music is gold for ten whole months by Ansar Eddine, Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and the other extremist groups. The shadow of their philosophy still lingers on.

In effect, that shadow has turned the Festival in the Desert into the frontline in a cultural war dominated by religion, a war that is also being waged in Algeria, Egypt, Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan and many other parts of the Muslim world. Festival director Manny Ansar and his dedicated team feel the heat of that conflict every day and their courage deserves our gratitude and respect.

Nonetheless that bright propagandist from Ansar Eddine got it seriously wrong. I understand his bitterness. The suffering of desert peoples seems intractable at times, and the disparity between their circumstances and those of the travellers who come to visit the region can be alarming.

But I believe the desire to see that desert, that beauty and human wealth has nothing to do with sadistic revelling and, in most cases, everything to do with a genuine desire to learn, to try and understand and ultimately to help, however much that help can seem misguided and hamfisted at times.

All I can say is that I miss the vast desert that the Festival drew me to for first time twelve years ago, more than I've missed any other place in my life. All I can do is pray that peace returns to it one day and I can go back. I'll still be a tourist and I'll still be dumbfounded.

And if I do make it back, I will thank the tens, even hundreds of people, who have battled unimaginable odds to keep the Festival in Desert alive, for all the wonder, all the friendships and for the trove of memories that their efforts have given to me and to so many others this past decade.

It's in that spirit of thanks that I ask you all to give a big heartfelt welcome to Festival Director Manny Ansar who has come here to accept the Womex Award for Professional Excellence 2013 on behalf of the Festival in Desert...