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CULTURE

Desert rhythms

A music festival in the desert? Well, that's what happens at the Touareg festival in Mali, says ANANTHA KRISHNAN.

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AS Chennai is in the midst of yet another music season, preparations are underway for the annual music festival from January 9 to 11 in an unusual environ, 65 km north of Timbuctu, in the Sahara desert. It is reported to be the most remote location ever for a music festival.

Many would have heard of "Timbuctu" with reference to a geographically distant place, but few know that it is located in the largest West African country, Mali.

Mali has a rich historical background. In the 13th Century, Sundiata Keita, the respected leader of the Manding people, had strategically converted the empire to Islam and taken out a monopoly on the gold and salt trade. Like in India, the Manding women revere gold. Mali still has deposits of gold, second only to South Africa. The French made inroads into Mali in 1898 and ruled until 1960.

Today, Mali is one of the rare democracies in Africa. Its 10.5 million people comprise myriad ethnic groups.

Music is an essential part of Malian life. Indian films are popular too. In fact, it is said that some leading Malian musicians got their inspiration from listening to Indian film music.

Though the similarity is striking, Malian music is based in its roots with the use of traditional instruments like the Djembe drum, 21-stringed harp called the Kora, the Kamalen N' goni, the Fulani flute, the Njarka, the Belafon and the Calabash. Western instruments such as the guitar, drums and the violin add to Malian rhythm. Those who have made it to the world music stage include Salif Keita, Oumou Sangare, Ramata Diakete, Kora, Tumani Diabate and Bluesman Ali Farka Toure, who has a Grammy under his belt.

Touaregs, or the Kel Tamashek (people who speak Tamashek), are the nomadic tribe of the Saharan desert, scattered among Algeria, Mali and Niger. They are probably one of the least studied and most misunderstood people of the world. Their men are known as the "Indigo warriors of the desert" as they wear indigo dyed robes that rub off on their light complexioned, perspiring skin. During the early 1990s, there was insurgency in northern Mali, as the Touaregs were demanding more autonomy from the government. As the army came down heavily on them, the Touaregs sought refuge in neighbouring countries. Peace was restored in late 1990s and the government started to integrate the Touaregs into national affairs.

For four years, in an effort to rebuild their lives in northern Mali and to celebrate the rich heritage of their culture, a yearly music festival is organised by EFES, a Touareg association with help from certain European partners and the support of the Malian Government.

I attended the festival early this year. The Touaregs came on their bedecked camels from villages far and wide, and the outsiders from the United States and Europe were mostly journalists. The organisers did not want to turn this into a "Woodstock", as this was a "get-together" of the wandering nomads of the desert.

Located at the mouth of the desert, the fabled town of Timbuctu was the starting point to get to the festival site. Apart from camel-hide tents for musicians and visitors, a main concert-stage and a canopy for afternoon events, it was just an ocean of sand. There were no seats and that was fine with everyone as the natural setting was an attraction in itself.

For obvious reasons, food and water were rationed at the festival. We sought refuge in the tents from the blazing sun until the afternoon events began, under a canopy. It was all Touareg music and their dance called "takamba", a fluid movement of arms and shoulders, as the nomads watched the proceedings from atop their camels. As the sun disappeared in the sandy horizon, the main stage started to become active with artists who included Robert Plant of Led Zepplin, the French group LoJo, a native Indian group from Arizona, U.S., leading musicians from Mali such as Oumou Sangare, Fantani Toure and Touareg bands like Tartit, Tinariwen and Tidawt. Each artist would perform for about 20 to 30 minutes.

Sixty groups performed over three days. The music played was not just entertainment but an artistic expression of their culture and tradition. Charcoal-burners were set up in the sand to keep people warm as the shows went on until the wee hours when the temperature dipped to hit the other extreme.

ANANTHA KRISHNAN



... and Touareg men on camel-back.

Besides the performing hours, music would emanate from the tents as the musicians found the "jam-sessions" hard to resist. Star-filled skies above the pollution-free desert was a breathtaking sight, before we snuggled into our sleeping bags. The grand finale was by none other than Ali Farka Toure, and those who gathered were in trance. With the festival coming to an end, it was time to hop on the caravan of Land Cruisers to head back to the real world. Back in Timbuctu, one can feel the antiquity with its narrow sandy lanes, mud houses and people riding donkeys.

The story goes that once there lived a woman by the name of Buctu, who watered the camels of the caravans that passed by the town from a well, which is called Tim in Tamashak language and hence the place came to be known as Tim-Buctu. It was the converging point of the Northern Arabic and Berber states with Black Africa. Timbuctu was the most important trading post of yesteryear as the precious salt from the desert was exchanged for gold and grain from the Southern Africa. One can still see camel caravans head to the desert and bring back slabs of salt, a round-trip that would last almost a month, crossing the unforgiving Sahara.

At the town museum, age-old Islamic scriptures are exhibited as it was one of the leading seats of Islamic studies. Children on the streets offering to be guides speak perfect English in a Francophone country, thanks to tourism.

After long negotiations, we rented a car and headed for Mopti, located at the confluence of the Bani and the Niger and known as the "Venice of Mali". Visitors use Mopti as a base to get to two popular tourist sites in Mali — the Bandiagara escarpment of the Dogon tribe and the grand mosque of Djenne. In Mopti, we took a cruise on the Niger and visited villages of various ethnic groups. Hippos abound in the Niger. Mopti is a bustling port town where one can see the decorative "pirogue" boats.

A few hours' drive from the town square brought us to Mali's architectural jewel, Djenne. Founded in the Fourth Century, Djenne has scarcely changed since the Middle Ages. Between the 13th and the 15th Centuries, Djenne was a rival of Timbuctu for the wealth of the trans-Saharan trade.

The city is located on an island in the inland Niger delta, and is surrounded by mud brick walls. The attraction of the town, the Grand Mosque, the largest mud-structure in the world, transported us back to medieval times. A market in front of the mosque on Mondays brings the most colourful locals from nearby villages and that makes it the

most touristy day of the week in Djenne.

Dogon country is considered to be one of the most extraordinary places on earth. Built up high on the narrow ledges of the cliffs are the villages. In the 11th Century, the Dogons fled from the advancing Arabs and the Islamic invasion, found shelter in one of West Africa's most inhospitable areas. Houses, granaries and burial sites were all built along 200 km long escarpment. Dogons are animists, worshipping their ancestors and the spirits of nature. They are known for their Kanaga masks and wood carvings illustrating their animist views. Elaborate costumes and masks are worn during the Dogon dance, and some do perform on stilts.

A 16-hour ride from the Dogon country in a truck that had people, goats and chicken as passengers, a typical African scenario, brought me to the capital of Mali, Bamako. Bamako was founded in 1640 and situated on the Niger that flows through Mali. Bamako has a large art and craft centre where sculptures, weavers, leather workers, jewellers, and metal workers exhibit their skills and trade. Great market is a place to explore stalls that sell anything from Malian music cassettes, to fabrics, beads, brass and gold works and the variety is mind-boggling. Not everyone can take the medicine section, as shrunken animals that are believed to cure any ailment are on display. The culture centre is a great place to learn African beats on drums or few African steps in the dance classes offered.

On my last day in Mali, my host Oumou Sangare, well-known singer in Mali, took me to a "Baptême", a child-christening ceremony to complement my memorable cultural experience in Western Africa.

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