

## **Camel song and dance**

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In this brief note I approach camels from a musical angle, looking at contexts where camels intersect with music, song and dance; the article includes a proposal that war, conflict, and gender offer useful framing contexts for camel discussions.

### **The Tinariwen project**

The year 2001 saw the first staging of the Festival in the Desert, an annual world music gathering held in Mali. It marked the first emergence into the public arena of the band Tinariwen<sup>1</sup>, a young “desert-blues” ensemble, formed in 1979 and associated with the camel-nomadic Tuareg people of North Africa and their decades-long struggle against colonialism and for national independence.

Tinariwen and “desert blues” was a joint creation of world music promoters, development activists and indigenous musicians, a venture created between traditional North African cultures and the European music industry. The specificity of the project is that it has created an imaginary<sup>2</sup> of the camel and camel cultures and the desert blues. Among young Europeans the Festival in the Desert is a major alternative-culture musical marker. But it is more than merely a musical project.

In 2003 the band issued a CD album entitled *Aman Iman* (“Water is Life”). The promotional video for the film begins with a shot of camels in a sandstorm and a song which celebrates the desert – white, bare and empty, where sheep and goats cannot live, only the young camel who wanders after its mother. The next shot – and the irony is deliberate – shows band members on board a 4-wheel-drive, churning across the sands of the desert, while their manager, Andy Morgan, speaks from the back seat about the band’s project.

The video spoke of – and was made functional to – the development of water resources in desert areas of North Africa and their importance for indigenous populations. Engaging with complex issues of development. Hence an intermeshing of issues to do with music, identity and culture, and also the cultural conflict (but also potential reconciliations) between traditionality and modernity. The band are aware of the tension between 4-wheel drives and international jetsetting on the one hand, and simple desert values on the other. And the camel is forefronted effectively as an image embodying all these complexities.

For anyone wishing to explore the project in greater detail, there is ample material about the Tinariwen available on the Internet.

### **Mongolia – *The Weeping Camel***

As part of our conference programme we have projected the film *The Weeping Camel*,<sup>3</sup> which is posited entirely on the intimate relationship between humans and animals achieved by means of music and song. Briefly, a family of Mongolian herders in the Gobi desert deal with a crisis, when the mother of a new-born white camel refuses to suckle her calf. Various means are tried, to achieve a reconciliation. Finally the skills of a fiddle-player are enlisted, and the woman of the family sings gently to the camel. This results in the mother-camel accepting her offspring, and the film shows her with tears in her eyes. In short, the whole film pivots on musical sounds and the use of the song. For instance, an extraordinary moment when the

wind is playing the strings of the two-stringed bowed instrument and the voice of the camel enters in the same tonality. And more particularly, the fact that it is a woman singer who effects this reconciliation between the mother and calf. The power of that hypothesis attests to the very depth of the relationship between human beings and camels and its mediation through song. For research purposes we can further extrapolate from that particular *mise en scene* an assumption that song is an inextricable part of camel cultures and, furthermore, that camel cultures *cannot be fully understood without reference to song*. This is a fairly strong claim, but one which I think bears analysis.

### **Somali camel songs**

That takes us to Somalia, where, as our survey informants have reported, there is a very large national population of camels, and also a very large percentage of camels in relation to the population as a whole. For 20 years now Somalia has been riven by civil war, with all the poverty and misery that follow from that fact. The camel clearly plays an important part in the rural economy, but equally noteworthy is the fact that the forces seeking to restore national pride in a shattered country have chosen to valorise the camel as a symbol of the nation and national identity.

In 1993 a book by Axmed Abokor was published as part of the Somali Camel Research Project, started in 1983.<sup>4</sup> It is a book of Somali pastoral work songs, and in passing we might note the subtitle, namely “The poetic voice of the politically powerless”. In Somali culture songs are functional to various purposes – mediating social conflict, or as a way of negotiating social relations between men and women, and men with other men. Song is also used in, and is functional to, the working activities of everyday life – for example resting camels, corralling them, taking them to water etc. Furthermore, as in many traditional cultures, song provides the spaces in which you can say publicly things that you cannot raise by any other means. So, for example, young women may have the right, sanctioned in song, to say things to the elders which they cannot say at any other time. Additionally we should note that in Somali culture song also represents a closed space of women – the repertoire contains secret songs which are not to be divulged to others – a fact which connects with Keireine Canavan’s fascinating contribution [this volume] about the hidden semiotics of women’s weaving.

The camel fulfils many purposes in society – carrying goods, transportation, meat, milk, payment (not only as bride wealth but also as blood money). It is also one of the factors that define manhood in Somali society. It is reported that among nomads, one of the abilities that young male Somalis have to develop is the ability to stay in the desert for given periods of time; *living entirely on camel milk*, with no other source of sustenance. A remarkable fact in itself. The other rite of passage in the transition to manhood is the ability to distinguish yourself in oratory and the arts of poetry (which in turn connects to song). So we have this powerful image of young men in Somali culture, aspiring to be able to express themselves poetically and to show their toughness, their relation with nature, to be able to survive purely on the milk of the camel.

In Somalia it is reported that the camels are aware of and respond to particular tonalities of song. If you sing in a particular way they know that something particular is going to happen. For instance, if you sing loudly and boisterously, they know it is going home time. And the interesting thing is that in Somalia you sing all day long, with every activity that you do with the camels, but you do not sing when you are milking. This is because camels do not like disturbance at milking time.

### Women and the powerless

What is also important in the Somali context is that some songs enjoy a higher social status than others. These are the men's songs. On the other hand, the work songs to which I have referred are very largely songs of women, and also of young men – and they are regarded as frivolous and insignificant and in no way “worthy of note”. So whereas I cited the subtitle of that book, as the “poetic voices of the politically powerless” (in other words the pastoralists), at the same time *within* the politically powerless there are those who are even more dispossessed and deprived of voice – and they are the women. This can only confirm our belief – as has been shown in several of the papers produced for this conference – in highlighting the role and position of *women* in camel cultures. Which expresses itself particularly through song. In order that the voice of woman that has been quieted can be brought out.

### Fear of Loss

Now a slight detour. This year I made a proposal to the Endangered Languages project which is housed at SOAS and whose mission is to save endangered languages around the world. My contention was that the donkey and mule cultures of the Mediterranean basin are rapidly becoming extinct (this is one of the concerns of our biennial Hydra Donkey Conference). In those cultures, the people who use the donkeys and mules have very specific languages which they employ in communicating with their animals. Commands, sounds, ways of expressing themselves, ways of pitching the voice. With the vertiginous decline in donkey and mule ownership these languages are in danger of becoming extinct. They are surely worthy of research, documentation and archiving before they disappear definitively. I further propose that this is also a project that we might pursue in regard to camels – namely to get some good recordings done, in the field, of human-animal communication in *all* the camel cultures that exist in the world.

But by the same token, the threat to these cultures is also, obviously, a threat to their songs. Song disappears in the same way that artisanal and handicraft skills disappear. Song disappears if you don't write it down – and the disappearance becomes all the more rapid with globalisation and the availability of internet communications. Historically, the impulse to song collection has generally arisen out of awarenesses / panics of cultural loss. The great collections of Irish song are a case in point, in the face of the losses and emigrations arising out of the great Potato Famine. A whole musical culture was about to be lost forever, so the collectors embarked on a rescue mission. We are not in that situation with camel cultures. But in the example of *The Weeping Camel* we saw how it happens – television arrives, and that poses a direct threat to traditional culture. So I propose that we set ourselves a little project for the coming years. Namely the collecting of camel songs into some kind of global database. Anyone who has material of this kind is invited to contact me at the address below.

### Camel as negative imagery

I cited above the enrolment of the camel into positive imaginaries. However it also functions with negative connotations. For instance, I am told that in Iran there are very many camel jokes, and they tend to be directed in a racist sense against Arabs. (One the great Persian poets says of the Arabs that “they drink camel milk and they eat lizards”). It is commonplace for the camel to symbolise cultural backwardness. Many of us know the intermezzo “In a Persian Market” by Ketelbey (1920). The text accompanying the musical score informs us that: “We are in a Persian market. We see camel drivers arriving in the market.” When the familiar musical motif arrives, it is actually a bunch of beggars singing “Baksheesh, baksheesh, Allaaaah”. A strong statement of casual colonial prejudice.

Another song in which the camel is enlisted within a racist discourse – the song is so repulsive that I would not cite the lyrics here – is the “Taliban Song”,<sup>5</sup> created out of the war in Afghanistan, in which American imperialistic, jingoistic, racist discourse is given full rein. The songs pivots around the camel as image.

### Dance

As to the participation of camels in musical matters, their role historically as bearers of musical instruments in military bands has been noted (including the use of pairs of kettledrums, which later become a feature of European horse cavalry). As regards camel *dance*, however, I do not have much to offer

Certainly camels can be trained to perform. They have performed in circuses, and at the 5-day Pushkar Camel Fair in India there is a well-developed tradition of dancing camels as part of the public entertainment on offer. This could usefully be the topic of a future paper.

As a curiosity we note that in Greece camels were once part of the transport economy – certainly during the period of the Ottoman empire. There is a remnant of this camel culture in the *kamilieriko* found in rebetiko music, a 9/8 camel rhythm periodised as follows: 2-2-2-3, or *dum-dada dum-dada dum-dada dum-daa-daa*. It has a slightly comical subcultural connotation, and is often associated with hashish songs (for instance “To vapori ap’ tin Persia” – “The ship from Persia”, by Vassilis Tsitsanis).

### The camel in war and conflict

In the Tinariwen project we have a valorisation of the camel within national culture. For the Tuaregs this means the seeking of an identity within pre-existing historic realities, claiming the specificity of a national culture of their own, which they date back to the days of the Jugurthine Wars and battles with the ancient Romans. There is a lot of history here. The camel is valorised within that, as a symbol, as an image.

What also comes out strongly in the band’s video is the connection with war and conflict. War and conflict have surfaced occasionally during our conference, but every time they arise our speakers have preferred not to address them. Arguably it would be healthy to discuss war and conflict as the environment within which camel development takes place. Indeed we heard of one relevant example – in places where cattle raiding takes place, farmers may prefer to keep camels in order to avoid the risks of loss of livestock to raiders. And we should not forget the use of camels by the Janjaweed militias operating in Darfur, and the camel involved in the cavalry charge against the Egyptian protesters gathered in Tahrir Square in February 2011.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tinariwen means “deserts” or “countryside” in Tamasheq. Documentary available for download at: << [http://youtu.be/BnwEzvm\\_rH8](http://youtu.be/BnwEzvm_rH8) >>

<sup>2</sup> *Imaginaire* – a word which works better in French than in English.

<sup>3</sup> Dir. Byambasuren Davaa and Luigi Falorni. Full-length feature film available for free download at: << <http://youtu.be/E4tpTq6gjHw> >>

<sup>4</sup> Axmed Cali Abokor, *Somali pastoral work songs: the poetic voice of the politically powerless*, Uppsala University, Uppsala, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Taliban song: << <http://youtu.be/7hPjatgRjL4> >>

<sup>6</sup> << [http://youtu.be/4k0\\_9Y1XaC8](http://youtu.be/4k0_9Y1XaC8) >>