

Quarterly Report III: Maria Coryell-Martin

Ties to the Land: Exploring Remote Regions through Art

My Tamasheq Time

**a note on terms: Technically speaking, Tamasheq is the language spoken by the Tuareg. Kel Tamasheq literally means, "speakers of Tamasheq." The people I met generally did not call themselves Tuareg, it being more a term that strangers used for them and used Tamasheq rather broadly.*

I left Bamako in the beginning of January to travel up to Essekane, 60 km from Timbuktu for the Festival au Desert. Fadimata Walet Oumar, or Disco, the driving force behind Tartit, generously agreed for me and my brother who was visiting me at the time to join her caravan of friends and family. It was the beginning of my time spent in the northern region of Mali between Bamako and Timbuktu. As I lived and traveled with the network of Disco's family and friends, I learned their history and their means to survive in a challenging, although at times profoundly beautiful, desert environment. In February and March, I based myself primarily out of two villages, the most stationary I have been all year. Taking the time to immerse myself in remote communities allowed me to both discover and experience the daily rhythms of life. My efforts to sketch and record my surroundings also rewarded me with generous friendships and connections. Although my focus has generally been on the landscape, here it was just as often the people who I sketched, a reflection on the importance of friends in and family in an otherwise difficult environment. While leaving the desert in the beginning of April was difficult, I left it with a new perspective of Mali. I am now ready to explore another desert (one that registers on the other end of the thermometer): Greenland.

The Festival in the Desert, staged at Essekane, had limited funds and poor organization this year. While I enjoyed the three days of music and discussion of Tuareg culture and desert politics, I found the voyage to and from the festival more engaging and it served as the foundation for the rest of my stay in Mali. The voyage immersed me in Tuareg culture and the Tamasheq language and I found myself absorbing as much as possible as quickly as possible. Disco's extended family, I learned, extends from Bamako to Timbuktu (with a few folks in Gao as well). Until the Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s (the beginnings of which began just after Malian independence in 1960), the family was largely nomadic, moving with the seasons, seeking good grazing lands for the animals. During the rebellion however, most of the family fled to Mauritania where they lived as refugees for four to five years (the Tuareg from other regions also took refuge in Niger and Burkina Faso). As refugees, their lives were dramatically altered. Leaving their animals behind, they lost the majority of their wealth and means for nomadic lives. In the camps however, they had access to quality health care and schools. Returning to Mali in the late 1990s, the Tuareg began to rebuild their animal populations and create permanent settlements, exploring alternatives to the nomad lifestyle that maintained the social structures that they had become accustomed to. Today, the Tuareg are a mix of nomads, semi-sedentary, and sedentary people. Family members are often based in towns seeking a means to live and supporting children in school while their relatives live in bush encampments and move with their animals. As I visited Disco's family, this was apparent as I stayed at her father's nomad encampment, her cousin's bush settlements, and others' earthen houses located in towns complete with schools and stores. I also learned that her family made a conscious decision as they resettled the region after the rebellion to spread themselves out along the 900 km between Bamako and Timbuktu. In doing this, they are always at home along the transportation and trade line. Family is everywhere.

I was adopted into this strong and far reaching family, and with it, I explored the region for a total of three months up north and was rewarded with new perspectives and experiences. I learned to hunt, traipsed about on camels and rumbled around on donkey carts. I tore across the hard packed earth in a 4x4 at

60mph and even shot an AK-47 (at a wedding). I lived in traditional clothing and felt my body adjust to a restricted diet and hot, dry climate. I left Mali with a deeper knowledge of the land and of the people who live there.

Aman iman
Axx isodak
Isan telmdu
Isink esuk

*"Water is life, milk is food, meat is flavor, and everything else just fills the belly."
-Traditional Tamasheq saying*

Much of Tamasheq culture is encompassed in this deceptively simple saying. Water is life. (Direct translation: Water is the soul. I tend to think of it as the essential life force). Heading north from Bamako, the agricultural town of Niono, based around a series of canals, marks the boundary between the developed region of Mali and the desert. During the dry season, there is no surface water up north (and thankfully, no mosquitoes). Wells, both traditionally dug and those created by non-profit organizations, are found throughout the region, but their quality varies and pumps are far and few between. Two of the villages I stayed at had salty water and imported water for tea from other towns. The work for water begins early in the morning and continues throughout the day, relying upon camels, donkeys, and bulls to draw the water from wells (I have seen them up to 150 m deep). I appreciated water like never before while in the desert.

Milk is food. Traditionally, the Kel Tamasheq were nomads, traveling throughout the Sahara, trading salt and other goods (tea, silver, etc...) and tending their animals. The desert is a limited environment. Milk provides all basic nutrients and to survive and fuel to burn. If meat is available, it adds flavor, and anything else such as rice or bread will just help make one feel full. My brother and I were staying with a brother of Disco. "What do you eat for breakfast?" Asked my brother, innocently. "First, you should ask if we do eat breakfast," Abdoulahi replied. "Often it is just tea and around 9am, buttermilk (the best buttermilk I have ever tasted). The first food we eat is rice midday." As my body adjusted more to life up with the Tamasheq, I found myself craving milk. It has never tasted better.

I returned briefly to Bamako to see my brother off, but was anxious to return to Tamasheq country, leaving the heat, bustle, and mosquitoes of the big city. Stuck in traffic, I yearned for "la route nomade." I left Bamako soon enough, though, and returned to the small village of Karal where I spent a full month before traveling further up north around the town of Léré and Koigma. Settling in Karal was initially one of the most challenging situations I have placed myself in. Two people in the village of six or seven families spoke french well and few spoke much any Bambara. I was immersed in Tamasheq. Living with my friend's family, I soon settled into the rhythm of daily village life and began to understand things. I drew regularly, portraits (they were never my strong point before, but I am much more comfortable with them now!) and the small sights around me. I also experimented with alternative pigments (henna and ground stone) and painting materials. One lovely morning was spent making arqanib wan tenare (desert pens) out of ostridge feathers with friends. I never cease to appreciate how accessible sketching is (verses the sense of alienation I encounter with my camera), and I always delighted in having people leaf through my portfolio and recognize the images, explaining them both to me and to each other.

After my months of traveling and always encountering new stimuli, I found the predictability of living in one place with few people soothing, both to my mind and body. I knew how to get water, could predict what food would come when, and knew where I would sleep. Walking the forest and accompanying my

friends out hunting, I learned the names of trees and different animals. A strict vegetarian for 12 years, I can now eat a bird that I helped find and prepare (or rabbit, though I prefer birds as the pet rabbits I had when I was younger closely resemble the bush variety). Life was simplified and at the same time, very accessible. I participated in the daily rhythm of prayer and felt the weekly rhythm of going to the market town. The moon changed and I learned the names for the stars (I claimed to be in love with Amanarq – Orion- to keep the men at bay) and could tell the time through their position. Walking the dusty paths, I learned where there were camps and how to find water. I embraced their perspective that the sun is a bad thing (contrary to my general native Seattle opinion). The wind blows generally from the north east...

Sometimes when the wind blew, hot and dusty, the words of a woman from the town Gargando would come to haunt me, "Il y a rien ici, rien que la fatigue." There is nothing here, nothing but fatigue. When I felt the moisture, energy, and force were just drained out of me, I would often buoy my spirits with words of friend Mohammad Issa, guitarist and brother of Disco. "Here, time is not money. Time is passing the time- together. We may not have much, but we have each other. And music." By late afternoon the wind would often stop and I would often be lying around on a mat with friends, drinking tea, chatting, or just contemplating and taking my time. I seldom find such time in the United States. In the desert, I learned to slow down.

Tamasheq music, like so many of their activities, is slow and chill. It is music for traversing spaces and people say that the rhythms originate from the camel gate. I find one of their drums, however, particularly interesting. It is tightly covered with skin or cloth and then is doused with water. A drum that drinks in a desert... music is important. The music has life.

While at Karal, I met a team from Agro Action Allemand, conducting interviews throughout the north to assess the impact of their work, focusing on the wells. They generously allowed me to observe some of the interviews and ultimately to attend an education conference in the town of Araten. The non-profit organization perspective was new to me and I was confronted with concerns of development in remote regions. What does it actually mean to be developed? There is no single answer, but I think it comes down to access and opportunity. Access to good water, health, and education, and information... Development is about having choices. On this note, I have asked myself if having more choices makes us happier (as our mass media tends to declare). I question the work of aid organizations, however. I have recently read an excellent book, *Learning to Love Africa*, by Monique Maddy. She encourages business investment and entrepreneurs rather than the free money of aid. As of now I agree. I encountered too many people who expressed a sense of entitlement to aid, yet little incentive to actually work. Without personal investment and interest, how do we teach responsibility and accountability and maintain structures in the long term?

This is just the beginning of what I learned and experienced. My time up north with the Tamasheq was incredible and has pushed me in new directions. Once again, I entered a culture that I knew little about and left with a solid grasp of the language and a deeper understanding of the land and history, all initiated through my art.

One last note: One morning I was walking back to Karal after a morning jog around the dried forest. I was listening to the wind whisper through the branches as I paused to cut a "tusekulsein" (twig toothbrush). Feeling the space around me, I had a moment's dizziness as memories of Tibet, Beijing, Tokyo and the South Pacific came flooding to me. I felt the activity of the train stations, the press of crowds, and the pulse of the ocean. Then it passed and I felt grounded in the desert of northern Mali. As I have now been out and about for more than nine months, I am beginning to feel a true sense of ground traveled and of the greater, global activity. I have learned and seen so much- and now I am in Greenland. I feel truly fortunate. Thank you again for this opportunity and for your continual support.