

AKALINE KIDAL

Ahmed Ag Kaedy

Ahmed Ag Kaedy is a guitarist from the Northern Malian city of Kidal, playing in the Tuareg folk tradition known colloquially as “guitar.” Part of a long lineage of Tuareg musicians, Akaline Kidal marks a departure from contemporary music for a return to the origins of the sound: played live on stripped down acoustic guitar, with unproduced bare vocals, recorded to cassette tape, and above all, carrying a strong political message.

The story of Tuareg guitar origins is muddled with hyperbole from the journey from humble folksongs played around a campfire to one of the most popular African musics on the world stage. Any tellings should be taken with a large grain of salt (including this one). The popular story goes like this. In the 1980s, the now-defunct Colonel Khadafi offered citizenship to Tuaregs for military service. Young Tuareg men flocked to the camps, and in their exile, discovered the guitar. The innovators (among them founders of the Tinariwen collective, Inteyeden Ag Ablil and Ibrahim Ag Alhabib) created a new sound, borrowing from fingerstyle guitar of Ali Farka Touré and the traditional rhythms and vocal intonations of the *tende*. While the guitar was nostalgic and plaintive, the lyrical content was directed and political, speaking to the long-standing grief of the Tuaregs, ethnic minorities in the Malian state, and offered up a call to rebellion. The political arm of the rebellion commissioned recordings directly onto cassette and sent them back into Mali where they became political contraband, worthy of jail time. Nevertheless, the music made its way across the diaspora, planting the seed for the future rebellions and cementing the sound of Tuareg guitar as a popular folk music.

Ahmed Ag Kaedy grew up in the shadow of these innovators, coming of age during the later rebellions of the 1990s. Like his predecessors, Ahmed left home at a young age to train in Libya. It was here that he first encountered the guitar and he decided to forgo the military life and devote himself to song. He returned to his hometown of Kidal, playing in a number of bands before forming his own group, Amanar. The band took their name from the constellation Orion, and the namesake warrior, a towering figure of Tuareg mythology. Ahmed’s home in Kidal became a



musical compound, a destination for wandering musicians who wished to learn to play. Amanar became a training camp, much like those in Libya, but for music, and over the years, scores of musicians passed through.

In 2012, the Libyan state collapsed. In the ensuing chaos, Libyan ex-military made off with Kalashnikovs, rocket launchers, and mounted artillery. The long-dormant forces of the Tuareg rebellion were re-ignited, striking an alliance with Islamist extremists from Algeria. With this new firepower, a war began for the Northern territories. The conflict threw the government into disorder, the military staged a coup, and the state abandoned the Northern towns. The citizens of Kidal fled. The Islamist forces imposed a harsh interpretation of sharia law, particularly with regards to music. Islamists ransacked Ahmed’s home and burned his instruments. Ahmed was told not to return to Kidal, or he would have his fingers cut off.

The rebellion flared but after a couple of years, the French military

invaded the North and chased out the Islamists. A tentative peace returned to Kidal. But in those intermittent years, the town had changed in irreversible ways. Many of those who had left had begun new lives in new cities. Such was the case with Amanar. The drummer had become a bricklayer in the capital of Algeria. The rhythm guitarist now traded motorcycles across the border town of Tinzaoutine. Ahmed settled into a life in Bamako, the Malian capital. The city presented a stark change to the desert outpost of Kidal. Where Kidal was a sleepy desert outpost, Bamako was a bustling city. The people in Bamako spoke another language, the customs were foreign, and the desert seemed a world away.

I lived at Ahmed's compound in Kidal for six months nearly a decade ago, in the calm years, prior to the chaos. It was here that I recorded a number of musicians and in essence formalized the project and label that has continued until today. In 2018, I had the opportunity to invite Ahmed to my home in Portland, Oregon. We spent much of our time not only reminiscing for those years in Kidal, but for a place that physically was no longer. While the city itself remained, it was merely a shell without its people. Too many of our old friends had died or vanished, swept away by forces bigger than any of us.

We decided to make a recording. Without any band, we left his typical setup, the five-piece Amanar with drum kits, bass guitars, and rhythm sections, and instead settled on stripped down acoustic recordings. I put out a call to the Portland music community and found a friend with a basement studio and an 8-track cassette recorder. Ahmed had a repertoire of music ready and a message that he wanted to send out to the Tuareg across the diaspora. Walking a fine line, with verse couched in metaphor and allusions to avoid retribution, he addressed the diaspora directly in a call for unity. With simple acoustic arrangements, Ahmed's recording echoed back to those early Tuareg cassettes. Though nostalgic and plaintive, he spoke with an urgency not so different from the first recordings, but with a very different call to arms. And he transmitted his message back home.

Christopher Kirkley, 2018

Adounia (Life)

In today's world it's good to have a wandering heart
one that never becomes sick
never feels any hurt
and never travels with bad friends.

My friend

I've patiently studied the world today
And I've learned it's difficult for two to walk together
without a problem eventually arising.

People will do things that don't fit
for example:

You have a friend you care for
and you prefer more than all the world
and he tells you the same
but you understand that deep down he doesn't like you.

My friends

let your heart be free and connect with one another,
because the wise say that this life is like the mousse
that forms on a glass of tea
nevermind how large
in a short time it's like it never existed at all.

Ishilan (The Day)

The day has passed
We've lost many men from our home in Kidal
Others are locked away,
Towns are abandoned and homes are destroyed
But what hurts me the most is that the ones left behind

are not united.

Every family, every ethnicity, and every tribe
has become a rebellion.

Every morning a group steps up to fight
and everyone wants to be a leader.

Once we were so afraid of being colonized,
but in these last days
we've found the problem is bigger
than the Malian government.

Every morning they begin their war
stopping on the side of the road.

Everyone who passes is demanded:
"From which tribe do you belong, and where do you go?"

Imetawan
(Tears)

If you see the tears
understand behind them is suffering.

A suffering of joy
or a suffering of pain

Look there

I see the person I like
tangled in the branches of a tree
and I'm incapable of getting them free.

It causes me great pain,
to see the one I love the most
have such a bad heart.
Sometimes we can't even begin
to understand one another.

Akaline Kidal

(My land, Kidal)

I see Kidal there before me
and it's become like the ruins of a civilization.
a land of the United Nations
the French military
and a terrible drought.

The Tuareg people are a small minority
and the Tuareg must understand.
France doesn't like us
Algeria doesn't want us
and Mali is at war with us.

The Tuareg people must know
you can consider France an enemy
no better than Algeria who stands in our path
blocking us from evolution.

Asin Oral
(Two Months)

My love
our separation of two months has passed
and during this time
I want you to know that each day
all of my thoughts were with you.

Do you remember the day we met
there was a strong heat and a fiery sun
and we walked a short distance to the west.
We spoke much
but I understood little of your position.

What I love most in this world,

is to see you always happy and smiling.
Never listen to what the others say
for those who speak the most
are always the ones with bad character.

Tikaras
(Treason)

The riches which you've heard about,
you must understand
the biggest traitor is he has the most.
It's become rare today,
to have a friend on whom you can count
and have complete confidence in.

The best way to live today is with all the world
to be correct
respect the tradition
and above all be noble.

Azaman
(Era)

This generation today is in a moment of terrible events
deforming our system of life.
But worst of all
the family has become unwound
like a string.

Your proper family will leave you if you have nothing
trading you for someone better.

People today are agitated,
like the small animals, separated from their mothers

crying out for milk
searching for them in the confusion.

Poesie

Oh poor me,
you believe that the suffering of love just affects the youth.
The more I age
the more it burns in my heart
until all my thoughts have turned to love.

There is much time that has passed
with our people stranded
until today they are scattered everywhere.

Some have left East towards Algeria.
Others have gone West to Mauritania and Burkina Faso.
Others have remained behind
with no one left alive in their family.

There are many orphans
and many men who have committed most terrible acts.
And below it all
a great drought has come upon the land
that hurts the spirit of the nomad.

Oh my god
we ask for help in all these problems
because it was you who once said
that after every suffering
you will bring a joy.

A joy.

All songs written and composed by Ahmed Ag Kaedy
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