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« The Cultural Caravan for Peace: a controversial peacekeeping project on the roads of
Malian political crisis »

Introduction

In 2012, the political situation in Mali goes to large disruptions: development and economical issues entail vehement political opposition in the South. A military coup occurs on March 22nd, and President Amadou Toumani Touré resigns after ten years of presidential term.

In the North, reminiscences from the last great Tuareg rebellion in the 90's merge with the recent phenomenon of Islamic extremism spread over the Sahara; rebel armed groups – some of them being jihadist – take advantage of the confusing situation and overrun the area, disputing control for the main cities (Timbuktu, Gao, Menaka, Kidal). The 6th April 2012, the MNLA declares the independence of “Azawad”, a territory covering the entire northern region of Mali. Ansar Eddine, one of the main jihadist groups, imposes Islamic law “Chari’a” on the whole Azawadian territory and applies violent treatment to anyone who would break it. Facing this deleterious security context, more than 200 000 northern inhabitants leave their home to flee oppression. They conglomerate into refugee camps temporarily built up at the borders with Mauritania, Algeria and Burkina Faso, expecting solutions in order to lastingly set up in the South, mostly in Bamako.

In January 2013, while Ansar Eddine attempt to take hold of Southern parts of the country, the French army stop them under Serval military action required by the interim president. The United Nations involve into the conflict in order to pacify by sending international military forces (MINUSMA) and help with resetting the Malian state. New elections are organized height months later, and a peace-building process is implemented under a multilateral dialogue¹.

Whereas the immediate key factors of the crisis appeared to be linked with economical and political troubles, the global composition of the national population results to a large cultural diversity to manage on a unique territory: 60 different ethnic groups, and more than 35 languages². While institutional rhetoric consists in promoting this cultural diversity as a national wealth, the daily reality of coexistence implies much mutual understanding of one another's way of life, as well as dedicated policies to rule proper governance.

Within such a politico-cultural context, a variety of initiatives aim at enhancing intercultural dialogue: this is the case of art and culture organisations offering cultural events in order to increase a common feeling of tolerance between people. Are these cultural promoters and mediators able to sooth tensions in a situation of armed conflict and political violence?

¹ For more details on Malian crisis, see T. PERRET, *Mali, une crise au Sahel*, Karthala, Paris, 2014.

² J. LECLERC. « Mali » in *L'aménagement linguistique du monde*, Québec, CEFAN, Université Laval, 15 avril 2015, [online] <http://www.axl.cefan.ulaval.ca/afrique/mali.htm> accessed on May 15th, 2019.

This presentation deals with the Cultural Caravan for Peace, a particular peacekeeping project of these, which was created as a cultural reply to the war. We will examine its capacity to react to the conflict situation in order to disseminate a reconciliation message.

I. Origins and creation of the Cultural Caravan for Peace

A. Before the Caravan in the South, a festival in the North

The Cultural Caravan for Peace appeared as a consequence of the crisis, which broke out in the North in 2012. Indeed, the organization committee, especially the director of the Caravan, were among the northern refugees who went in exile to the South. Manny Ansar and his team used to organize a festival entitled the Festival in the Desert for years (2001-2012), first in Kidal area and then in Timbuktu region.

This festival, initiated by French and Tuareg musicians and cultural promoters following the disarmament and peace-making process in the late 90's, was internationally known and grew year by year until it became one of the largest African cultural gathering, taking place in the middle of Saharan dunes. More than ten thousands visitors attended the event every year. Famous artists such as Bono (U2), Robert Plant (Led Zeppelin), or Manu Chao, shared the stage with Malian well known artists like Tinariwen, Salif Keita, Ali Farka Toure and more.

The festival turned to a mean to support development in the North, to promote Tuareg culture and values at a national and international scale, and to favour intercultural dialogue between people. Whereas international tourists came to discover Tuareg culture and make an original experience in the desert, Manny Ansar had to ensure safety for every participant. However, the larger the festival became, the more oppressive the threats were to him³. In 2012, the last edition of the festival was held a few weeks before the political outbreak in a very tensed atmosphere, punctuated by security alerts⁴. In 2013, when the Islamic armed groups took control of the area, music and festivities were totally prohibited. The festival could no longer exist in its sedentary shape in the North.

B. Using nomadism to promote peace on Malian roads

When Manny Ansar reaches the South with his relatives, he finds new support from other cultural promoters and institutional actors. Unable to return home, they decide to create a new artistic event, reflecting a political statement in favour of peace and unity in Mali: the Cultural Caravan for Peace.

As a way to keep the vocation of giving visibility to Northern cultures, but also to address the need to wisely promote a peaceful message to Southern communities, a nomadic style is applied to the event. Its itinerary drives every year, from 2014 to 2019, toward the North of

³ Interview with Manny Ansar, Bamako, Mali, 2017.

⁴ M. AMICO, *La Fabrique d'une « Musique Touarègue ». Un « son du désert » au prisme de la World Music*, Ph. D. thesis in Anthropology under the supervision of Prof. Denis Laborde, EHESS, Paris, 2013 ; S. Daniel, « A Tombouctou, un festival avec la star Bono fait oublier Al-Qaïda », published on January 14th, 2012, [online] <https://www.ladepeche.fr/article/2012/01/14/1260788-a-tombouctou-un-festival-avec-la-star-bono-fait-oublier-al-qaida.html>, accessed on January 4th, 2017.

the country, as a symbolic path and wish. Stops are planned in strategic cities, whether they can be the location of partner event (Festival on the Niger in Segou) or strategically situated (Bamako, Mopti, Niafunké) on a political approach.

II. Activism for Peace through Music

A. Bringing joy and hope to disparate people

The personal experience of the organization committee taught them about the emergency of carrying about thousands of people still stuck in the refugee camps. These people have lost everything, even sometimes relatives who count among injuries of a strict Chari'a implementation in the North. In 2014, the Caravan Cultural for Peace starts its annual trip by visiting these camps in Burkina Faso. Artists and promoters deliver a vibrant and supportive message on their common belief in a safe and pacified future, reminding that actions are made everyday to solve the political issue and help refugees to get better living-conditions⁵.

In the same way, the Caravan drives until remote villages⁶, where development and economical issues are everyday struggles, where cultural melting pot barely exists and ethnic confusion is quickly made. Further than advocating for Malian wealthy cultural diversity, the speeches explain the importance of education for children, solidarity and partnership between individuals and the virtue of leaving together.

B. Intercultural dialogue as the key for peace-making

Speeches are illustrated by performances given by famous artists and young talents, all representing the variety of ethnic groups of the country. Thanks to percussive shows, from traditional to modern styles of Music, they sensitize the public, always counting thousands of people, to the political message of the Caravan.

On the top of this eclectic program, the Caravan organization committee initiated the creation of a band composed of as much musicians as the number of regions in the country, each coming from one of these regions. The band was called "Malikanw", meaning "the Voices of Mali", standing for "le Mali Un et Indivisible" that is to say "A unified and indivisible Mali"⁷. They sing peace in different languages⁸, in order to be understood by any Malian citizen in the public. Sharing a common idea of fighting against the war, they use "their mouth as a bomb"⁹ to discredit armed attacks and violence perpetuated on civilians.

Nevertheless, in this preconceived musical project aiming at staging cultural diversity, tensions between musicians are frequent, and the artists explain backstage that they need to

⁵ Speech of Manny Ansar, Cultural Caravan for Peace, Mopti, Mali, 2015.

⁶ Sélingué (2014); Koutiala, San (2015); Diré, Bourem (2016).

⁷ National motto of the country

⁸ Bambara, Songhoy, Peul, Dogon, Tamashaq etc.

⁹ Interview with Malikanw, Samba Touré, Cultural Caravan for Peace, Segou, Mali, 2015.

overcome their difference to keep on playing together¹⁰. Musically speaking, they admit that a Malinké won't be able to play the proper guitar rhythm of Tuareg blues, and a Bobo will never rightly sing chores as expected in Wassulu chants; Malikanw and the Caravan can therefore be perceived as relevant representations of the Malian cultural context.

III. Doubts and scepticism on the evolution of the Caravan

A. A politicised project

Created in a highly tensed political situation, the Caravan Cultural for Peace initially took part to the context with a clear peaceful vocation. Guided by the need to survive, the promoters of the event reached public institutions to apply for support, communicating on their claim for peace and reconciliation. They converted international funding previously allocated to the Festival in the Desert toward the Cultural Caravan for Peace, maintaining their partnerships with organization such as: Embassy of France to Mali¹¹, Embassy of the Netherlands to Mali, Embassy of Norway to Mali, Doen Foundation, GIZ Germany etc.

Moreover fell the Caravan within the framework of ministerial policies to promote intercultural dialogue and reconciliation between North and South, rebels and government, nomadic and sedentary populations. Under the joint distinguished patronage of the Minister of Culture, Craftwork and Tourism, and the young Minister for Reconciliation, the Caravan was given an official recognition. President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and his spouse themselves were loyal supports and attended shows in Bamako. In 2015, few weeks after the Caravan drove from Bamako to Mopti, the Agreement of Algiers, defining the terms for new governance in Mali taking into account particularities of Azawad area, was signed between the opposite parties.

Speech of Ms Ndiaye Ramatoulaye Diallo, Minister of Culture, craftwork and tourism of Mali, Bamako, Cultural Caravan for Peace 2015 :

« Avant de saluer l'initiative, je l'encourage à grandir dans un contexte autre. Je l'encourage à dire pour évoquer ce qui devrait être notre préoccupation première : le développement. A travers le dynamisme et la créativité de ses initiateurs, cette Caravane de la Paix, tout en symbolisant la volonté de tout un peuple, s'impose comme un véritable espace de dialogue, d'échanges et d'expression artistique et culturelle, propice à la vulgarisation du message de la paix et de la réconciliation.

Mesdames et Messieurs, je note avec satisfaction et espoir la présence parmi nous de Madame la Première Dame du Mali. Cet accompagnement est loin d'être le fruit d'un hasard heureux. Il s'agit là de la conviction suivant laquelle la Culture du Mali doit être à pied d'œuvre pour réconcilier les fils et les filles de ce pays. »

This political enrolment of the event entailed much criticism from previous participants of the Festival in the desert, and a part of northern citizens, especially in Kidal area. Some famous artists choose to boycott the Caravan and denied the invitation to perform. Indeed, the Caravan being associated to national institutions appeared as mobilized by the government to

¹⁰ Interview with Malikanw, Petit Goro, Cultural Caravan for Peace, Segou, Mali, 2015.

¹¹ Interview with Yves Gueymard, former cultural counsellor for the Embassy of France to Mali, France, 2019.

reassert its authority on the northern region. The promoters and some of the artists performing during the Caravan, despite their Tuareg origin, were considered as political supporters, betraying their relatives who fought for the autonomy of Azawad.

B. Access denied: the Caravan stuck in the South

The closed partnerships with the government and the international community advocating for the unity of Mali made the Caravan an enemy of the Tuareg rebellion. Despite the good will of the organizers to favour dialogue and negotiation, their political statement warded them off from northern populations who still suffer from the lack of development on one hand, and violence from both jihadists still circulating in the area and the Malian army on the other hand.

Year after year, the Caravan strived to drive upper and upper in direction to the North. In 2016, as the itinerary should finish in Gao, the convoy was stopped at the doors of Timbuktu and demanded to drive back to the South¹². From then, the project has been consequently reduced in its official version: a few shows are still organized in the framework of other festivals in Mali (Segu) and abroad (Morocco, Belgium). Cut off from its roots and goals, the Caravan can no longer undertake its role.

Conclusion

Promoters of the Cultural Caravan for Peace live a very intricate situation: whereas they left Northern Mali to go to exile in the South and created a project inspired from northern traditions, they could never go back home to spread the peaceful message where people mostly need to hear it. While the Caravan has wisely been publicized in the years of the Algiers Agreement process, it nowadays surreptitiously produces shows on the occasion of other festivals, most of them abroad. As security has not been completely restored in Mali and the Sahelo-Saharan area, Peace remains hard to implement and its main actors look breathless.

We have observed that war situations can create hopeful initiatives to help with pacifying a territory when discordance and violence disrupt a country global governance and the national communities living-conditions. Founding on the cultural dimension of a conflict, civilians offer cultural projects as peace-making means. However, according to the evolution of the political context, making peace doesn't mean solving the conflict with satisfying solutions for the opposite parties. With or without their will, cultural promoters get related to funding institutions and partners, playing themselves a political role in the conflict.

More than being neutral mediators, they therefore become, in a way, stakeholders within the conflict. Then have they to overcome impediments and threats, to keep their project and faith alive.

¹² Interview with Khaira Arby, artist, Bamako, Mali, 2017.

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Short Abstract

The Cultural Caravan for Peace was created as a peacekeeping mean, promoting political reconciliation to face the aftermath of the Malian political crisis. This proposal aims at underlining the paradoxical position of cultural actors in a conflict situation, between neutrality and involvement.

Abstract

When the Malian crisis starts in 2012 with the military coup and the occupation of the North by rebel armed groups – mostly jihadists groups, more than 200 000 northern inhabitants urgently leave their home to flee oppression and violence. Founded on former claiming for independence from Touareg populations, the conflict strengthens a feeling of division within the whole country, between main geographical and ethnical areas.

As per a reaction to this situation, a group of artistic promoters decide to launch the Cultural Caravan for Peace. This peacekeeping mean aims at circulating a federating message, promoting intercultural dialogue and political reconciliation through shows to be given in different affected places in Mali and around. Every stop on the road appears as a quiet and joyful musical meeting point between different ethnic groups composing the public for one night, despite rampant surrounding threats and hazards. The peaceful word is widely spread thanks to the artist's fame and international medias. But the Caravan becomes institutionalized year by year. A large portion of the northern communities, including rebel groups, who are still favourable to obtain the autonomy of their Saharan region, doubt over its initial political neutrality.

Until today, the Cultural Caravan for Peace has surely impacted people's minds everywhere it passed by, sensitizing about mutual understanding. However, although cultural actors would rather stay on the side of the conflict, they finally get involved in actions reflecting their political opinion. This proposal aims at underlining the paradoxical position of cultural actors in a conflict situation.