


Morocco and Mauritania Field Visit

May 2014



آفاق AFAC

The Arab Fund For Arts and Culture
الصندوق العربي للثقافة والفنون – آفاق



AFAC organizes field visits to different parts of the Arab region to reach out to their various arts scenes, discover new talents, encourage collaborations and present the variety of AFAC

Introduction

programs that provide financial and professional support. For 2014, we are targeting the Maghreb for a 12-day visit covering Morocco and Mauritania between May 6th and 17th. This field visit took us to Casablanca, Marrakech and Agadir then onwards to Nouakchott and gave us a snapshot of a dynamic and exciting cultural scene at the far west of the Arab region.

Morocco

Today, Morocco appears as one of the most stable countries in the Arab region. It has a strong tourism trade, easy access, beautiful landscapes, rich history, tradition and culture. The population is nearly 48% below the age of 25 and features a distinctive ethnic diversity of Berbers, Arabs, sub-Saharan Africans and Spanish-Andalusians – all of whom are contributing to the national culture of Morocco.



May 5, Casablanca

Fatma Jellal is a long-time activist for independent cultural production here in Morocco. Her Galerie Fatma Jellal is a creative space where artists can meet and collaborate, not just exhibit. From Fatma's perspective, Moroccan artists are

Fatma Jellal Gallery in Casablanca

succeeding in creating strong connections and collaborations, even if public authorities are

seen as restrictive. Commenting on the public cultural policies in place, she says:

"We have donated more money than any other country to support The Louvre, yet no funds are given to local artists in Morocco." And regarding contemporary arts, she adds: "We have been waiting for the museum of contemporary arts to open for the past 10 years."

Taking matters into her own hands, Fatma opened her own gallery to exhibit works by Moroccan and European artists alike. She has also agreed to offer her space for an AFAC presentation the following day.



Open Taqafa is founded by Abdellah M. Hassak – a musician, producer and cultural manager who is also an AFAC Music grantee 2013 for his third album "Drop Bump". Together with illustrator Salah Malouly, he is also working on introducing the art of video games as a recognized discipline in contemporary

Meeting with the Artists Collective 'Open Taqafa'

cultural and artistic production. Ghassan Wael El-Karmouni, the third collective member, is a journalist

and cultural activist, who seeks to develop new tools of expression that address the needs of a new generation. Also present at the meeting was Hosni Almoukhli who is working on introducing Theater of the Oppressed in Casablanca by incorporating traditional local theatre known as 'the circle' (الحلقة), a ritual of street performance.

The members of this collective are the major initiators of "Summer Lab," now preparing its 3rd edition. Held every September, "Summer Lab" gathers multidisciplinary projects under a particular theme and pools in participants from different cities and countries. Their network is growing, including collaborations in Cairo, Dakar and even China. Commenting on the bureaucratic system of the public sector, which leaves most artists demotivated, the group emphasizes that whatever public funds are available to the arts, they are limited to classical disciplines, leaving very little to be shared with the innovative and the experimental. Nonetheless, independent artists are self-motivated, moving forward with their projects, even with meager support. "We don't have the luxury to wait for funds, we need to move on. There is a lot to do, and we have no time to lose!" they say. Their real challenge is finding spaces to develop their works. Rents are high and Morocco has strict squatting laws; the possibilities of transforming derelict spaces into 'quartier des arts' are limited.



Karima Zoubir is twice grantee of AFAC, first in 2009 for the development of her debut documentary film 'Camera/Woman,' and, more recently for her short fiction film Behind the Wall,

Meeting with AFAC Grantees

supported in 2012 as part of AFAC's Crossroads

program. She speaks very fondly of AFAC, especially the workshops and the technical support she received from the one-on-one meetings with the filmmaking advisors.

Rachid Biyi, an ADFP 2012 grantee, is being supported with his feature documentary "Bread and Angels," which is still a work-in-progress. He takes us through the old city of Casablanca, offering us a deeper look into the social history and the socio-economic changes taking place today.

Public Meeting at Gallery Fatma Jellal

At Fatma's gallery, the space is elegantly designed and the entry piece is a controversial installation of "barraq" facing the defying painting of Ahmed Bouanani, an artist who passed away 2 years ago leaving behind a treasure of films, manuscripts, and drawings. His daughter, Touda Bouanani, is currently working on collecting and digitizing all his manuscripts.

Other paintings and installations are in the gallery, touching on the omnipresent themes of identity and belonging, nationhood and citizenship, frustration and hope. Artists featured include Fatima Mazmouz, Mustapha Akrim, Raphaël Durans, Meryem El Alj, Mounir Fatmi, Faouzi Laataris, Guy Limone, Younès Rahmoun, Philippe Cazal and Nawal Dahbi Skalli.

Artists and cultural managers gather for our presentation and get an in-depth presentation of AFAC general grants and special programs. A Q&A session takes place after the presentation and we take the time to discuss the attendees' projects in more detail.





May 8, Casablanca

Espace Darja was established two years ago by dancer/choreographer Meryam Jazouli, a pioneer of contemporary dance in Morocco. Her institution won an AFAC RTR (Research, Training & Regional Events) grant in 2012

Meeting at Espace Darja – Meryam Jazouli and Nisrine Chiba

and offers residencies for dancers as well as all kinds of artists who are inspired by body, movement and dance.

Photographs of workshops line the walls and the entrance of her dance studio. It is spacious and well-lit; a cactus collection on the terrace adds to the relaxed environment for dancers, trainers, residents and guests. Darja is the only space for contemporary dancers in Morocco.

Meryam's experience of dance and body within the Moroccan context is optimistic. "Our women have such a beautiful relation to their bodies," she says. "The body is a unique characteristic, worthy of being explored as a tool of expression in its own right."

AFAC supported a Darja project called "Hay Rhapsody", a six-month dance workshop led by Zouheir Atbane. The participants performed in the "On Marche" festival initiated by Taoufiq Izzediou, the first contemporary dance festival in Morocco.



Hassan Darsi – Visual Artist

Visual artist Hassan Darsi is the founder of Source du Lion and his office is located in the same building as Espace Darja. He is a well-established artist and his works can be found in public parks in Casablanca and various other locations across the Arab region and in Europe. The signature inclusion of a shiny golden item in his artworks has become the signal for Darsi's presence in defending a particular social cause.

Darsi studied at the Higher School of Fine Arts and Visuals Communication in Belgium for 7 years, returning to Morocco in 1989 to launch Source du Lion in 1995. His work concentrates on public spaces and defending these spaces from privatized use. Examples of his work are the "Hermitage Park Project," "Le lion se meurt," "Le passage de la modernité," "Le square d'en bas," "Point zero."

Darsi and his team created a model of The Hermitage Park over 18 month, with the collaboration of dozens of artists and artisans. With no funds, space or means to actually show it in Morocco, Darsi halfheartedly agreed to sell the model to Centre Pompidou in Paris.



Meeting with Rita Aloui

Rita Aloui invited us to visit her "The Ultra Laboratory" artists' residency space. Aloui is a graduate of Parsons School of Design, New York, where she received a BFA in painting 1996 and is now a recognized figure of the contemporary Moroccan art scene. In January 2013, she created this alternative space as a residency that is open to artists worldwide, working on projects that relate to Morocco. Aloui is also preparing for the opening of her own exhibition *Objets Trouvés* (Found Objects). "There are no coincidences," she says, "every object you meet on your way is there to tell you a story."



Public meeting at Boultek – Mohamed Merhari and Hicham Bahou

The charismatic duo, Mohamed 'Momo' Merhari and Hicham Bahou, are the directors of the festival and the association L'Boulevard. They help us host our second public meeting, this time with focus on musicians. The meeting is held at Boultek, located in an industrial zone of Casablanca.

"L'Boulevard" is a non-profit organization that works for the promotion and development of urban culture and alternative arts and an initiative which Momo and Hicham successfully developed over more than a decade, building a strong networking of collaborators and volunteers. Their space, "Boultek," became a popular area for musicians, designers, performers, cineastes and cultural activists and includes soundproofed rooms for rehearsals and recordings, a main concert hall, and various rooms for small meetings, trainings, and workshops. L'Boulevard has gradually established itself as the platform of the underground Moroccan cultural scene and has earned the trust of many sponsors and volunteers over the years.

In 2014, L'Boulevard prepares its 15th edition of its international festival, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors and bringing together high caliber musicians from Morocco, UK, France, and the USA in rock, metal, hip-hop and fusion. We notice the absence of bands participating from the Mashrek: Unfortunately, the main reason is the high cost of travel as Morocco is far easier and cheaper to reach from Europe.





The Godfather

**Je vais vous faire une
offre
wmatgolch liya ilaa !**

rebel spirit productions présente «the godfather» brojoula dek chi dyal lah !
une parodie réalisé par rebel spirit & jilalcapoola
avec l'ma3ti brando & al batchino
said Imirsidiss . malika bianat .mustapha milano .o nass lghorba sec
nalma bent jeddi .samaka taarbi

May 9, Marrakech

Upon our arrival in Marrakech, we meet with our RTR 2012 grantee Abdel Aziz Taleb, co-director and co-founder of the Arab Media Lab (AML) and initiator of the Arab Digital Media festival.

Meeting with Abdel Aziz Taleb - Arab Media Lab

Abdellatif Benfaïdoul and Abdel Aziz Taleb are video

artists and filmmakers living between Marrakech and Europe. They started the Videokaravaan project in 2002, then went on to launch the AML in 2010. The objective was to help Arab artists gain more visibility in Europe and change the stereotyped Western perception of Arab arts and artists in general. According to Abdel Aziz, it is important for AML to strengthen the Media Art sector in the Arab region. The exchange between the Magherb and Machrek, as well as between the MENA region and Europe, is still very weak.

For funding, Abdel Aziz counts a lot on sponsorships and collaborations with local philanthropists such as Mr. Philippe Barraco, the director of a spatial observatory and museum adjacent to the "Atlas Golf Marrakech". Mr. Barraco has opened the doors of the museum /cultural center to the Arab Digital Media festival, offering his space to young trainees and artists during the festival days.



Public meeting and visit of the ESAV

Mr. Vincent Mellili, the director of the Ecole de Cinema and Visual Arts – ESAV - in Marrakech greets us at the school's entrance. The student body includes over 15 different nationalities, mainly from Africa. The school was opened in 2006 by the Susanna Biedermann Foundation and has been touted as the first school of advanced study in cinema in the region, endorsed by brand names such as Abderrahmane Sissako, Martin Scorsese and Abbas Kiarostami.

Walking through the halls, we start the visit at the Graphics department. The course is about the use of Graphics in social activism. Then we visit the Cinema department, which is impressively well supplied with 10 rooms for editing, 10 for sound recordings, studios for shooting and a large storage for material related to the cinema industry. The storage is also rented by professionals allowing a regular income to the school.

After an hours' tour, we are invited to the amphitheater to meet with the students and present them with AFAC programs, focusing on Cinema and Visual Arts. Not surprisingly, and as in every meeting we have held in North Africa, the issue of language comes up: French would have encouraged many more to apply to AFAC, which currently accept applications in Arabic and English only. We explain the burden of introducing a third language and take note of this important requirement.

At the outcome of the discussion with the students, half of which had already graduated, we realize that film production has not been very prolific here. A friend filmmaker states critically: "ESAV graduates have little knowledge of Moroccan cinema and are unable to adapt to the realities of independent production which requires a risk taking attitude and working with modest budgets".



Meeting with Taoufiq Izzinou

Our last meeting of the day is with Taoufiq Izzinou, founder of Anania Troupe in 2000 and initiator of the first contemporary Moroccan dance festival "On Marche," held annually in Marrakech. Since its inception in 2005, "On Marche" has been a wonderful venue for the Moroccan and the International contemporary dance scene, serving as a forum for dialogue between professionals and all kinds of audience.

Besides organizing and raising funds for the "On Marche" festival, Taoufiq also works on his own performances. "Rêve Illusion," his latest, talks about the revolution in relation to the individual. He is also preparing for his residency in Europe during which he will write his next work planned for 2015.

The lack of spaces is re-iterated as the main concern among the various artists we are meeting. Space is needed to develop work, train, produce and lastly to show. This concern is particularly exacerbated by the lack of public spaces and the expensive rental rates that are out of reach for small non-profit and independent structures.



May 10, Marrakech

It is impossible to talk about arts and culture in Marrakech today without mentioning Dar al-Ma'mûn. Dar al-Ma'mûn is not-for-profit cultural center and library that is founded by

Public meeting at Dar al-Ma'mûn

Omar Berrada and directed by Julien Amicel, is supported by

a small group of philanthropists and also through revenues from the adjacent "Fellah" boutique hotel. In less than four years, the founders have succeeded in becoming one of the most sought-after arts residencies in the region. In this short time, Dar al-Ma'mûn has hosted 38 artists in residence for medium- and long-term stays (3 to 5 months), 16 translators and authors, 13 visual arts events (both onsite and offsite) and 79 panelists in various symposia and conferences. Around 300 people benefit weekly from their educational program. At the last commission launched few months ago, more than 1,500 applications were submitted from around 110 countries, and only two projects are to be selected.

The foundation is located in a rural area, 14km from Marrakech, and offers villas and open spaces for art residencies and a multilingual library open to all visitors. While some criticize it as an elitist space, it proves itself to be accessible and engaged with its surrounded communities. "Young people from neighboring villages have found their way to the library and have been inspired to start writing their own essays and poems." Julien tells us.

During the AFAC presentation, we meet Nourredine Ezzaraf, a villager in his early twenties who shares his idea for a multidisciplinary project he would like to launch in his little village aiming to introduce street arts and popular expressions in an accessible way to his otherwise conservative community. We also meet Sara Ouhaddou, a young artist that had just finished her residency. Her project involves working with local artisans and traditional craftsmen on contemporary designs. Meanwhile, our Cinema 2010 grantee, Safaa Fathy, who had just arrived the day before to start her residency, tells us about her latest project combining cinema and poetry.



Unlike other Moroccan cities, Agadir is modern, strongly influenced by the Corbusier school, its white buildings stand out like a defiance to the traditional mud-red houses and green

Meeting Brahim El-Mazned

public squares elsewhere in the country.

This is because Agadir was completely rebuilt following a devastating earthquake in 1960. An estimated 15,000 were killed, 12,000 injured and 35,000 left homeless. On seeing the devastation of the city, King Mohammed V said "If Destiny has decided on the destruction of Agadir; its rebuilding depends on our Faith and Will."

Our host is Brahim El Mazned, the artistic director of the Timitar Festival of World Music and most recently elected member of the Board of EFWMF (European Forum of Worldwide Music Festivals), the largest network of music festivals in the world. Brahim is also one of AFAC's Music jurors from 2013 and a guest speaker at a public meeting hosted by AFAC at Metro al Madina to create collaborations between independent musicians, sound engineers and producers.

Brahim is launching the first year of his long-in-the-making project "Visa for Music," set to take place in November in Rabat. Visa For Music (VFM) is the first professional market of Africa and Middle East music. The project aims to be sharing a platform that conserves and promotes the music sectors of African and Middle Eastern countries. It is an essential meeting place for professionals of the whole music industry.

Just before holding our public meeting planned this afternoon, we head for a meeting with the mayor of Agadir – Mr. Tareq Kabbage, in the presence of the director of the cultural

Meeting with the Mayor of Agadir

department of the city and Brahim Al Mazned.

Mr Kabbage holds that the municipality of Agadir is doing its best to develop the cultural scene of the city. Its strategy is to do so by creating "Maisons des Quartiers"- youth centers - in the suburbs of Agadir. The Mayor adds that the government has the money but not the needed competence to develop the city further. "New measures of recruitment were imposed, but the government forgot to communicate and define these measures. This has made the recruitment of the right persons for the jobs needed almost impossible."

We ask him about the closed-down cinemas and the absence of theatres, but he refuses to consider these problematic. According to the Mayor, the old cinemas will be 'saved' as heritage and there is no need for theatres in Agadir. The Mayor's priority is clearly the youth centers in the suburbs. At this point, Brahim laments the lack of appreciation among officials for the purely creative aspect of the cultural sector. "We absolutely have to make a difference between social development and cultural, we need both equally and cannot limit actions to only social work."

On asking some of the cultural activists we are meeting about the role of the 'youth centers,' many consider it a way to keep young local population far from the center in order to avoid 'uncontrolled art' in the touristic streets of the city. "There is Culture for the Elite and Culture for the People," we are told, "and the politicians prefer to maintain this situation".



Public meeting at Jazzaweya – Agadir

We then move to Jazzaweyah, an underground space created by gnaoua musician Raouf. Over 70 people gather around to attend our talk in this make-shift living-room, jamming & concert space. Among the bustling artists, actors, cultural managers and musicians included are the Director of the Agadir Theatre, the Director of the Agadir Film Festival, local band Ribab Fusion and prominent musician Mehdi Nassouli, just to name a few.



In our last day in Agadir, just before leaving the charming city, we have our last meeting with one of the cultural associations supported by the Region: "Souss Massa Draa Culture" is the

Souss Massa Draa Culture in Agadir then back to Casablanca

result of a study that has been done by the Region to assess the cultural needs in the city and its suburbs.

We are received by Mr. Hassan Benhalima, the director of the association, who offers us a global idea on their field of action and their support of cultural institutions and collectives. Thirty to fifty projects are supported every year after selection by a jurors committee. After exchanging and presenting AFAC in our turn as regional grant-makers and supporters for the arts and culture, we say our farewells, leaving the offices and Agadir to take the road for Casablanca.

Joining us on the car ride back to Casa are Brahim Al-Mazned and Younes Al-Qassimi, a young engineer who started an initiative with his friends to develop marketing and communication arts via social media tools to promote arts and culture. Their attractive search engine, EV, covers all cultural events taking place across the country. Amid our discussions about Morocco today and its changing cultural field, the great geographic landscape also impresses itself as an obvious inspiration.

Arriving to Casablanca, Brahim heads off to give his lecture on "The Future of Moroccan Music" at Boultek, and we go to town to meet Ali Essafi; an accomplished documentary filmmaker and one of AFAC's film programs advisors and Malika Zarra, singer, composer and music producer, ending the evening in their insightful company.



Mauritania

Mauritania is at the furthest West of the African continent, with a mixed population of Berbers and Arabs (Moors), Wolof, Soninke, and Pulaar. The Arab invaders from medieval times were led by the Beni Hassan tribe whose descendants today make up the upper stratum of Moorish society.

Imperial France gradually absorbed the territories of present-day Mauritania starting in the late 19th century. During the colonial period, 90% of the population remained nomadic. As the country gained independence in 1960, the capital city Nouakchott was founded at the site of a small colonial village, the Ksar, on the Atlantic coast.

After gaining independence, larger numbers of indigenous Sub-Saharan African peoples (Haalpulaar, Soninke, and Wolof) entered Mauritania, moving into the area north of the Senegal River. New conflicts arose between the southern populations and Moors. Between these two groups stand the Haratin, a very large population of Arabized slaves of sub-Saharan African origins who live within Moorish society and are integrated into a low-caste social position.

We arrive to Nouakchott at midnight and find Saleck Najem waiting for us at the exit of the small airport. He wears the attractive traditional Darra'a, like the hundreds of men and women that surround.

Saleck is an activist in both the cultural and the socio-political sense. His blog attracts many followers and includes articles like "What Does it Mean to be Free?" "Who Will I Vote For?" "To be a Hartani (a descendant of slaves) Today," and "To Be a Woman in Mauritania." His references range from al-Mutannabi to Marx and, while he may provoke many, his articles have been read by more than 70 thousand people.

Saleck, who works at the German delegation in Nouakchott, is also an essential member of the Asalam Alekoum Festival and is engaged in many other collectives and associations, such as the "Maison des Cineastes." He takes us to our small hotel, Jeloua; a peaceful oasis amidst the city, frequented by foreigners and locals alike.

Nouakchott has an extremely young population. More than half, at 67%, are under the age of 25. Mauritania's ethnic and linguistic diversity makes it hard to image how the country actually functions. Progressively, as we meet with the different artists and cultural activists in the fields, we get a better understanding of the whole scene.





May 15, Nouakchott

On our first day in Nouakchott, we meet with Abderrahmane Salem, filmmaker and founder of "La Maison des Cinéastes," one of the most active cultural movements of the country. He

Filmmakers and Musicians

offers us our first insights into the country's social, cultural

and political situation. According to Abderrahmane, there are many contradictions in Mauritania, especially on the political level. "The rules are excellent, their application is a real disaster," he explains.

The history of slavery in Mauritania is still very present and has strong ramifications on the current political and social discussions, even though the government works on keeping the subject taboo in an effort to avoid trouble. Artists are almost the only ones who dare to mention the subject and speak frankly about the history of slavery and its sad impact on the society. "We are not afraid to bring up the subject and organize discussions and raise awareness. We are creating networks and collaborations between artists from different communities across Mauritania and we are careful in choosing the locations of where we work and meet."



Monza – Asalam Alekoun Festival

The French Institute is very actively involved in the cultural activities of Nouakchott. Located in the center of the city, its doors are open to artists for exhibitions, meetings and live concerts, in addition to offering financial support and sponsorships cultural events. The Assalam Alekoun Festival, initiated by the young hip hop star of Mauritania, Monza, is managed by Marion Mourre in collaboration with Sadeck as one of the main organizers.

This day is the start of the 'tremplin', a series of competitive concerts taking place every Thursday for one month to filter out the best hip hop band to enter the finals. It is part of the Assalam Alekoun Festival pre-activity which Monza prioritizes as an opportunity to train musicians to perform live rather than rely on playback.

Monza himself has a remarkable story to share. In 2007, he created Zaza Production initially as a label to launch his own albums, but it is now the official platform for the Asalam Alekoun Festival and its related workshops. This leap in vision started a few years ago, he tells us, when he released his first album. His talents were recognized by the French institute and they offered a grant for a residency in France to launch his career and do a professional recording of his album. However, instead of accepting the offer, Monza re-negotiated the grant to be used as a seed fund for a festival here in his home town. It would be the first music festival ever held in Mauritania. "I remember I had a moment of dilemma; shall I take the grant and go to France and leave all my hopes of a better cultural scene in Mauritania? I knew I couldn't feel happy about that... I want to develop the musical scene for my whole country, not just my individual career," he says.

Monza thinks the best way to help artists is by providing spaces. Public service employees, however, are not trained to think about cultural needs and so, there are no spaces made available. As we leave the court of the French Institute, it is full of young people enjoying, encouraging and dancing on the beats of the hip hop bands performing.



May 16, Nouakchott

Ciré Camara is, first and foremost, a storyteller. After spending a few years in France, he came back home to develop storytelling in Nouakchott and his father was happy

Espace Ciré Camara

to support his decision, offering the family house

as a space to create the center. Remarkably, this is the only independent cultural space in Mauritania.

Camara's father finds that storytelling is a perfect tool to transmit values such as justice and equality. The activities they host are addressed to children and most of the ones in their neighborhood come from the black "harratin" communities. The themes they explore are about exclusion and discrimination.

Camara has also created, with the support of American funds, a small library corner where kids can come and read. "At the beginning, I was worried that the kids wouldn't bring back the books," he said, "but strangely, they all did." Camara also programs performances, films screenings and concerts, mainly during Ramadan "where kids do nothing besides watching TV".



Meeting with Cultural managers – Maison des Jeunes

We head to the Maison de Jeunes where we plan to meet with the leading cultural actors in the city. In attendance are: Bios Diallo – “Traverse Mauritanides de Literature” Festival in its 5th edition - a traveling band of writers and poets that trek annually across the Mauritania desert, bringing international authors to meet with local writers and lovers of literature; Mohamed Ali Bilal who is creating the “Les Nuits d’El Medih” Festival, the Nights of Praise, a chanting tradition that calls on the virtues of the Prophet Muhammad as deliverance from the toils of slavery; Salem Dendou the president of the filmmakers union and one of the main actors in Sissako’s movie, Timbuktu the latest Mauritanian film presented recently at the Cannes Film Festival; Ahmad Habibi, consultant at UNESCO and member of Association Theatre together with Taki Abdelhaye and Baba Mindi, Aziz Wane member of Nomad Theatre, Ahmed Salem, journalist, Maimouna Salek from “Biodiveristé” association, and Mohamed Idoumou from “Maison des Cinéastes.”

Each attendee presents his project and we ask them each about their contexts. The explanation is often related to the continual coups d’états that destroyed the infrastructure of the country. The only period that Mauritania experienced a real change was under the last elected government back in the 80’s. The country had a real period of prosperity, that ended as soon as the new coup d’état happened and plunged the country again into a stagnant status quo.

This meeting confirms the cultural scene in Mauritania to be completely self-driven. Every single initiative presented to us is initially an individual initiative that managed to gather people around it and to grow and became a real effective action. The artists and cultural practitioners here are not waiting for the government to act. “The real cultural action in the country is completely independent and non-governmental,” they say.



Malouma – The Rebel Diva of the Desert

Meeting renowned Mauritanian Blues Diva, Malouma, is our next destination. Besides being a charming vocalist and traditional musician, a militant singer and a spokeswoman for women's rights, Malouma Meidah even succeeded in becoming a senator in parliament in 2007. Her straightforward opinions about freedom, injustice and inequalities had her initially blacklisted by the government and she was forbidden to sing or communicate any public opinion for many years. In 2003, friends and fans gathered to protest the government-imposed censorship on her and to have her designated as the Singer of the People (Mutribat al-Shaab). Some 10,000 people demonstrated that year, and ended up taking over the Mauritanian national television to call for Malouma's freedom of expression. Immediately after this event, the President offered a public apology to the singer and she was invited to resume sharing her voice and her music in the public sphere.

Malouma's villa is part home and part office. The part that is allocated to the office is full of pictures of her ancestors in traditional Moorish dress and carrying their traditional musical instruments, like the "ardin." Her father, Moktar Ould Meidah, was a master of traditional music. He taught her all the secrets of the instruments and the arts of words and poetry. In Mauritania, being a singer or a musician is a family heritage and Malouma comes from a large family of "iggawen" (the Moorish word for griots, singers of oral history)

She tells us with pride about her childhood and remembers fondly listening to the voices of the two Egyptian icons Oum Kalthum and Abdelhalim Hafez as well as the famous Lebanese singer Feyrouz. During her most recent visit to Beirut for a TV interview, she tried hard to make contact with Feyrouz, but was told it would be impossible. "That same evening, and to my huge surprise," she recalls with shining eyes and pulls out a paper from her purse, "I find this message from Feyrouz at the hotel reception telling me to call her back! We chatted on the phone for a long time, and I thought I suddenly had wings and I could fly back to my childhood when I used to hear her songs and dream of becoming one day like her."

Malouma is outspoken in her music and is in a position to transform the Mauritanian music scene particularly because she is a master of it. Although she attracts criticism for not upholding tradition, her concern is to protect Mauritania's rich musical heritage from extinction by mixing the traditional with the new. She is currently trying to create a school for music, though it would be breaking the rules of music being passed on, strictly and honorably, through family ties only. She dreams of educating the emerging musicians in the traditional instruments and rhythms before they are obsolete, while adapting them to the taste of the new generations and new genre of music. In her last album, "Knou", the diva collaborated with a wide array of musicians and singers from various styles, showing versatility in tradition as she never let down her "ardin", her family heirloom.

The "Maison des Cinéastes," was founded in 2006 under the patronage of Abderrahmane Sissako, the spiritual father of cinema in Mauritania; It was launched during the annual

Maison des Cinéastes

National Film Week Festival, which today exists as a

Short Film Festival, and has been led by its main animator, Abderrahmane Salem, until recently. Abdelrrahmane has offered his place as director to the young and promising Mohamed Idoumou not long ago, in a modest gesture reflecting the collective mode of conduct at the Maison and its aim to bring in new energy and new blood.

The MdC is run by an active group of filmmakers who aim to provide professional training and support to emerging filmmakers in Mauritania. "A whole education needs to be done in this country, where there are no film schools and not even a cinema!" they claim. They also offer script writing, editing, and other technical workshops.

Progressively, and due to the real need on the ground to address important issues in Mauritanian society - such as slavery, injustice, segregation and exclusions - the MdC designed several programs that marry filmmaking with social concerns. ABCinema is one of the first programs that introduces the world and industry of cinema to a larger audience. A more sophisticated and professional platform was designed to follow the progression of the young filmmakers who had gone through the introductory phases. Their latest program, "Two without Complex," addresses deep social concerns like racism. "We feel that we have the responsibility to work on multi-ethnic issues because if we all stay in denial, we will reach a very sad end."

Their main need is infrastructure; spaces for the training and also for screening. Abderrahmane takes us on a visit to an old cinema, to prove his point. It is located between two ethnically divided areas, that of the "Harratin" and the "Beidane." The old cinema, like many others in Nouakchott, is closed.

The MdC are now in negotiations with the owner to rent the place and renovate it for public use. Abderrahmane is already imagining the projections and the movies he will show. "When I look at this old abandoned cinema my heart is broken, but I know that what we are doing will definitely bring happiness to the Mauritanian audience." According to him, providing spaces is crucial for the predominantly young Mauritanian population, in order to save young men from delinquency.



Association Tourathona

For our last meeting in Nouakchott, we are received by Ahmad Zeidan, known as the "Living Mauritanian Heritage." He greets us with the sweetest smile of a wise old man, his wrinkled face etched with the music and songs of Mauritania. When he speaks, he looks in the eyes of everyone in the room, showing the same deep respect to the old and the young alike. He asks us solemnly, "Isn't it sad to have so much musical and cultural diversity in a country but not a single written note or document about them?"

His son, Ahmed Al Kabir Ahmed Zeidan, is founder of the Tourathona Association. The reason of founding this association and website is to create and maintain an accessible platform and an archive of information about all old and current Mauritanian singers. "The government does not see the necessity of documenting any of this history," he says. "They are counting on people like my father to transmit the traditions and keep it alive. But the people of that generation are disappearing and it is urgent to start recording and archiving all what they know before it is too late." Determination is present in father and son alike. "If we don't respect our past, we can never build a better future," he says.

They show us their website and we discover how little, in fact, we know. Huge number of singers and musicians run by, most of whom we had never heard of. The old man, watching us with a proud smile, says "This heritage belongs to the people. We have a whole civilization to share, and no one, absolutely no one, has the ownership on it!" His voice is clear and resolute. We shake hands, with humble words of encouragement, and take our leave.



