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A NOMADIC FIGHT AGAINST IMMOBILITY: THE TUAREG IN THE MODERN STATE

Hélène Claudot-Hawad

... the woven fabric has been completely cut up,
piece by piece, strand by strand.

(Ag Elaglag 1996, p. 160)

A tent in tatters, a mutilated body, torn cloth... These images recur like leitmotifs in Tuareg speech to express the situation of their country or society in the modern political order.¹ The words used evoke the violence of an action that fragments, amputates, diminishes. They indicate the transition from an entity perceived as an ordered and meaningful structure — be it described in terms of architecture, the human body or textiles — into one of disintegration that prevents the fulfillment of its function. Thus the tent can no longer protect, nor the body move, nor the fabric cover. Rebuilding, soldering, riveting, re-stitching are the repairs envisaged to try to remedy the situation. Without exception, these attempts consist in the reattachment of separated parts. In this context, the painful metamorphosis of the country is clearly evoked as a rupture from which stems a feeling of insecurity, menace and death.

How can this perception be interpreted and what reality does it reflect? What can be understood from the haunting plea for “the mending of the deserts”

¹ See for example the accounts given by Tuareg published in Claudot-Hawad and Hawad 1996.

which is expressed in Tuareg interviews, manifestos, poetry and song?

This article is based on anthropological field work carried out in the Tuareg regions of Arabenda on the loop of the river Niger on the Mali side, of Aïr (Ayr) on the Niger side and in the refugee camps in Burkina Faso between 1989 and 2000, a decade marked by the armed Tuareg uprising in Niger and Mali. An analysis will be made of the manner in which the Tuareg today view their nomadism and their future in a profoundly changing ecological, political, economic, social and cultural environment. Nomadism will be studied here not only as an economic spatial practice, but also as a philosophy of movement.

On the Far Boundaries of the States

The Tuareg live in the central Sahara and on its Sahelian fringes. Their language belongs to the large linguistic family of Berber (called *tamazight* in the Maghreb). They refer to themselves in various local forms: *Imajaghen*, *Imuhagh*, *Imushagh*, or *Kel tamashaq* in the West. Their numbers are estimated by the Tuareg themselves at more than 3 million, and at 1.5 million by official agencies. The variation in these figures—which do not correspond to any reliable census—is dependent on the political stake represented by ethnic demography in the present-day African states.

The Tuareg are attached today to five different countries created in the 1960s out of the “decolonization” process: Libya, Algeria, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta). These recent political groupings, built on the Western model of the nation-state, have produced a new type of territoriality. In each of these states, the desert zones frequented by the nomads are situated on the periphery. All of them are located hundreds if not thousands of miles from the new centers of power, on the very furthest boundaries from the modern capitals, whether Mediterranean like Tripoli and Algiers, or Sahelian like Bamako, Niamey and Ouagadougou. This is why in the Sahara the modern states are viewed as machines for turning out minorities who are relegated to the margins of the new centralities which are settled and urban, and in other respects separated from their ancient poles of attraction.

A first observation can be made: in less than five decades, there has been a dramatic decrease in the nomadic way of life. It has virtually disappeared in Algeria and Libya, where a systematic settling policy was pursued in the 1980s and 1990s. It is in rapid deterioration and steep decline in the Sahelian states, where once, in the 1960s, the nomads were the most numerous and wealthy group of the Tuareg and of the Saharan peoples in general. This

decline is directly related to the grave crises which have hit these regions: some, often evoked as natural and unavoidable events, are climatic and ecological (the droughts of 1974 and 1984), but are also intrinsically bound up with other political and military, as well as social and economic, factors. The interplay of these elements threatens the peoples of the desert, and in particular the nomads. Survival has become more and more uncertain, risky and hazardous in these arid spaces which are gradually losing their inhabitants.

The Body of the World

The Tuareg represent themselves as a social body which, before the establishment of colonial rule at the beginning of the 19th century, was made up of four large political poles with complex links between them: the Ajjer in the north-east, the Ahaggar in the north-West, the Air in the South-east and the Tademekkat in the South-West, to which was added a fifth group, still at a formative stage at that time, the Azawagh, also called the Tagaraygarayt, which means the “middle,” or the “intermediary” in a political rather than a geographic sense.

The organization of the whole is symbolically likened to the frame of a tent or to the anatomy of the human body. This parallel is based on several principles. On the one hand, it expresses an organic vision of society, perceived as a structure that articulates differing but complementary elements. On the other hand, it emphasizes the protective function of the structure, either because it provides a shelter like that given by the roof of the tent, or because it allows the body to move and to be autonomous. The third principle at work is the dynamic quality attributed to each object, each element, each being, perceived as being in motion on a universal cyclical journey, like that of the universe itself. Thus everything advances and transforms; the body extends its limbs and the tent its roof, increasing the limits of their range. More than the parts making up the whole, constantly changing, this vision emphasizes the links which unify them: this explains the importance in the construct of the role of mediator, represented in pre-colonial institutions by various figures of society (Claudot-Hawad 1996a)—the chief-arbiter, the priest, the freed slave...—or the function of meeting-places and junctions placed at the intersections of territories (roads, tracks, wells, markets, towns...).

This structure is applied to every social and territorial formation, however large it may be. The assumed sameness of nature between society, territory, the home and the body allows the passing from one metaphorical register to

another. Political vocabulary demonstrates the semantic transfers operating in these domains (Claudot-Hawad 1990b): thus political and social entities are designated by names borrowed from human anatomy (“wrist,” “thigh,” “hips,” “chest”...). In the same way the proper names of numerous confederations of tribes belong to the vocabulary of the tent and its interior spaces, to which correspond also the various parts of the territory.

The “embodiment” of the surrounding world, inculcated and assimilated from earliest childhood, functions as a tool to interpret different realities and as a way of building the self and one’s relationships with others.

This imaginary body, projected into multiple spheres—the human body, the social body, the territorial body...—has one particularity: it is imagined as being in motion. This is why the parts, which permit movement, appear so essential. Their stiffening or dysfunction makes the body vulnerable.

The double process of corporeity and incorporation of the world certainly marks perceptions and sensibilities as much as the practices and strategies of the social actors. Relationships with territory, nature and space are imbued with the logic of the system.

Seen in this light, nomadism is not only an itinerant way of life, associated with a particular economic activity, pastoralism, which is an extensive management of resources adapted to the arid environment. It would appear also to represent a philosophy, a manner of interpreting reality and acting upon it. It contains an underlying model of society founded on the notion that each entity has a composite character, just as the body is formed of different organs; that the tension between the separate but equal elements is necessary to stimulate the system and render it dynamic; and lastly, that the relationships between the parts must be constantly negotiated and rebalanced to ensure harmonious interconnections.

This position implies a range of knowledge and practices implemented to preserve in one way or another the proper “working” of the world, that is both its continuity and its growth. Such a position is based on the capacity to forge and manage lasting relationships between distinct and ever-changing elements.

The Art of Being a Nomad

As part of transmitted knowledge, Tuareg education stresses those skills that

permit mobility, communication and adaptability to new situations.² The position taken in the actual transmission of knowledge demonstrates a clear choice of plurality and syncretism over unicity and exclusivity. Excellence in Tuareg child-raising has to be constructed in the same way as does a prestigious genealogical position: being of “good birth” in this context actually means the accumulation of parental links to different lineages (Walentowitz 2003), rather than to a single one. Likewise, learning is less an acquisition of a “tradition” in the orthodox sense than the search for openings to the outside. The pursuit of knowledge, illustrated in many individual experiences—see, for example, Kawsan ag Kedda (Claudot-Hawad 1990b; 1993a; 1998), Mohamed Ali ag Attaher Insar (1990; 1996), Hawad (1990; 1998)—is nurtured with the greatest possible diversity and seeks always to avoid narrowness. It deliberately draws from multiple sources, with the proviso, however, that external knowledge is only of benefit when it is sorted and contained (*eseluji*), to be recycled into an original synthesis obtained through knowledge learned from within the society. This open but critical attitude towards knowledge shows itself in many ways.

For example, a young Tuareg woman from a religiously well-educated background explains the reasons for her dual education at the *medersa* (Muslim school in Arabic language) and also in French school during the 1980s by the fact that her father “thought that knowledge is different from religion. For him, knowledge is to be found *in every culture* and has to be sought everywhere” (Welet Halatine 1998, p. 30). In a similar way, the paths to wisdom or initiation for many Tuareg are founded on a voluntary eclecticism, which opens on multi-faceted horizons of thought.

One can understand in this context the high value given to the *tikruru*, a person of mixed culture who, because of his background, masters the standards of several worlds while submitting to the logic of none. Nomad education takes care to give children the means of establishing links with the outside world and to be part of the widest possible social networks. One of the tests given to the children as they reach the age of seven, for instance, is to identify precisely the social origins, group membership and status of a visitor (Hawad 1998). The power of memory is trained so that the visitor, if he is Tuareg, can not only be placed within a political group and a specific

² These skills comply with the double demand which animates all life—to protect oneself while at the same time advancing—a process expressed in Tuareg in various ways: building a house and “clearing” the void, building a shelter and opening a path, breaking then resuming a journey.

region, but also his precise genealogical position determined within a lineage whose interconnections must be known. It is an amazing experience for an outsider present at this kind of virtuoso performance to hear an educated person reeling off the ancestors and relatives of someone he has never met before. The ability to bring rapidly to mind somebody's family circle—whatever his original background or its geographical distance—marks out the social importance of the individual who manages the task with ease.

Similarly, the training received allows the memorization in the smallest detail of a large number of situations and facts. This power of memory can lead, for example, to the recognition of someone met ten years previously for only a few minutes on a desert track in a specific geographic location and in a context which will be remembered and described minutely.

Child-raising among the Tuareg demonstrates just how much value is placed on the acquisition of various forms of knowledge in different socio-cultural fields. Until the 1970s, for instance, boys from noble backgrounds in Aïr spent one or two years staying with their parents' allies or customers, learning new languages and experiencing other life-styles. For this reason, the men—whose role it is to maintain links with the outside—are at least bilingual, speaking perfect Hausa as well as their mother-tongue (*tamajaght*), and also, depending on their individual situation, Arabic, Fulfulde (Peul), Teda (Toubou), Kanuri, without counting those languages like Persian, Aramaic and Hebrew which in scholarly Sufi circles are regularly transmitted in their written forms.

The training in traveling and intercultural communication is one of the originalities of nomadic instruction (Claudot-Hawad 2002, pp. 22-25). It permits the weaving of links that “build the shelter,” in every sense of that term. The notion of the protective framework—whether constructed by Man's material or by his spiritual journey—is a strong structuring force for relationships with society, with kinship and of course with territory.

The “Joints” of the Land

“*AmaDal amadal*,” says a Tuareg proverb, meaning “the land is what protects,” what “preserves,” what “mothers.” Once out of its protective and nurturing womb, the children of the earth live by its “sweat” and by all the secretions of its body. But the earth, like an ancient ancestor, must be respected and tended. Care must be taken to keep it covered, to protect its limbs, its vital organs, its flesh and bones, that it will continue to bring forth and carry life on its back. This is why human beings cannot cut or trample the

growing grass, nor pick unripe fruit, nor eat raw meat, nor use green wood, nor waste water... In short, if men are not to damage the earth by inflicting wounds upon it, it is better not to remain for too long in one place, but to give it up to the void which will then regenerate the spot. The nomads “advance on the back of the land” negotiating and sharing each stage with the desert. The only kindly, friendly land is that which has been crossed, known, tamed; land which has been shaped by nomadic paths and which gives order to the unceasing negotiations between the self and the desert or any different facet of otherness; the earth upon which humans have set up their markers. Thus “without a walking man there is no land, and without land there is no man.”

This proposition leads on to a well-thought out economic use of the soil, managed and organized to optimize the exploitation and regeneration of resources. It also corresponds to the social, symbolic and psychological practices of the territory with which the people identify according to their social group.

In concrete terms, each social unit, from the smallest (the camp) to the largest (society as a whole), is associated with a territory, which is itself included in other, vaster territories. Within this territory every unit exercises rights of use, which are preferential though not exclusive. These prerogatives are determined in relation to movements in space, that is to say to regular paths, where the exact course of each remains flexible according to climatic or political conditions.

The resources in question are essentially the grazing lands, the natural and man-made water-holes (springs, pools, drainage basins, lakes, wells), the game, the food and the wood gathered. In the Tuareg system, these goods cannot be appropriated by a single person. The control of them is established at different levels of the community, represented in the past by chief-arbiters who took on the responsibility of managing the territory among the neighboring groups and wider authorities. Within this system of nested territorial spaces, each space, no matter how small, plays its part in the larger picture, as one element of the whole.

The course of nomadic paths represents the establishment of contact and dialogue between the two faces of the world, deemed to be mutually indispensable, as opposite as they are complementary. These are wilderness and domestic space, the desert and the tent, the unknown and the known, otherness and identity, others and the self.... Similarly, the frontier routes have a fundamental interfacial role, places where relationships can be forged which may transform potential enemies into partners. This way of looking at

the limits, viewing them as reversible (as places of friction or of contact), fits into a management of space that is open to the exterior, that is able to spread horizontally like a “rhizome,” to use Deleuze and Guattari’s image (1980), gathering other members to the existing body without changing the overall structure. For a nomad the frontier is thus the ideal place for recruiting new partners and for going beyond the known to reach a wider social and territorial network that both includes and absorbs what goes before.

This concept—whether it is taken in an abstract or a literal sense, whether it is apparent as a form of philosophy, superstition, a feeling or as a practice—implies as a necessary condition of life the constant creation of alter egos by the conversion of the stranger into the client or the relative. Without the weaving of relationships between the same and the different, no stable existence would appear possible.

Stepping over the Frontier

To be a nomad in the central Sahara thus signifies the practice of a mobility which not only provides economic advantages and the maintenance of ecological resources, but which also creates social and symbolic ties, a displacement linked to highly positive values. Nomadism, perceived as the opposite of vagrancy, implies organized and regulated journeys that, at each displacement, “build” and reshape the political and territorial body, in the image of that of the universe. In this system, moreover, the social importance of an individual or group can be measured in terms of the extent of mobility and the stages covered. Traveling over far-flung lands, establishing ties with neighboring or outside worlds, means in fact being capable of mobilizing a vast social network and thus being powerful. The converse, being confined to a restricted area, is more often seen as proof of mediocrity in contacts and allies, a lack of skill (political, diplomatic, economic, linguistic, cultural) in creating links with anything other than the nearest social spaces. That is why, in this scheme of things, the term “native” is generally only applied to the “poor,” the less fortunate, the dependent. The elite, in contrast, define themselves as necessarily coming from a prestigious “other place,” a well-known center of communications where at any given moment extremely important commercial, socio-political and cultural streams converge. The myths relating to the origins of Tuareg groups show signs of how they have been reworked with respect to the decline, the abandonment or the emergence of these magnetic places.

This organization therefore enhances the composite and flexible nature of the social fabric and the essential role played by interfaces and connections,

whether they are embodied in mediatory characters or in crossroads. The nomadic frontier is not seen as a watertight barrier, forbidding foreigners access to resources or right of passage (it should be remembered that land rights are preferential, but not exclusive). It is quite the opposite: a line, negotiable and fluid, marking a meeting-point. Indeed on nomadic territorial borders wells, markets, roads, sacred places and urban settlements are set up, and in the past these formed part of a very widespread system. In this context, the ability to “step over the frontier”—the territorial frontier, but equally the social, cultural or linguistic frontier—is viewed as a source of self-enhancement, of emancipation and social improvement. The image reflects the social mobility among the Tuareg, and those procedures, which permit, within varying temporal parameters (one or several generations), the passage from one social category to another (Claudot-Hawad 2000).

An Entirely New Concept: The Modern Frontier

The nomads’ conception of a frontier can be put into practice only by default in the modern political context, which propounds notions of identity based on unicity, permanence and exclusivity. The introduction of the model of autonomy and unicity of identity, veering sometimes towards that of “purity,” renders possible the idea of the “equality” of individuals or groups. But such a system leaves no room for other ways of apprehending identities and memberships in their composite, plural, developing and fluid aspect, founded on a relationship of complementarity and on the inclusion of differences³ rather than on mutual opposition and exclusion.

State boundaries have by definition a fixed, immovable and intangible line, and are purposefully made not to be transgressed. They separate what are considered to be mutually opposing entities. Whether they are called “states,” “nations,” “ethnic groups,” “races” or “classes”... these social constructs of modern political thought resemble each other in that their boundaries are by definition non-negotiable. Viewed from this angle, taking the initiative to cross the boundary generally equates to putting oneself in danger, to becoming an outlaw, or, in social terms, to entering the strange realms of “hybridity.”⁴

In the Sahara, the most obvious and concrete manifestation of the modern

³ For an explanation of this reasoning see Dumont 1983.

⁴ See, for example, the interesting observations on this subject by Young 1996.

state is the frontier. The five frontiers that divide those vast areas of desert and steppe once controlled by the Tuareg are the direct issue of the history of colonial penetration. Their outlines were mapped out according to the advances of the armies sent to conquer the Sahara at the end of the 19th century: at the center, the French troops from Algiers and Dakar; to the east the Ottoman, and then the Italian, troops; to the South, the British. Entrenched in the middle of the desert, these rival armies preset by their positions the shape of the state territories. At first they produced colonial estates administered in a particular way, though fitting into the overall logic of their larger empires. Later they were used to define quite distinct political, legal and spatial entities. The disproportionately large part of the Sahara annexed to Algeria is linked to the discovery of hydro- carbons in the Sahara in 1954, a stroke of good fortune that the French State was determined to keep to its own advantage.

The Saharan frontiers cover thousands of miles of arid expanses, some of them uninhabitable and therefore used more as transit zones than as living spaces. Almost invariably, nothing marks them out, except the occasional military patrol surveying the zone. Normally it is in the nomads' interest to avoid these brigades, for whom any presence in such regions is a matter for suspicion.

The frontiers only become apparent on the great highways, the ancient caravan trails marked out according to the ease of access to water-holes. These strategic border posts are permanently manned by the army, the police and customs officers who are stationed there. They are distinguished by the presence of official buildings topped with flags. Although some frontier-posts have been created out of nothing after deep drilling for water, most have been set up near wells originally dug and used by the nomads.

The presence of local government has attracted small shop-own- ers and gardeners to set up business, and has often drawn a motley band of adventurers, delinquents, prostitutes and ruined or refugee nomads, forced to settle. These places are thus in a double sense marginal spaces. Desocialized individuals live there side by side with state representatives, who themselves have often been sent to these deprived places to serve a punitive sentence or to have some offence forgotten.

To cross the frontier, it is necessary to have state identity papers (a passport or card) and to pay customs duty, an impossibility for most nomads. The banning of caravans began in 1963 after Algeria became independent, and was keen to keep a closer watch on its Saharan region. Measures were taken

to break or weaken the links between the Tuareg of the north, who had become Algerian, and those of the South, now attached to the Sahelian states. The underlying motive behind this was the presence of petroleum and gas, of which the largest reserves lay in the Tuareg territory in Algeria and Libya. The objective was to stifle any impulse to make a group claim, which would swiftly take on a cross-boundary dimension among the Tuareg. In 1963, moreover, the Kel Adagh, who had not taken part in the resistance to colonization at the beginning of the 20th century, refused to be separated from the Kel Ahaggar now to be attached to Algeria. Their revolt was drowned in bloodshed by the Malian army which inflicted terrible cruelty on their civilians while the rebels who had fled to Ahaggar were handed over by Algeria to the Malian authorities (Ag Attaher Insar 1996).

A similar system of repression was set up in Niger from around 1975, when the mining of uranium at Arlit, in the north of the country, began to increase in scale. The smallest cross-border movements were monitored and harshly suppressed. These dark years saw the increase in arbitrary arrest, brutality, torture, and imprisonment without trial on trumped up charges of “plotting.”

The territorial dispossession of the nomads, the fragmentation and the extreme limitation of their lands, the banning of mobility, the destruction of natural resources, and the weakening of their social fabric have forced thousands of families into poverty and exile. Nomadism as a protective way of life can no longer be practiced and has been replaced by a series of improvised activities, which are considered by the Tuareg to be closer to vagrancy. This has both ripped to pieces the social fabric and loosened ancient ties of solidarity.

Internal Barbed-Wire and Social Fragmentation

The reconfiguration of identities in the Sahara, implemented first in the colonial and then the post-colonial organization of nation-states, has led to several different and sometimes contradictory perceptions, that oppose each other and superpose themselves on previous modes and norms, without dispelling them completely. Among other modern models for interpreting reality, first the explorers and then the administrators of the colonies introduced Western scientific myths from the 19th century, based particularly on raciology and evolutionism. The idea of the Berbers' Roman past or the notional relationship of the Tuareg to the 13th century crusaders of Saint-Louis, for example, helped to explain what looked like the “civilized” aspects of this society (their monogamy, the elevated position of the women, the special relationship to Islam...), feeding the fantasy that they might be

facilitators of Western conquest and of the diffusion of Christian values in Africa. As a result of Tuareg resistance to colonial occupation this portrayal of them was reversed. They began to be regarded as worryingly and menacingly different: out and out brigands, anarchic nomads, primitive people who were reckless and impulsive, not content with putting others in danger but themselves also. The mission of colonialization could in this way be claimed to be civilizing and protective.

As a direct result of these assumptions about the Sahara, the Tuareg have been “whitened,” Bedouinized, feudalized and archaized. In such a process, which makes racial, social and cultural differences coincide, Tuareg identity has been considerably reduced. Its new “ethnic” definition excludes a number of its old constituent elements, for instance the dark-skinned Tuareg (“negrified” as Atgier put it in 1909), or those who do not speak Tuareg, those who are non-nomadic and sedentary (farmers, city-dwellers) and those who are pacifists, priests or dependents...

Images of “the lords of the sands,” “the pirates of the desert,” “the warrior nomads of a former age,” the “whites” who are foreign to Africa, a tribal world as opposed to the law-abiding world, have given birth to the ambiguous relationship which the French have even today with this people whom they see as exotic. One only needs to look at tourist brochures for the point to be made. But the portrait of the nomads first drawn in the colonial era has also been given new life and sharper lines by the modern state authorities, especially at times of crisis, as in the 1990s, during the armed Tuareg uprising in Niger and in Mali.

One of the common arguments prevalent in modern discussion of the Tuareg is the denial of their ancient attachment to an organized community. For example, the “Basic Document Issued by the Government of Niger for Use in Negotiations with the Rebels” (Niger Republic Government, April 1994) states that: “there has never been a united Tuareg world, either politically or economically.” The corollary of this thesis is that these people by definition hold no “territory.” The Tuareg, by implication the nomads, are viewed as “men from nowhere” (*Jeune Afrique*, July 1994).

These arguments were widely employed by the political authorities and their academic supporters to prove the “illegality” of claims for regional autonomy made in 1990 by the Tuareg and the Arabs in Mali (“Arabs” who in the old political order were attached to the Tuareg confederation of the Tademekkat, but who in the modern ethnic reassignment appear to be radically different from the Tuareg). Looked at like this, the insurrections were deprived of all

political sense, being reduced to “isolated and anarchic actions,” which must have been instigated by marginals, cut off from their milieus, ignorant and uncivilized émigrés who were manipulated by foreign powers:

The rebellion is essentially supported by groups of young nomads, who moved to Libya during the years of drought and were cut off from their families and their social milieu, without any education or professional training. These elements were maintained in hatred of their mother country, drawn into military action and used as mercenaries in different theatres of operations...

(*Livre blanc*, the Mali Government 1994, p.11)

In fact it was after the signing of the first peace agreements in January 1991 in Mali and in May 1992 in Niger that the most bloody operations were led by paramilitary troops, drawn from and backed by the army: in Mali it was Gandakoy who attacked light-skinned civilians; in Niger, the Committee for the Defence of Tazara (CAT), trained by Saharan Arabs, targeted the Berber-speaking Tuareg. These organizations received national and international aid: from Arab and Muslim states (notably the Gulf Emirates) in the case of the CAT; from the French and the Swiss Co-operations and from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in the case of both Gandakoy in Mali, and the Timidria association (i.e. “Fraternity” association) when it was created slightly later in Niger.

The CAT promulgated both the government ideology about stateless communities and the Arab-Islamic views on non Arab-speaking Muslim peoples, assumed to be primitive and religiously, linguistically, culturally and morally deficient.

Gandakoy and Timidria based their actions on a racial ideology which divides Africa into two distinct camps, a view set out clearly in the support document of the Gandakoy movement, entitled “*Blacks and Tuareg: Who are the Racists?*” distributed in 1994 by the Présence Africaine bookstore in Paris. According to this, on one side stand the black Africans, the “negrafricans,” who constitute “the only large natural and cultural community never to have linked its destiny to the domination of other peoples, or to the spirit of exclusion” (p. 26), and who are by definition kindly, pacifist and innocent, still more so in that “reverse racism does not exist” (p. 23). This paper presents on the other side the light-skinned Africans (the “leucoderms”), as “spiteful,” “racist” and “greedy,” those negative features being attributed to their alleged foreign origins: “the Berbers [and among them the “white” Tuareg] are not Semitic (...) but in fact really Europeans” (p. 5). Their foreignness, as the argument goes, explains that “although they have been

everywhere colonized by the Arabs, they turn against the Blacks with an instinctive racism, claiming the right to self-determination” (p. 18); further, the Tuareg are presented as having absolutely no “collective historical consciousness” and suffering from “a complex about their white skins” (p. 30): they are in fact only “the reinforcements of Arab racist powers,” acting “within the framework of fundamentalist organizations” (p. 21). Between these two categories are pictured the “hybrids,” “ignorant Blacks” (p. 28) who have abandoned “positive black values” (p. 28), like the feudal Tutsi or the Muslim blacks, and “who are used as a driving force by Saudi Arabia, France, Iran, Libya and Morocco, and by all the death-mongers who have united against the black people and its deported children” (p. 29). The document concludes in particular that it is essential “to bring every possible aid to the Gandha Koy,” to mobilize “all the black elements from the rest of the continent and from exile,” “to regard the Tuareg problem in terms of a collective black anti-racist defence” (p. 31) because what they are facing is an international conspiracy, “a racial war declared and fuelled by the West in combination with the ruling powers of the Maghreb, the Machrek and the Persian Gulf” (p. 32).

These extreme theories demonstrate the globalization of populist and racist language, which is grafted on to very varied historical facts and makes use of dichotomies borrowed from other societies. They echo the propaganda of certain Afro-American movements which advocate the return to “authenticity,” taking as their own those Western racist theories developed against themselves, and inverting the terms: the “blacks” in this view become the positive element as opposed to the “whites.” Furthermore, this kind of language uses the whole range of symbols developed by European anti-Semitism, but in this context is targeting the “Europeans,” that is the Berbers, seen as foreigners to Africa, or the Arabs, imagined as their “racial” accomplices, while the parallel is drawn between the fate of the “Blacks” and that of the Jews, using the theme of “deportation” (a term used by African-Americans in particular in reference to the trans-Atlantic slave-trade).

Upon this fertile ground is erected a whole doctrine of violence which is crystallized in the opposition between the nomads/whites/reactionaries/feudal lords and the settlers/blacks/progressives/democrats. The social effectiveness of this ideological construct was translated between 1991 and 1996 into violence and killings perpetrated with total impunity against light-skinned civilians by the Gandakoy militia in Mali. In Niger, the same sort of language has been used for several years by the Timidria association to legally and morally harass a number of Tuareg personalities in the name of anti-slavery, a

respectable cause used here to shameful ends. This ideology — comparable to that broadcast in Rwanda by the radio station *Radio des Mille Collines* — which criminalizes the Tuareg and the Moors is spreading worldwide thanks to the Internet and the cinema.⁵ Other equally watertight barriers are being raised under the cover of justifiable ends, expressed using unimpeachable Western terms (democracy, equality, republic, education...) which appear to anaesthetize the critical senses of their financial supporters.

In this tense political and ideological context the peoples of the Sahara, and among them the nomads, are struggling despite these setbacks, to survive.

A Hotch-Potch of Pastoral Activities

At the present time, if the attempt to maintain pastoral nomadism persists, from a Tuareg angle it can only be an aimless and sketchy activity, an improvisation based on chance and deprived of all possibility of forward-planning. The very foundations, which made this activity durable and profitable, are now shattered. For the old pastoralist economy, which combined extensive rearing and trading, can only take place on territory that is vast and accessible, that can be traveled over and that has been picked to allow a form of management that will preserve its resources. But, in the organization of nation-states, nomadic territories have been deemed vacant. The refusal to recognize the Tuaregs' territorial rights has led to ecological catastrophe.

A concrete example will serve here. Modern technology enables wells to be dug wherever ground water is available, even if it is at a great depth beneath the surface. The technical reasoning adopted by development aid agencies has encouraged an increase in watering-places. The underlying idea behind these operations is that the essential problem in a desert milieu is the scarcity of water-holes. Therefore for the problem to disappear wells must be created. This conclusion is treated as self-evident, needless to say without asking the opinion of those who have an interest in the matter. It is certainly true that, by facilitating access, the drilling of an extra well will shorten the work of drawing water and bringing the herds to drink. But another direct consequence is the ruination of reserve grazing lands, once preserved precisely because of their distance from water-holes, which prevented their use in the dry season. The ground, now occupied all year around, is

⁵ See the critical analysis of the very biased “documentary” by B. Debord broadcast on Arte in 2002, in Claudot-Hawad and Walentowitz 2002.

consequently churned up by animals' hooves. Under these new conditions, it becomes impossible to rationalize the use of the vegetation according to the short-lived or perennial nature of the plants. Pastoralism can no longer be practiced in any logical or durable manner. The disastrous long-term results of this type of initiative completely wipe out the benefits they seem to present in the short-term and end up by compromising the entire pastoralist activity.

The long-distance trading which was the life-blood of the nomadic economy has become an illegal trans-state activity, requiring authorizations, which are denied to ordinary people. Only those who for some reason have contacts in the state machinery (in particular the Arab-speaking Chamba traders in Algeria, and the Kunta in Niger) can obtain such permissions and these have thus supplanted the ancient Tuareg caravans. The latter are forced to transport their goods clandestinely, at great risk to themselves. Many of them, hunted by the army, avoid the water-holes to escape arrest and as a result lose their lives or their minds.⁶

The old caravan activity of the Tuareg was supported by a solid group organization, which allowed the dangers to be minimized and offered to each individual the chance to make his fortune by lending him pack-animals if he had none of his own. Now obsolete, the activity has been replaced by *afrud*, from the French "fraude" meaning "smuggling," using at best worn-out motor vehicles, trucks or four-wheel drive pick-ups (which the nomads have rapidly learned to repair using spare parts they sometimes have to make themselves out of whatever comes to hand). These drivers, who travel alone to remain unobtrusive, are the most affluent. The others, that is to say the majority, bypass the frontier on the back of an animal or on foot. Men in search of work, but also entire families fleeing repression and poverty and seeking refuge with relatives on the other side of a frontier, travel secretly along the ancient routes, from Timbuktu (Mali) to Agadez (Niger), from Markoye (Burkina Faso) to Tamanrasset and Djanet (Algeria), from Tahoua (Niger) to Ghat or Sabha (Libya). In these endless trips for survival, with no apparent money to be made, there are many who perish.

Outwardly the nomadic way of life seems to have changed little. In the camps, the daily tasks of pastoralism continue. The techniques and underlying knowledge needed for breeding and breaking-in the riding and pack animals are still retained. The regular moving of tents persists.

⁶ Among many accounts, see in particular Ag 1990 and Akli 1996.

However, these activities take place within a much smaller radius (for example, the annual cycle of the Ikazkazen of the Aïr which once carried them over a distance of 300 to 600 miles, between the Western edge of the Aïr and Ingezam, is today limited to less than 60 miles). Also, among the poorer families smaller stock animals have replaced the herds of camel and cattle. Stock-rearing, once the job of the “poor” and the young, is now engaged in by all members of society. Caravans have become an individual rather than a collective undertaking.

But beyond these superficial changes, a radical and profound transformation is threatening the very existence of nomadism, which can no longer subsist in the area because of the territorial dispossession of the desert-dwellers’ lands and the fragmentation of their territory. Absolutely no land rights or rights over resources are legally recognized as belonging to the Tuareg in general, nor to the nomads in particular. Absolutely no pre-colonial forms of arbitration or management are allowed by law to be practiced. Absolutely no concept of territory can be allowed which spreads beyond the frontiers and the micro-states they demarcate. In this context, it becomes clear that even the projects for the development of grazing areas promoted by the non-government organizations, far from sustaining the nomadic way of life, are precipitating its demise. The virtual boundaries of nomadic mobility have thus not only shrunk, but have become fixed, preventing the possibility of being a “nomad” in any true sense of the term.

The Sahara: Manna only for the Happy Few

Whereas the Sahara today is a region of marginalization and impoverishment for the great majority of its inhabitants, it is a goldmine for the new political and economic actors of the modern states. The large mineral resources of the desert have given it a major role in national and international economies, particularly in regards to hydrocarbons, the main resource of Algeria and Libya, as well as uranium in Niger, and on a slightly smaller scale, gold, copper and other minerals on the Mali and Burkina side. The water resource available in the Sahara is also playing an ever-greater role: harnessed by high flow pumps sunk into the fossil ground water, it is even sent to supply the northern cities (notably Tripoli) and to irrigate the great state farms in Libya, leaving the ancient oases (Ghat, for example) to dry up. In the Aïr, a region of Niger, a private factory producing mineral water has recently begun to use the Agharus site. The redistribution of the immense riches taken from the Saharan sub-stratum is, however, hardly apparent at the more local level. On the Niger side, for instance, modern infrastructure

(roads, schools, hospitals...) have been developed only around Arlit, the center of uranium extraction, to serve the Western expatriates working there, while the surrounding region has remained totally neglected. Most of the Saharan zones are in the same condition, with a few rare exceptions, as for example in Libya, where the Tuareg, subjected to strict development policies, have been allowed access to modern amenities. It is in fact in Libya that there are the largest number of Tuareg with a university education or working for the state, either in government or in one of the internal security forces such as the local and state police or the army, entry to which for Tuareg is difficult in other states, if not totally banned, as was the case in Niger until the armed uprising in 1990-2000.

The second major economic interest of the Sahara is related to international smuggling, principally of weapons, American Marlboro cigarettes and drugs, in particular cocaine, which comes from South America and is destined for Europe. This trafficking operates with a huge logistical back-up (brand new four-wheel drives, radio links, satellite telephones, armed escorts) very noticeable in the Sahara. The armed convoys travel over vast distances, from the Atlantic to the Red Sea and from the Sahel to the Mediterranean. The ease with which these highly visible convoys move between frontiers necessarily implies a certain connivance with the state authorities. Such Mafia-like activities are undertaken by a very heterogeneous group of people. As for the identity of their leaders, one can only make a guess. In the Press the men on the ground are often loosely called "bandits," a term which was also used to describe the Tuareg rebels in the 1990s, and is equally employed for common thieves. Recently, there has been mention of "Islamists," and more recently still, of "terrorists" linked to Al-Qaida. This is the theory propounded by the United States, which is carrying out its "Greater Middle East Initiative" in the Sahara by establishing military bases and observation posts in Mali, Libya, Algeria, Mauritania, Niger and Chad. Local people who meet this new type of desert traveler notice that they are heavily armed (with submachine guns and rockets on the roofs of vehicles) and that they tactically withdraw towards Algerian, Mauritanian or Sudanese territory when threatened. These latter are all Northern Arab-speakers who have links with the Arab-speaking peoples of the Sahara. Tuareg who have had dealings with them have been invited to listen to a day-long awareness briefing, disseminating a blend of Arab and Muslim nationalism. This is an operation of persuasion with no physical violence involved, unlike the death-threats made to the tourists accompanying them. Illicit dealing in arms, drugs and tobacco, Islamist escorts, attacks on Westerners, unhindered mobility across frontiers, modern and efficient weaponry, are the characteristic features of the new actors who are moving

around the Sahara. A recent example will serve to illustrate the tangle of seemingly contradictory interests revealed in this sort of activity. The French newspaper *Le Monde* of May 26 2004 reported that rebels from the Movement for Democracy and Justice in Chad (MDJT) had captured, after the destruction of his band by the Chad army, one of the most wanted men in Africa: Amara Salfi, alias Abderrazak “El Para.” This ex-member of the Algerian Special Forces became the leader of an underground Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). Among other things he is suspected of kidnapping thirty-two European tourists in the Sahara in 2003, including fifteen Germans who were freed after a ransom of five million euros was paid. According to Algiers, he had established links with Al-Qaida, a fact which led to American support for the states of the region in their fight against “terrorism.” The MDJT offered Algiers the use of its runway and its bases in Tibasti in order to organize the removal of “El Para.” But Algeria made no decision about prosecution, neither did France nor the United States who were also contacted, merely suggesting that the Toubou rebels should act through the Chad government, with whom they were in conflict. The four-month stagnation of this affair demonstrates very well how political priorities can be—to say the least—difficult to define when they are caught between national and international interests, official and unofficial state aims, Islamist organizations and private Mafias... These examples prove that trans-Saharan mobility and the transfer of merchandise, however illegal they may be, are today monopolized almost exclusively by those with links to the state powers.

Finally, the Sahara is an area of transit for those Africans keen to emigrate to the Maghreb and Europe. These clandestine people, the products of poverty and dictatorship, are at present the focus of sociological and geographical studies of the region, examining their routes and the often sordid lives of those that smuggle them. In contrast, drug-, tobacco- and arms-dealing, to which officialdom turns a blind eye, are equally invisible from a scientific point of view.

Escaping from the Enclosure

For the Tuareg the problem today is to find more crossover points which will permit them to continue their “nomadism.” As is often expressed figuratively in Tuareg speech, the Saharan space has for them been progressively transformed into a “pen,” a “cage,” a place of exclusion and of “suffocation under a slab of stone.” This “side-lining” is blamed not only on the dispossession of their political, social and territorial rights and on the erection of national state boundaries, but also on the massive fragmentation of the

community or intercommunity social fabric. In the divisions that have been enlarged or totally created by the new political order, it is indeed less the idea of a “frontier” or place of difference that causes a problem than the characteristics these limits are imbued with, that is to say their fixedness and immutability.

Today, in a state-dominated international order, the identity assigned publicly to the “Tuareg” usually confines them to the part played by museum exhibits, representing the “last” nomads or the “final” specimens of a culture doomed to disappear.⁷

Since the 1970s, a new and swiftly expanding form of economy has been built upon this stereotype: that of tourism and the exploitation of the image of the “blue men.” In this project, the Tuareg initially took on subordinate functions (guides, drivers, cooks, suppliers of camels, exotic dancers...). Today they are trying to gain access to the market as independent entrepreneurs and in this are finding themselves in fierce competition with the promoters of tourism in the capitals of Algeria and Libya, and, in the case of the Sahelian countries, those of the West (in particular French, Swiss, Belgian, Italian, Spanish, German and Austrian agencies).

Those Tuareg who have been successful have created their own client network not locally but by going to large European cities and by participating personally in international tourism fairs. In their own countries, it should be noted that they are exposed to numerous administrative constraints (the difficulty in obtaining agency licenses in Niger, for example) which are frequently absurd, as illustrated by the recent farcical battles between the Tuareg of Ahaggar in Algeria and the regional prefect: the latter had among other things seen fit to import from France the law banning the wearing of the veil in educational establishments, but had transferred it to the taxi-drivers in Tamanrasset.

For their part, Tuareg craftsmen, put out of work by the pauperization of their society, have since the 1970s, managed a remarkable economic breakthrough by passing from the fabrication to the direct distribution of their products outside the country, first in the African capital cities (Niamey, Bamako, Ouagadougou, Abidjan, Dakar and Lomé), and subsequently in

⁷ In daily life, for example, it is almost impossible for a Tuareg, whatever his profession, to avoid being classified as a “herdsman,” which is inserted automatically on his identity papers by civil servants in Niger.

Europe (in French-speaking countries, but also in Italy, Germany, Austria and Denmark) where individuals have ventured further and further afield over the last ten years or so.

Other individual activities have developed since around 1958, necessitating temporary migration to places which although thousands of miles away at least permit the Tuareg to come and go: laboring jobs in Algeria and Libya either as unqualified workers (in the petroleum industry, the atomic test sites in Algeria in the 1960s, in road construction or the building industry), or as stockmen and gardeners. There is now a new destination for the Tuareg and in particular the craftsmen from the Aïr, who were among the first to tread these hitherto untried paths: the United States, where they ended up finding often very arduous jobs as unskilled workers. It should be noted that obtaining a visa for the United States, although requiring a considerable outlay (80,000 Francs CFA / 148 US dollars) which is forfeited if the application is refused (as roughly half of them are), is judged to be easier than obtaining a visa for France. For this reason more and more young people searching for an opening prefer today to try their luck directly in America, rather than in Europe.

In their native regions, there is a source of income of a less individual nature based on “winning a project.” The project can be undertaken by various foreign organizations (non-governmental agencies, individual states, the United Nations, Europe, the World Bank, the Muslim Bank...) who offer national or international loans which provide certain people with a salary or benefits in kind over a fixed period. The aims of the project, often considered to be inappropriate by those living locally, seem not to be particularly important in themselves. It is the salaries provided that are of interest. It is noticeable moreover that these initiatives—whether they come under the heading of “developmentism,” “human-rightsism,” “culturalism,” “Islamism”...—generally recruit their local personnel from the same socially, symbolically and morally extremely fragile milieus, sedentary or nomadic people who have no problem in moving from one function to another.

The Sahara, then, land of freedom and dreams for tourists, of unforeseen wealth for state governments and also, as one Tuareg put it, for unemployed Western workers, has instead become for its inhabitants a place of pauperization, enclosure and immobility, making the nomads’ way of life impossible and illegal. The notion of a stimulating disparity, opening perspectives on to new horizons and drawing individuals into wider networks, would seem for the moment to have vanished, impossible to reconstruct in the context of the modern African and North African states. Such a meeting of

different worlds may perhaps occur on an individual basis, but is no longer possible collectively.

To progress, to regain economic, social and cultural dynamism, for the Tuareg it seems that today this difference must be relocated. This is why the new theatres of action sought by the Tuareg are in such places as New York, Paris, London or Mexico City, rather than on the ancient nomad frontiers or in African cities. This new “nomadism” is expressed in old terms, but has spread beyond its customary Saharan and Sahelian perimeters. For the Tuareg, this represents a much better continuity of nomadism than that offered by pastoralist activities confined to overgrazed valleys, which they perceive as enforced and fatal settlement.

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Illustrations

- Carte

- Photo 1. Tuareg in Niamey, Niger, 2004. To make room for the forthcoming Francophonie Games (*Jeux de la Francophonie*), the police have just expelled these Tuareg craftsmen from their improvised stalls on the street where they used to work and sell their wares (Hélène Claudot-Hawad).

- Photo 2. A Tuareg shanty town behind the BCEAO (Central Bank of West African States) in Niamey, Niger, 1990. Because of the Tuareg rebel movement in 1990, the army took reprisals against civilians living in the desert who then sought refuge in towns. Here Tuareg families who fled Mali have come to settle in the capital of Niger (Hélène Claudot-Hawad).