

# Local Texts, Rumor and Ethnic Ideologies: the Amazigh Community and Its Border Identities

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## Introduction

Historical evidence shows that the Amazigh (Tuareg) of the Sahel have, over the last century, fought consistently to maintain their local cultural sovereignty. Yet, their identity as Berbers is contested in different ways in trans-Saharan spaces, both in the Maghrebian north and the Sahel/Savannah south. In this paper I explore the positionality of Amazigh, or Tuareg, youth in the swiftly changing and politically charged universe of their trans-Saharan territories. This paper will draw on anthropological works that focus on border identities, place, and dynamic uses of social affiliation. The essay draws on Veena Das' work, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (2007), to discuss the particular case of the Amazigh. My paper thus examines violence, ideology, and rumor through local experiences of ethnicity, race and mobility in the contexts of trans-Saharan nation states and global discourses of race and indigenous authenticities.

As Das focused on the "everyday" and the banal frameworks from which violence sometimes emerges, I situate Tuareg life in its quotidian balance between ethnic and national borders where local narratives are constructed. I pose the question of how the historical role of rumors contributed to social and political instability and the isolation of Amazigh Sahelian contemporary communities.

## Le quotidien : regard sur le passé (brief overview)

### *The western sahelian and trans-sahara zones*

West African and trans-Saharan pastoralist communities historically are steeped in militarist traditions sometimes expressed in the form of the *razzia*, or raid, on agricultural

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peoples to the south. This tradition can be traced to three critical factors: the nomad community as local minority in the context of the state (including pre-colonial forms), their constant need for wide expanses of pasture for their animals, and the need to control farming labor for grain. The last two factors are particularly relevant, as pasture is threatened by human and climate factors, and the end of domestic slavery rendered traditional production adaptations for camel husbandry almost obsolete. These factors affect the nomadic world view today, especially in local perceptions of the 'fairness' of their current social and economic situation.

The local economies in the zone are precarious, and depend on the two vacillating poles of government policy and prevailing climate conditions (unless linked to informal, sometimes extra-legal trade networks). In pre-colonial times, much of this region was wealthy due to long distance commerce and a much less densely populated agricultural zone on the southern edges of the Sahel. We know, for example, that the trans-Saharan region has historically been an area of converging and overlapping long distance trade networks. For example, Terence Walz, in his article "Libya, The Trans-Saharan Trade of Egypt, and "Abdallah Al'Kahhal, 1880-1914" (2010), describes the 'western route' that tied West African Sahel to the Kingdom of Darfur, to Egypt and points beyond. This route dates to beyond the 19<sup>th</sup> century and far outdates the colonial period – we can look back to the era of the Darfur State, the seven Hausa states, or even Kanem Bornu in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This western Sahel network included such centers as Katsina and Kano (now situated in current day northern Nigeria), and Walz points out that it was the Egyptian conquest of Darfur which accelerated the demise of these trade routes. These regional characteristics remind us that relations between what are today Niger and Libya, for instance, not only pre-date the colonial period (i.e., Zinder, Katsina, Kanem and Bornu), but actually operated actively up until the end of the nineteenth century.

By the beginning of the twentieth century important changes had taken place that moved trade away from southern Libyan and hence Sahelian, commercial centers. Pressures on the Ottoman Turks from the British in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century resulted in the

displacement of prominent Syrian and other mid-eastern merchants from western Egyptian trading centers, which contributed to the fairly swift destabilization of trade routes. To the west, colonialism by the French and English interrupted historical trade relations. Centers of power shifted or were extinguished. However, until the period of independence in the early 1960s, most pastoral communities were able to continue their traditional lifestyles while taking advantage of new market opportunities. The northward push of farmers into the pastoral zones along the southern edge of the Sahel had not yet begun in earnest.

### **The case of the Tuareg in the Western Sahel, in comparison with the Fulbe**

Before the French overwhelmed the resistant Tuareg forces of Niger and Mali, roughly at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the Tuareg maintained a pastoral economy that was similar to that of the semi-sedentary Fulbe, who live south of Tuareg zones in the southern grassland borders of the Sahel. Through war, raids, or purchase, the Tuareg established client communities made up of captives, dependents known by the names Bellah or Bouzou. Unlike the Fulbe, however, the Tuareg only occasionally lived in settlements contiguous to their slave or dependent communities, due to the transhumance itineraries they followed with their camels, and which historically were complemented by trade activities. Tuareg society is hierarchically organized, made up of up to seven classes, with agricultural slaves constituting the bottom rung. Many of these slaves were pilfered or bought from outlying Songhay or Hausa villages over the centuries. Of the other classes, made up of black smiths, leather workers, free herders, the Tuareg nobility class interacted intensely with the blacksmith class. On the other hand, the caste farmer class, though the most despised, served the critical function of supplying grain to the higher social castes, which enabled their mobility.

During French colonial period, the client farming class of the Tuareg slowly, but surely began to ebb. By the first years of independence in Mali and Niger, Bellah and Bouzou families had emigrated in earnest to make their way elsewhere and away from

the yoke of slavery. Their fates differed, and depended on what sorts of host communities they could find that would allow them to establish homesteads. In some cases, such migrating households re-integrated into their communities of origin, re-asserting Hausa or Songhay identities. Others traveled far enough away from the sites of their captivity to distant communities that, though not identified as their places of origin, were willing to give them small plots of land on which to settle. Individuals and whole families among these groups also tended to assume Songhay or Hausa identity once they moved. Finally, there remained an important number of Bellah households that found themselves marginalized and disinherited on both sides. These households which often constitute small transhumant Bellah communities today, continue to rely on their former Tuareg masters for income opportunities such as the production of grass mats and other items for domestic use. Increasingly, members of such communities also join the rural-urban exodus.

During the 1980's customary exchange and loan support systems were still in play between the Tuareg and their satellite casted communities. It can be said that the droughts of the 1970s and early 1980s actually reignited some of the historical relations of dependence between these groups, as all were fighting to survive the loss of herds. By the mid 1990s, however, much of this interdependence began to dissolve. By 2000, Tuareg communities had fissioned decisively, largely but not always according to lines of caste and hierarchy. The members of the noble community meanwhile dispersed into different political camps. Some joined Islamic militants, others continued transhumance, while some moved to the cities for wage earning opportunities, and many (as well as some casted folk) migrated to Libya. When Qaddafi fell, they returned to Niger and Mali. Roughly 12,000 returned to Niger between 2012 and 2013. Many were the target of Libyans who saw them as interlopers and strangers who had benefited from Qaddafi support.

From 1974 to 2011, there were four separate rebellions of Tuareg against their national governments in the Sudanic Sahel. All called for more autonomy from the states of Mali and Niger, and declaimed the lack of development support their communities typically received from those governments. Whatever links the

Tuareg community might have sustained with neighboring Hausa, Songhay or Bella communities, they were not enough to instill or sustain a feeling of belonging or investment of the Tuaregs vis a vis the modern state. In 2012, the latest movement for autonomy launched by Tuaregs in Mali was co-opted by local and exterior Islamic radicals. This raises the question of whether this last confrontation, complex and complicated by external forces, signals the end of the Tuareg way of life which has slowly been falling apart due to the forces described above, not the least of which has been the loss of their dependent communities who were crucial to the pastoralist economy. These slave communities tied the grasslands of the southern Sahel to its northern reaches at the edges of the southern Sahara. Over time, the Tuareg/Amazigh have destroyed or otherwise lost important social capital gained through their participation in national politics, providing tourist destinations, and their slow, but real, beginning kinship networks with other groups through marriage. These processes of affiliation have grown in tandem with the increase in educated youth among Tuareg populations.

Fulbe communities have not staged rebellions against the modern state, partially due perhaps to the diffuse nature of Fulbe lifeways, made up of nomadic, semi-sedentary, and sedentary communities. Tuareg and Fulbe communities did not, for the most part, develop the same sorts of relationships with the modern state. The main difference between the Tuareg and Fulbe social domination strategies, for example, can be found in the way each group has navigated in the past between the poles of racial purity and political expedience. Where the Tuareg determined that intermarriage with sedentary elites was not a primary necessity in assuring their political security, Fulbe elites intentionally made strategic marriages across ethnicities in order to gain significant and sustainable political weight. Tuaregs generally did not. The exceptions, to my knowledge, are the populations of the towns of In-Gall and Agadez in Niger, and Timbuktu, Gao and Gossi in Mali. However, marriages of this sort by Tuaregs were more often coincidental than intentional. A major reason might be that the Tuareg were not in need of the lands controlled by black (Songhay, Hausa) farmers. Their Bella and Buzu communities functioned as a proxy of the farmlands of their free neighbors, for Tuareg food commodity needs. Moreover, the Bella occupied

territories that were intermediate to the drier north and the richer farmlands of the Songhay and Hausa to the south. The nomadic Fulbe, on the other hand, needed the grain produced by Fulbe or non-Fulbe local farmers, and more importantly had to negotiate passage for their cattle through northerly agricultural zones. They needed allies.

In In-Gall, (a town in the Agadez Region, Tchirozerine Department) Songhay noble lineages eventually were absorbed by their Tuareg counterpart lineages in the pre-colonial era. This occurred when a party of Songhay travelers who were on their way to Mecca, said to have been part of a party of Sonni Ali Ber, stopped at this Tuareg town for provisions and rest. Some remained, while others continued on their journey. In-Gall was once a destination of the Azalai salt caravans in which Tuareg merchants transported salt from the markets here across the Sahel for agricultural and medicinal uses<sup>1</sup>. The case of Agadez town is only slightly different. In Agadez alliances between leading noble Tuareg lineages and noble Hausa lineages led to intermarriage on multiple social levels, eventually including intermarriage across ethnicities among castes of various ranks. Notably, there are similar histories of the Tuareg of the Niger bend, between Timbuktu and Gao<sup>2</sup>. Intermarriage between Tuareg and Songhay, usually along class and caste lines, as well as between other ethnicities including Moors, and Fulbe, is not unknown in this region, reflecting the historical cosmopolitanism of Timbuktu and its environs (such as Djenne-Djeno, as described by Susan Mackinstosh, et al., 1979). Fulbe society evolved differently from Tuareg society in important ways, though both were fiercely independent, nomadic in origin, livestock driven economies, and ethnocentric.

The Fulbe, who specialize in cattle rearing, essentially developed three major production adaptations, thus broad social categories<sup>3</sup>. These were the mostly nomadic groups who lived the farthest north and traded for grain, the semi-nomadic groups who

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia, [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In-Gall](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In-Gall), accessed 5/10/2014.

<sup>2</sup> Saad, E.-N. (1983), *The Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Scholars and Notables, 1400-1900*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, W. (1995), "The Fulani Model of Sustainable Agriculture", *Nomadic Peoples*, n° 36/37, p. 35-52. International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, Commission on Nomadic Peoples. Berghahn Books

either settled periodically or divided seasonally into sedentary and transhumant groups, and a category of itinerant herders who vacillated outside of (and between) these two communities (often called Bororo, or Tolebe). Because of this diversity, it has been less likely for the Fulbe to become a target as an insular group, although today it is their most insular groups (those who are most nomadic) who have become most marginalized in the context of the modern state. However, their identity has not been racialized. The framework suggested by the Nigerian scholar Abdourahmane Idrissa in his article “Democrats, Ethnocrats, Theocrats,” is useful here, in particular the way in which Idrissa contextualizes the Sahel’s history in terms of different ecological regimens of territoriality and specialized, interfacing production systems and cultures<sup>4</sup>.

### **Slavery, Ethnicity, Citizenship and Belonging**

Slavery has always been a major economic and social element of the various states and the rural acephalous communities of the Sahel and its adjacent grasslands. It is now understood that in addition to trade in salt, gold and hides, the trade in human labor was a critical, primary force in the development and longevity of the Sudanic states dating from the medieval period. Furthermore, scholars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have, through the examination of Arabic texts, learned much about the application of Islamic and local traditions to the keeping and trading of slaves<sup>5</sup>. Although scholars are still not in agreement regarding the diverse forms forced labor may have taken in the era before the arrival of European adventurers in the mid-nineteenth century, it is known that in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries slavery flourished in the Waalo, Trarza, Brakna and Tekrur states

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<sup>4</sup> Idrissa, A. (2012), “Democrats, Ethnocrats, Theocrats”, *West African Research Association Fall Newsletter*, Boston University. While Idrissa’s argument echoes the works of Barth (1969) and Horowitz (1972) in his reference to the idea of the “ecological niche” he goes beyond these discussions in his particular focus of the regional dynamics of West Africa’s interdependent systems, as well as their historical interface with the Arab Maghreb. See also Fredrick Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, Waveland Press, Grove Illinois, [1969] 1988 and Horowitz, M. (1972), “Ethnic Boundary Maintenance Among Pastoralists and Farmers in the Western Sudan (Niger)”, *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 7, Issue 1-2, p. 105-114.

<sup>5</sup> Lydon, G. (2005), “Slavery, Exchange and Islamic Law: A Glimpse from the Archives of Mali and Mauritania”, *African Economic History*, n° 33, p. 117-148.

in the westernmost Sahel and extended to Kanem-Bornu in the east. Thus, slavery among and by the Amazigh, and their participation in the slave trade, was not a unique activity in the region. How can we explain, then, the tenacious resentments and antagonisms of other sub-Saharan groups towards Tuaregs and their slaving past? As we attempt to deconstruct the recent acts of violence and suspicion of both sides, particularly in Mali, we must necessarily engage this question. Local memory of past violence, displacement, and positions of power in the pre-colonial period is one factor. Racial ambiguity is without question another.

As John Hunwick has shown<sup>6</sup>, and as discussed, for example, in the collection of essays in the volume recently edited by Mirzai, Montana and Lovejoy<sup>7</sup>, perceptions of racial difference have existed in the trans-saharan world for centuries. We should understand these perceptions as dynamic and changing, and not necessarily in a linear fashion, over time. Attitudes about race probably also differed across and within territories depending on historically specific conditions. Race, at some point in the region's past, overtook ethnicity as an important social marker between the Maghreb and the Sudan. Scholars are in agreement that the slave trade, including the trans-Atlantic and the trans-Saharan slave trade, which lasted well into the first decades of the twentieth century, had everything to do with the eventual association of blackness with servitude and inferiority. In the Arab world this often translated into expressions of suspicion regarding the religious commitment of black African Muslims, and was fueled by contempt towards non-Muslim black African communities. But we can also observe that colonialism exacerbated and complicated local understandings of race, whiteness, and cultural superiorities.

In addition to bringing whiteness as a hierarchic framework for ideas of civilization and rationality, colonialism also introduced classificatory rigidity into a system that had previously been more flexible, and nuanced. From the European perspective, race trumped, to a large degree, pedigree, which was in direct

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<sup>6</sup> Hunwick, J. (1992), "Black Slaves in the Mediterranean World: Introduction to a neglected aspect of the African Diaspora", *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 13, Issue 1, p. 5-38.

<sup>7</sup> Mirzai, B.-A. ; Montana, I.-M. and Lovejoy, P.-E. (2009), *Slavery, Islam and Diaspora*, Trenton, Africa World Press.



confrontation with local trans-Saharan mores. Both Arab and Berber; in this case, Tuareg, nobles, found themselves in the novel position of being classed as “lesser white” ‘others.’ This classification affected not only the relationship of the Tuareg to the colonial French administration, but the relationship between the Tuareg and other populations with whom they co-habited in the Sahel. Furthermore, it had an impact on how Tuaregs viewed themselves vis a vis their Sahelian neighbors, particularly in relation to the French. Paradoxically, for the colonial administrator Tuaregs were both savage and noble (in the sense that Trouillot discusses those terms) because they seemed racially closer to the French. In the French mind, the Tuaregs fought them because they were racially superior to other Sahelians, and in terms of civilisation, courageous but culturally inferior to Europeans.

Perhaps due to the historic importance of Agadez and In-Gall in the territory that is now the Niger Republic, inter-marriage between ethnic groups along caste lines seems to have continued and perhaps accelerated during the colonial and post-colonial periods. This does not seem to have occurred to the same extent in Mali, which includes large territories that earlier were part of the Mali and Bambara kingdoms. It may be that ideological remnants of pre-colonial states, which exercised some monopoly on the slave trade, also contribute to memories of the instability and unruliness of the Tuareg, who raided communities (free and unfree) that historically ‘belonged’ to the Songhay, Bambara, and Mali kingdoms. From the point of view of these black African communities, the Tuareg are anarchists and trouble makers who also think of themselves as culturally superior, inheritors of a militaristic culture who also perceive themselves as white and alien to their Sahelian neighbors. The fact that all of these ethnic communities were competitors for slave labor (from the same sources) does not enter into this discourse. This is significant and should be analyzed more thoroughly, though the constraints of time and space do not allow me to give this question the attention it deserves here.

The Tuareg, on the other hand, have had many opportunities to re-think their allegiances and their ethnicity in the post-colonial era. With the loss of slave labor that literally was the foundation of the detached mobility that characterized Tuareg transhumance,

the pastoral economy based on camel and goat management is almost defunct. The Sahelo-Sudanese cultural and economic foundations of Tuareg society are crumbling as casted community members migrate to the cities and are no longer dependent on their nobles for their daily bread. Consequently, Tuareg out-migration to Libya provided an economic alternative and defused social and political unrest that would probably have manifested earlier had that option not existed. In Libya, Tuaregs were Berbers among other Berbers. Others migrated to southern Algeria, again to seek wage earning opportunities. Instead of migrating locally with their animals, Tuareg youth migrated abroad and led peripatetic lives as they brought earnings home to their communities and departed again to cash-rich urban centers.

Today, the slave raiding that Tuaregs engaged in during the nineteenth century is, for some reasons that still remain unclear or at least inadequately discussed in the scholarly literature, remembered with much more anger among cultural communities in the Sahel than the raiding carried out by Fulbe pastoralists to the southeast in Adamawa (northern Nigeria and Cameroun) although most elements in each case are similar. What reasons can we identify for this? How can we understand this difference, and can it be reduced to racialism? I would argue that it cannot, though racist language is used today by detractors of the Tuareg south of the Sahara.

At least in the urban centers of the north, Berber identity is respected. In the agrarian south, where cities grew up from rich farmlands and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, few have demonstrated respect for nomads of any genre, and Tuareg are seen as exotic oddities. In the cities of the south, Tuareg are noticeably different, they are lighter-skinned, and enhance their difference by wearing the clothing of the desert.

But are the Tuareg seen as 'white' by their Berber brethren in Libya and Algeria? It is not easy to determine whether hostility in the Maghreb against Nigerien and Malian Tuareg was based on color or the conditions of their employment, or both. Certainly, in Libya, Tuareg were seen as labor brought in by Qaddafi, and resented for this reason. In southern Algeria, they are 'country cousins' who arrive without local kin or friendship networks, and often remain socially marginal. Some Tuareg I have spoken with

complained of being perceived as 'black' and 'different' when they were living and working in Algeria. Others discover that their attachment to Tuareg tradition does not match the more cosmopolitan views and lifestyles of fellow Berbers in the north. In particular, Tuaregs of the southern Sahara and northern Sahel have not experienced cultural pressure to be 'Arab' in the same way as Berbers further north, and there are still popular narratives among Tuaregs that the 'Arabs' drove them from their former homes at the southern reaches of the Atlas mountains.

Thus, the Tuaregs are faced with many ambiguities. South of the Sahara, they are not citizens in the way that agriculturalists are citizens; they do not have land tenure in the way that farmers have land tenure. Tuaregs are associated with slave raiding when in fact they have lived as denizens, if not citizens, of enormous Sudanic kingdoms that thrived on the slave trade. They are also remembered as pawns in the hands of the French who treated them differently from black Africans, in the memories of many. Moreover, they are seen as racially distinct and more dangerously, as racially fixed, or stagnant. They have not intermarried to the extent that other ethnicities in their home countries of Mali and Niger have done. To the north, the Tuareg (according to their own testimonies) are seen variously as rural and backward, or racially impure – that is to say, insufficiently 'white' to lay claim to a true Berber identity. The ambiguity that was in many ways an advantage in pre-colonial times has evolved into a liability. Paradoxically, Tuareg culture and identity have become important symbols of Malian and Nigerien national identity. Yet, many Tuareg do not feel as though they belong to these nations. This is partly due to their interpretation of the lack of development in their home regions, which they see as different from the lack of development in other regions. Uneven development and false promises have however been generally characteristic of the post-colonial era, and are not the sole experience of Tuareg communities. It is perhaps their local relations with national military and police, usually of modest origins and poorly educated, often from distant, agricultural zones, that has most left its mark of alienation on the Tuareg community.

While living many ambiguities, the Tuareg are also confronted with many clear borders to negotiate. There is the cultural border

between farmer and nomad, and between rural and urban. There is the border of historically different colonial experiences, the difference between how the French perceived them and how the French perceived their colonial subjects of black African origin. Finally, there are the geographic borders that are all too significant in their contemporary experience. To the north, they are strangers, even though ethnically-related ones. To the south, they are strangers to the territories of Sudanic farmlands. And increasingly, there has been the border between their perceived whiteness and the blackness of their compatriots. As global images circulate that enhance and crystallize racial antagonisms, relationships that were formally fluid have in many cases become more fraught with confusion as youth consume western images and concepts of whiteness and blackness, even as they also hear tropes of multicultural societies and individual freedom.

### **Daily Life and the Descent into Violence**

Veena Das describes a situation of re-directed violence that obtained in India when Hindus mined traditional histories to construct a contemporary stance of distance and rejection, indeed criminalization, of the Sikh community. This recalls the Tuareg dilemma, in that the Hindus are in many ways linked to the image of the modern state in ways that the empire of Mali is linked to the modern state of Mali<sup>8</sup>. Discourses of a “lost paradise” were used to instigate violence and contention against Sikhs who in turn believed that their ethnicity was the major factor of their marginalization by the Indian state following the assassination of Indira Ghandi<sup>9</sup>. The ethnic group, then, came to embody for the public the assassin’s identity, and the assassin was reduced to no more than a representative of the group. In turn, just as young Sikhs looked for a ‘good death’ instead of a slow death of indignity, the Tuaregs who decided to create the state of Azawak at any cost

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<sup>8</sup> Veena Das (2007), *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, University of California Press, p. 32. Das investigates the social residues of the riots against Sikhs of 1984, and explains that “in the period between 1981 and 1984, Sikh leaders led a series of mass civil disobedience campaigns against the Indian government for fulfillment of several demands while simultaneously propogating the use of violent means for achieving these ends”, p. 111. the Sikhs thus turned to violence and threatened allegiance to Kalistan. This can be compared to how Tuaregs, in response to ineffective support from the Malian state, staged repeated rebellions.

<sup>9</sup> Veena Das (2007), *Life and Words*, p. 105, p. 109-117, p. 158-159.

sought to transform the slow death of their communities to individual 'good deaths' that would lead to Amazigh sanctuary. This attempt, as we know, was co-opted by local and stranger Islamic radicals, and many of the local participants were from Tuareg and Fulbe communities. As in the case of the Sikh and Hindu, in spite of shared histories and bonds of mythologies and religion, violence led Tuareg youth to "forget" historically shared experiences and shared spaces<sup>10</sup>.

Without an intellectual and artistic response that could demonstrate strong alternatives to the re-living of past militarist lives, Sikh youth turned to the embrace of cultural ideologies that encouraged separatist and violent solutions. The use of music and historical referents to motivate political change or group solidarity is not limited to the Sikhs. A case in point is the "ishumar" among the Tuareg--youth who are sometimes called vagabonds, sometimes called "cosmopolitans." They circulate in the Saharo-Sahelian spaces of Libyan, Algerian, Nigerian and Malian borderlands<sup>11</sup>. In Mali and Niger, international music concerts and fairs created a new north-south network in which Tuareg and Wodaabe (Fulbe) youth began to vie for position and opportunity to sell "Wodaabe," "Tuareg," or "Sahel" culture to interested Europeans in Italy, France and elsewhere in western Europe<sup>12</sup>. We do not know whether former participants in the musical festivals were also participants in the Amazigh movement, or in the Islamist cause. Each of these choices led to a heroic positioning in relation to local communities.

A tension thus exists between the use of traditional imageries as a source of models for solutions to current economic and social crisis, and the use of these imageries to construct postcolonial ideoscapes that draw on poetics of romance and chivalry. Homi Bhabha sees this activity as a kind of "staging of modernity," where "dead" symbols are drawn from the past, and as such stage the circulatory life of the "sign" of the present. Furthermore, he charges this process as a complicity between the past and present

<sup>10</sup> Veena Das (2007), *Life and Words*, p. 115.

<sup>11</sup> Kohl, I. (2010), "Modern Nomads, Vagabonds, or Cosmopolitans ? Reflections on Contemporary Tuareg Society", *Journal of Anthropological Research*, (Winter), The University New Mexico, p. 449.

<sup>12</sup> Lofstdottir, K. (2008), *The Bush is Sweet : identity, power and development among Wodaabe Fulani in Niger*, Nordic African Institute.

used by the postcolonial subject to open up a space of revision and initiation, something he calls the “furious emergence of the projective past” that otherwise is not available<sup>13</sup>. Meanwhile, the rumors that circulate in Bamako are of the violence that the Tuareg visited on their sedentary neighbors. In particular, numerous rumors of rape of non-Tuareg women circulate. There is also a story of a Tuareg man who killed his in-laws, narrated as an example of the coldness of Tuaregs and their inability to truly engage with other ethnic groups. In other words, their actions were seen in ethnic and essentialist terms. Das states that “Rumor occupies a region of language with the potential to make us experience events, not simply by pointing to them as to something external, but rather by producing them in the very act of telling.”<sup>14</sup> Rumors of Tuareg violence thus dynamically construct Tuareg identities as volatile, disloyal, and dangerous.

Many people outside of the Tuareg community view Azawak political aspirations as expressions of ethno-centrism. Less is said about their relationships to the modern nation states they live in, although they themselves have identified these relationships as acutely problematic. At the same time, the state can be seen to court the Tuareg community in highly visible ways that are easily identified in international circles as actions towards ‘multiculturalism’, such as through high level government appointments.

### **Violent Spaces and Places**

Simon Springer argues that violent places are conjured up through western discourses on uncontrollable spaces. His thoughts are worth quoting here.

Through imaginative geographies that erase the interconnectedness of the places where violence occurs, the notion that violence is ‘irrational’ marks particular cultures as ‘Other’. Neoliberalism exploits such imaginative geographies in constructing itself as the sole providence of nonviolence and the lone bearer of reason. Proceeding as a ‘civilizing’ project, neoliberalism positions the market as salvatory to ostensibly ‘irrational’ and ‘violent’ peoples. This theology of neoliberalism produces a discourse that binds violence in place. But while violence sits in places in terms

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<sup>13</sup> Bhabha, H. (1992), “Freedom’s Basis in the Indeterminate”, October, vol. 61, p. 57.

<sup>14</sup> Veena Das (2007), *Life and Words*, p. 108.

of the way in which we perceive its manifestation as a localized and embodied experience, this very idea is challenged when place is reconsidered as a relational assemblage. What this re-theorization does is open up the supposed fixity, separation, and immutability of place to instead recognize it as always co-constituted by, mediated through, and integrated within the wider experiences of space<sup>15</sup>.

Springer reminds us that the study of geography, like the study of history as discussed by Natalie Zemon Davis, can be multi-centered. The study of violence can also, and perhaps must be, multi-centered and multi-sited. Violence calls on multiple players, and comes from a diverse set of intentions and meanings. Violence is in fact a resolution of conflicts of meaning, and a process of claiming meaning, one could even say, a process of naming a conflict or conflicts.

### **Regarding Niger's Tuareg communities**

Northwestern Mineral Ventures, began in 2004 to mine for uranium near In Gall through a government license. The company was awarded the Irhazer and In Gall concessions, each 2,000 km<sup>2</sup> (772 square miles) in size, of "open pit" strip mines. Over 100 uranium exploration licenses were granted in the Azawagh area to Chinese firms, and firms from Canada and India. Since 2007, a Chinese mining consortium working near In Gall has done infrastructural work for new mine at Azelik, some 85 km north of In Gall, which includes extending 85 km of roads southwards to In Gall from the site. Nigerien human rights, environmental and Tuareg groups have argued that mining activities in this region are a threat to scarce water resources, upon which pastoralists depend. The short rainy season in the Azawagh area north and west makes it an important destination for transhumant herders, who travel in the area with herds of cattle as well as camels, sheep and goats. The presence of mining in these northern pastoral zones has been a source of intense public debate and contention. Among the complaints cited by pastoralists in the area are Claims that revenues from mining activities are not reflected in

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<sup>15</sup> Springer, S. (2011), "Violence sits in places ? Cultural practice, neoliberal rationalism, and virulent imaginative geographies", *Political Geography*, abstract, 30 (2), p. 90-98, p. 90.

government development efforts in the region. Pastoralists point out that the number of schools, primary health centers, and other infrastructure does not reflect the considerable income that mining brings to the state<sup>16</sup>.

Young nomads of Tuareg or Fulani origin now trace new migration routes back and forth from cities to nomadic camps. They are usually itinerant wage earners who fund a 'free nomadic life' with city incomes. They rarely own herds, though they may have a few animals in trust with their nomadic families. With little formal education and very little cash or political influence, herders must fall back on the repertoires that they are familiar with. In those cases where individuals from these communities are better educated but still use historical referents from the pre-colonial period, the language used is often borrowed from local and regional histories and takes an essentialist turn that in reality reaches towards a past that cannot be re-constructed. This places the Sahelian pastoralist in the predicament of the post-colonial subject who experiences a kind of social pathology well described by Homi Bhabha, a social place where the subject experiences "loss of meaning, conditions of anomie" – that no longer simply cluster around class antagonism, [but] break up into widely scattered historical contingencies" <sup>17</sup>. That such a past, and thus social space, cannot be reconstructed does not keep youth from exploiting these oral traditions for a vocabulary that expresses their very contemporary and modern desires for power.

The aborted attempt of Tuaregs to secure a stable, recognized territory for acting out past meanings of class and race (if not economies), of an idealized Tuareg pastoralism, has certainly been painful to watch and is no doubt more painful to live through. The violent but inadequate response of the Malian state to Tuareg separatists and the intervening take over of a secession attempt itinerary by religious radicals created a sort of implosion where the commitment to growth and construction, albeit seen in conflicting 21st century (note Timbuktu music festivals) and twentieth century (noble and independent nomad) terms, became

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<sup>16</sup> [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In-Gall#cite\\_note-8](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In-Gall#cite_note-8).

<sup>17</sup> Bhabha, H. (1992), "Freedom's Basis in the Indeterminate", october, vol. 61, p. 50. A Special Issue entitled: "The Identity in Question" Bhabha quotes and discusses Habermas, (1978).



a twist of violence against social relationships that were born of the colonial and post-colonial experience. I interpret this response as a *refus* of how modernity has currently been served, a modernity that did not base governance contingencies on historical experience, but rather gathered against that experience in economic ways.

Above, I discussed why the recent violence and instability in the Sahel is historically based in a chronology of displacement and racialism that goes back to before the colonial period, but which was exacerbated when French colonial policy required the end of domestic slavery. I compared the Fulbe and Tuareg cultural and production regimes as a way to understand important differences in their historical positioning in relation to the state before and during colonization.

In order to understand the violence that proceeded, signified, and followed the uprising of the Tuaregs, it is critical to remember that the Tuareg, like the Fulbe, came to be minority communities stretched between several Sahelian and Maghrebian states. We might consider what this means in terms of their ability to control the environments they depend upon, and how conditions today differ from what they perceive as a better past existence. Entwined in this history is the control of farming labor, and the development of hierarchical societies that assured the continuance of transhumant (mobile) animal husbandry as a specialization. The loss of control over these factors has caused severe instability in nomadic communities across this spectrum, whatever the moral questions may be regarding these social hierarchies. Starting with the extended tug of war with the French over slave labor, which took place during the colonial period, the outmigration and separation of casted farming communities have much to do with the current drift and anarchy we see in these communities today<sup>18</sup>.

As the situation evolves in the trans-Saharan space and the Sahel, we find ourselves facing a situation uncannily similar to that which obtained in India in the 1990s between Sikhs and

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Klein, M. and his discussions of the competition between the French and various groups of African nobles for the control of slave communities and individuals. *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Hindus. Tuareg separatists, having espoused the need for an ethnically delineated territory, turned on their neighbors, in-laws, and representatives of the Malian state. All became the “other” in a new discourse of nostalgia, violence, and power. We are reminded again of Idrissa’s model of Sahel, Savannah and Forest as topographical embodiments of older political and cultural histories. The inheritors of the sedentary, agricultural cultures of the Sahel perceive Tuareg ambitions as ethnically, if not racially, cast. They see them as unwilling to live in a “black” state, and rumors circulate about the violence perpetrated on non-Tuaregs by their former Tuareg neighbors.

### **Conclusion : making Sense of the World**

In general, rural Sahelian communities are in acute crisis as a confluence of historical trends have ripped away most of the constants with which their lives have been constructed. This extends from spiritual life to the physical; their lands, wells, livestock and households.

I argue that much of the current crisis among pastoralist communities in Mali and its neighboring countries is a crisis of youth who find themselves at a historical juncture where traditional means of subsistence and acquiring luxuries are gone, while modern Sahelian governments have been unable to offer alternatives that replace old social and economic structures. Unhinged in many ways from traditional roles and unable to create new ones, youth in such communities are making desperate grabs at hodge-podge solutions in an effort to make sense of their lives and their worlds. These attempts include a modern essentialism that draws on historical notions of racial superiority and a gallant, militarist past. These ad hoc reactions have brought a devastating chain of events to themselves and their surrounding communities. Trans-Saharan communities, as in other places of the world today, face the consequences of rapid globalization of capital and the irony of de-territorialization, as discussed by Arjun Appadurai (1996), in their own home lands. Within these disjunctures, nomadic pastoralists, in my view, reach for the “right to signify” using past vocabularies and referents in attempts to engage a perceived pastoral modernity. In their efforts to project a diachronic national identity, and in view of an absence of

accessible 'democratic language' that converges with their historical experience, they reach for transnational solutions that fit more comfortably with their imagined migratory traditions<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> See Bhabha, H. (1992), "Freedom's Basis in the Indeterminate", vol. 61, p. 49. Later in the same article, Bhabha talks about the "production of difference as the political and social definition of the historical present." This aptly foreshadows the problem I am addressing here, as he later states that the articulations of difference, when making claims to "a radical singularity or separatism, do so at the peril of [their] historical destiny to change, transform, [or] solidarize", p. 55.

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