

Nomadic Traders of the Sahara desert: The Differences of the Tuareg and The Power of the Mouth

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Over the past two decades the Tuareg tribe in northern Africa has become radical, attacking everyone from tourists to military and government personnel. In 2007 the Tuareg began a second rebellion in Niger against the government which spread into Mali the same year (Simanowitz 2009, 71). However violent and unwarranted these attacks and rebellions may seem, the Tuareg are misrepresented in this situation. The attacks are in response to political unrest in which the government in Niger, Mali, and other North African countries are trying to forcefully strip the Tuareg of their natural nomadic way of life and push them into a settled lifestyle. In this paper I will continue to discuss this issue of violence between the Tuareg and North African countries. I will first discuss the history and culture of the Tuareg and explain why this tribe is so unique. Then I will finish the paper by discussing how globalization, natural environment conditions, and politics are helping to eliminate the tribe's traditional ways of living.

In a time when most people are stationary, the Tuareg still wander the desert trading goods, thus making them a co-culture of the region. Co-culture, as defined by Samovar (2010), is used "when discussing groups or social communities exhibiting communication characteristics, perceptions, values, beliefs, and practices that are sufficiently different do distinguish them from other groups and communities and from the dominant culture" (13). The majority of Niger, for example, is an ethnic group called Hausa which consists of 53% of the population compared to 11% for the Tuareg (Bureau of African Affairs, 2010). The Tuareg are something of an anomaly because they live in the "different regional confederations in Niger, Mali, Algeria, Libya, and Burkina Faso" which all "vary in the extent to which they are devoted to Islam, practice [sic] nomadism, and engage in oasis gardening, and in the degree of patrilineal or matrilineal property inheritance" (Rasmussen, 2008, 610). The Tuareg have their own language, Tamajaq, live a unique lifestyle, follow different social and religious values and beliefs, as well as a differing perception of the world and settled life.

Though the Tuareg do not settle, they are the founders of the city of Timbuktu. Timbuktu was founded about 1,000 years ago by a Tuareg woman, Buktu, literally meaning "the place of Buktu" (Engel, 2010, 8). The Tuaregs used the city as their main trading post. The main responsibility of the Tuareg was to ship gold and slaves from one part of the Sahara to the next. However, the city soon collapsed after the death of Mansa Mousa, the king in the early 1300's. War soon developed after his death when his children fought for power (Engel, 2010, 8).

The purpose of Timbuktu was to help establish a center for trading, the primary way to survive for the Tuareg. The Tuareg would move from one end of the desert to the other trading along the way with settled people. Because of this the Tuareg "depend on camels to move them and their goods through the harsh environment, from one oasis to the next" (Beelitz, 2010, 1). Some of the common things they trade are salt, gold, dates, animal hides, and oiler products (Beelitz, 2010, 1). Much like the U.S. practice up until the 1800s, the Tuareg traded slaves up until the last century. They would capture black African slaves and trade them along their route through the desert. It is esti-

ated that the Tuareg helped enslave 9 to 13 million black Africans (Engel, 2010, 6). It was not just the black African slaves that the Tuareg traded but also the white slaves; "most of the white slaves were Europeans captured by pirates off North African's Barbary Coast" (Engel, 2010, 6). Again, the Tuareg stopped trading slaves sometime in the last century. Tuareg trade instead continued in the dealing of goods such as gold and salt.

Besides being nomadic, the Tuareg have also adopted the Islam religion, although they differ from other followers of Islam in interesting ways. For instance, unlike traditional followers of Islam, the Tuareg women go unveiled. It is the men that wear a blue 15 feet long veil with its purpose to hide the mouth, believed (within the Tuareg tribe) to be the most sensuous part of the body (Engel, 2010). The mouth is not only sensuous but it also considered the "most revealing" because it "speaks truth or falsehoods," it "expresses fear and love," and can "curse bitterly and yell ferocious hateful insults," they believe "the mouth can start wars," and "can be slippery and sly and woo woman with deceitful lies" (Engel, 2010, 4). Overall they believe "the mouth exposes the soul" (Engel, 2010, 4). This belief is deeper than just sexual desire and is trying to restrict evil in all aspects of life. Most Islam followers believe that the husband or father is the head of the household. However, the women in the Tuareg society are in charge. They make all the decisions for the tribe and tend to be more assertive: "Tuareg women will shake a man's hands and look him in the eyes completely devoid of shyness" (Engel, 2010, 4). This is vastly different from the traditional followers of the Islamic faith, where women veil themselves for fear their necks will seduce men into carnal sin (Engel, 2010, 5).

Although the Tuareg have adopted Islam, they have altered the traditional practices to fit their beliefs and lifestyle. "The Tuareg's attitude toward women...is a cultural anomaly in the Islamic world that some have found shocking" (Engel, 2010, 5). The Tuareg have adopted the Islamic faith in a way that accommodates their cultural gender relations. The reasoning behind having the women as the heads of the tribe is similar to that of American soldiers when they sign power of attorney over to their wives while being deployed (Engel, 2010, 5). Women are left with the children and are responsible for the tribe while the Tuareg men are gone trading (Engel, 2010, 5). The Tuareg women are then responsible for educating the children and deciding when to move and when to camp, the "Tuareg men think it's only natural that women, who stay home with the children and animals, should take care of the family matters" (Engel, 2010, 5).

It is largely because of being a co-culture and not the dominant one that the Tuareg are being forced to assimilate. The land they inhabit is rich with resources which the government wants to exploit and sell. In 2008 Niger and China signed a \$5 billion deal that allows China to drill for oil (Simanowitz, 2009, 72). It is not just China with which and for which Niger has signed contracts and issued permits, but also India, Britain, South Africa, the U.S., Canada, and Australia, which are allowed "to establish mines and explore for uranium and oil" (Simanowitz, 2009, 72). This exploration to extract resources from Niger is happening in the Sahara desert. It is also helping to deplete other resources like water. Because the Tuareg rely on the desert and the few grazing areas for their camels, this exploration, which is damaging the water supply and grazing grounds, is helping to push them into a settled lifestyle. Because the water is becoming harder to find, the Tuareg are forced "to compete with southern farming

communities,” and “this has led to tensions and clashes between these communities” (Simanowitz, 2009, 72). This conflict is new for the Tuareg, especially since they rely on trade with the settled people to get what they need while providing things for the settled people. This increased interest in the exploration of resources in Niger is a result of globalization, which has “increased the economic strength of many nations, and...significantly intensified international competition for the natural resources needed to sustain commercial growth” (Samovar, 2010, 6). Because of this competition, the companies that are coming in to mine want little trouble from the native people they are displacing. Meanwhile, the Tuareg are being pushed about, forgotten, only remembered when they become an issue for either the government or for the companies that are mining and exploring the resources beneath the Sahara.

It is not just the government and the major companies mining and exploring resources, but also the natural environment that the Tuareg have to battle. The Tuareg rely on oasis and grazing ground to make their long journey across the desert and because of drought and famines they have been forced to settle in areas where the resources are more readily available (Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 2010, 1). The consequence of this is that many have been forced to become farmers, a lifestyle that the Tuareg do not value. A settled lifestyle is something that is hard for many Tuaregs to accept since they have lived nomadically for around 2 centuries. Even today, many of the Tuareg still live traditionally in the desert.

Those that refuse to settle still “maintain a trade network among the many peoples of North Africa, providing those who stay in one place with some of the things they require for everyday life” (Beelitz, 2010, 1). Trading, however, is also coming under attack through globalization and development. Roads and small landing areas for planes have developed, thus reducing the need for the Tuareg and their trade. However, the hot and sandy conditions of the desert often cause “engines to overheat and tires to explode...and wind-blown sand clogs truck and airplane engines so much that they cannot get enough air to properly run” (Beelitz, 2010, 2-3). These facts provide the hopeful suggestion that the Tuareg, who move about using camels rather than cars or airplanes, will always be needed for trade and will therefore get to keep their traditional nomadic way of life.

As we have seen, the Tuareg people are a co-cultural group that is being forced out of its home and lifestyle to better accommodate the increased need of natural resources due to globalization. However, the Tuareg people are not going easily. They are fighting against the resource mining and oil drilling that is damaging and consuming already limited resources like water. They are fighting against governments that are trying to force them to settle by allowing companies to invade their traditional route and requiring passports to pass borders. They are also surviving against desertification, where famine and drought is destroying once lavish grazing land for their animals. Despite all these adverse factors, the men and women of the Tuareg tribe still follow their traditions. They still trade goods at settlements at oases. Women still head the families and tribes. Men still veil. They were once a forgotten people of the desert, only seen by the governments that want them out of the desert so that they can sell its resources for money. Because the Tuareg fight back, they are seen as terrorist and are categorized by the local government with Al-Qaeda to help eliminate them from their native lands. Increasingly, however, new perspectives on the tribe are coming to the masses which chal-

lenge such misled characterizations of the Tuareg.

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