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Saharan Nomads and the State: The Evolution of Tuareg National Identity in Libya

The Tuareg are an indigenous nomadic people of the Sahara Desert, the largest and most inhospitable desert in the world. In their traditional lifestyle, the Tuareg eschew borders and rarely settle in an area for long, tracking the rains and resources of the desert, herding animals and trading. However, the colonization of Africa by the French, and later the hardening of borders when African nations became independent, imposed new boundaries and pressures on the Tuareg. The territory they roamed was sliced up between Algeria, Libya, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, and the Tuareg found themselves persecuted and rejected by many. However, they found an unlikely patron in the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, who presented himself as their savior and welcomed Tuareg migrants into the nation. Since Gaddafi's overthrow in 2011, the Tuareg lost their only powerful friend, and have had to find new strategies to adapt to a chaotic and violent Libya.

This paper will examine how Tuareg relations to statehood, territory and nationalism have evolved over time, focusing on Libya. The examination of the Tuareg's responses to changing political, economic and social pressures will reveal how the traditional nomadic lifestyles of the Tuareg have remained relatively constant in different contexts, adapted to the new realities of statehood. However, the Tuareg have also begun to recognize the importance of

sovereignty over territory, and a new Tuareg desire for inclusion in a state has manifested — particularly since the overthrow of Gaddafi in 2011.

Traditional Lifestyles of the Sahara

The Tuareg have adapted to the vast desert of the Sahara with a nomadic pastoralist lifestyle. Made up of a variety of different kinship groups and clans, the Tuareg's traditional way of life includes frequent migration across thousands of miles in search of pasture for their sheep, goats and camels. The territory in which they roam stretches across current national borders and reaches from southeastern Algeria to southwestern Libya in the north to northeastern Burkina Faso, northern Mali and Niger in the south. Because rain falls rarely and inconsistently in the Sahara, the Tuareg are highly mobile and traditionally live in tents, trading salt, grain, animals, cloth and fruits or vegetables among the settled communities in the northern Maghreb and south in the Sahel. They supplement the food they produce from their animals and cultivate in rare oases with their trading and occasional raids on settled communities (Butler, 2015: 51).

The Tuareg, or Kel Tamasheq in their own language, divide themselves into eight major confederative kinship groups, within each a number of different subgroups. These kinship groups have shifting sets of alliances or conflictual relationships. Within these groups, the society is broken into social classes determined by birth, including warrior nobles, kings, religious leaders known as marabouts, middle-class merchants and working pastoralists, blacksmiths and artisans, sedentary gardeners who remain in oases, and servants (Butler, 2015: 48-49). Elders within the group impress norms of behavior among participants through proverbs and unwritten rules of behavior. Marriages are monogamous, and young women often have many unofficial

relationships while young before they marry. Kinship is matrilineal, and women possess rights over many family belongings, animals and children (Butler, 2015: 32-33). Storytelling, poetry and literature are essential parts of Tuareg culture that noble men and women engage in. Fiercely independent, the Tuareg have traditionally declined to settle or integrate into the kingdoms and political powers of the Maghreb and Sahel, preferring to keep moving throughout the Sahara and retain their own nomadic culture and way of life.

French Occupation

The arrival of Europeans and the colonization of Africa, including the Sahara, imposed new pressures and structures upon the Tuareg. The French sought to control the Sahara to establish a link between their colonies in Algeria and Senegal and sent several expeditions into the desert in the late 1800s, which were killed by the Tuareg. However, the French persevered, and subjugated all Tuareg lands by 1910 through brutal military campaigns — with the exception of the northeastern territories of modern-day Libya, which were occupied by the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans encouraged the radical Muslim Senussi sect to rebel against the Christians in Muslim lands, arming the Tuaregs among others in an attempt to repel colonial rule. Tuaregs attacked the French in Algeria, Mali and Niger in 1915 and 1916, but the colonial forces were too strong, and the revolts were suppressed within months (Butler, 2015: 129-130).

The French divided the Tuareg by endowing leaders like Moussa ag Amastane of the Kel Rela with wealth and political authority in exchange for their help suppressing dissidents. They invested the office of *Amenukal*, which Moussa ag Amastane held, with political authority which had been absent in traditional systems. However, these offices were always subordinate to the

French (Keenan, 2004: 50). The French drew borders across the Sahara and began to administer the swathes of desert as separate regions, but the Tuareg were largely permitted to continue their traditional migrations. The Tuareg found old ways of life disrupted — the French colonial administration prevented the groups from raiding — but found new economic opportunities as well, such as tourism (Butler 2015: 136-140).

New States and New Boundaries

When first Libya in 1951, then Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso in 1960, and finally Algeria in 1962 became independent states, the Tuareg had been little involved in the movements for independence and quickly found themselves marginalized by the new African governments. When the French in 1957 proposed the creation of a confederation of the arid regions of Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad under one administration, the newly independent governments saw the project as a colonial plot between the Tuareg and the French against their states. In Mali, the state brutally repressed the northern Tuareg regions after 1960. Furthermore, drought, the collapse of tourism and the centralization of government resources led to an economic crisis among the nomadic people, forcing many of the southern Tuareg to migrate and settle in border towns of Algeria and Libya.

Libya's dictatorial leader Muammar Gaddafi saw the opportunity and was the only one of the states containing Tuareg territory to recruit them into the Libyan army and welcome them instead of openly persecuted the group. With new military training and weapons from Libya, the Tuareg have been part of several insurgencies in Mali and Niger since the 1990s, alternatively allying with and fighting Muslim extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

(Butler 2015: 172-178). After the overthrow of Gaddafi in 2011, the Tuareg have been forced once again to grapple with new circumstances and pressures, persecuted by the rebels who see them as Gaddafi loyalists and navigating the violent lawlessness of Libya's civil war.

Since independence, Libya has been a key player in the Tuareg people's future and exerted new pressures and opportunities on Tuareg lives. This paper will examine the relationship between the Libyan state and the Tuareg under Gaddafi and in the post-Gaddafi period, analyzing shifting conceptions of citizenship and nationality, economic prospects, and militarization from an anthropological perspective.

An Unlikely Patron: Gaddafi and the Tuareg

Before the African independence period, the Tuareg had no conception of citizenship or national belonging tied to the land. Although some settled communities existed, they themselves relied on the goods procured by the nomads. Tuareg generally saw themselves as part of their respective kinship groups and families rather than part of a larger kingdom or nation. The new states of Mali, Niger and Algeria did little to provide them with a sense of citizenship; more often than receiving benefits, the Tuareg were persecuted and excluded.

Unlike the governments of Mali and Niger, Gaddafi was willing to include the Tuareg in the Libyan national narrative. The military general seized control of Libya in 1969 and ruled the nation with an iron fist. While Gaddafi repressed the indigenous Amazigh people of Libya, banning their language and arresting their leaders, he viewed the Tuareg as Arabs and their language as simply a dialect of Arabic (Kohl 2014). Furthermore, Gaddafi's personal background

provides a clue towards his support of the Tuareg. The general grew up in the dry Sirte region in a nomadic Bedouin family, which maintained close trade ties with the populations of the Sahara (Ronen 2013). Raised as a desert nomad himself, he likely felt a strong connection with the Tuareg lifestyle. Thus, Gaddafi encouraged Tuareg migrants from Niger and Mali to resettle in Libya.

Gaddafi included the Tuareg in his pan-Arab ideology, calling them the “Arabs of the South” and “Defenders of the Sahara,” and encouraging them to feel included in “their country.” In April 2005, he received a delegation of Tuareg migrants and declared: “Libya is the land of the Tuareg, their basis and their support.” He based this declaration on the idea that the Tuareg were an Arab tribe which originated in Libya, and therefore the Tuareg in all their regions are an extension of Libya (Kohl 2014). Gaddafi’s overtures to the Tuareg was also motivated by the desire to create a loyal military corps to strengthen his rule, introduce immigrant labor for the modernization projects of the state, and extend Libyan influence beyond its borders. He recruited numerous Tuareg into secret military forces which he sent abroad to fight Israel in Lebanon and Palestine and fight perceived colonial powers in Uganda and Chad (Keenan 2004: 263-264).

Gaddafi welcomed the Tuareg into Libya more than just rhetorically. In the period from 2005-2007, he introduced new pieces of legislation that allowed Tuareg to move and work freely within Libya (Fischer and Kohl 2010: 144). As part of these policies, the Libyan government issued identity cards to Tuareg migrants which record the new citizen’s name, date, place of birth, and kinship affiliation. To obtain an ID card, a Tuareg claiming Libyan citizenship must have either relied on a well-connected kinship member, who can enter their name in a Libyan

administrative book, or provide several witnesses who can attest to the individual's birth circumstances (Perrin, 2014: 311). These ID cards are only issued to Tuareg, marking them as distinct from other Libyan citizens, and distinguish the Tuareg's transnational border crossings from sub-Saharan migrants seeking to enter Europe. These documents protect the Tuareg from immigration and border control police (Fischer and Kohl 2010: 147-148). By marking Tuareg as distinct from other Libyans and respecting their traditional transnational lifestyle, the Libyan regime did not simply replace a traditional conception of belonging as rooted in kinship ties with a citizenship rooted to territory. Instead, the Libyan state expanded the conception of Libyan citizenship, where members of certain ethnicities — the Tuareg — are entitled to a transnational Libyan citizenship that extends beyond the borders of the state.

Tuareg Identity in Gaddafi's Libya

How did the Tuareg react to this new citizenship? The answers among the community are mixed. Some Tuareg, particularly those who were born in Libya rather than being migrants from Niger or Mali, retired from their transnational lifestyle. They chose instead to assimilate and settle down in Libya. The most important marker of this type of Tuareg is marriage; often when Tuaregs marry Libyan women, they broke out of the roaming lifestyle of the nomads and chose to conform to the rooted, relatively luxurious lifestyle provided by the welfare state in Libya (Fischer and Kohl, 2010: 152). Formal schooling in Arabic, subsidized food, free housing, education and medical care and new job opportunities provided enormous incentives for these Tuareg to assimilate. These groups accepted the designation of "Arabs of the south" and

conformed to a sedentary lifestyle, rooting themselves in the Libyan nation-state and embracing their newfound citizenship (Kohl 2014).

Others continued to roam across borders, using their Libyan identification documents strategically and possessing multiple pairs. For example, a Tuareg man named Hamidan was born in Niger and possesses multiple sets of Nigerien ID documents. However, he also worked in Libya and therefore possesses a Libyan ID under a different name, which he uses to prevent being deported. He is also married in Algeria, and carries neither set of documents with him when he visits, so that if he is caught by the police he can tell them which place he wants to go to (Fischer and Kohl, 2010: 149). Hamidan's national identity is flexible, and he is a representative of the Tuareg who continue to migrate, ignoring traditional constructions of citizenship. For Tuareg like Hamidan, the issuance of citizenship papers does not provide him with some intrinsic sense of belonging or ties to that nation; instead, they are more like tools, which provide him access to resources and his personal network like work in Libya or his wife in Algeria. Thus, while some Tuareg were enticed into the rooted citizenship of Libyan nationality, others retained the traditional nomadic lifestyle and values of their predecessors, albeit with different types of economic activity.

These two groups with differing conceptions of nationhood perceive one another with mutual suspicion, despite speaking the same language and sharing many cultural traits. The 'settled' Tuareg classify their migrant kin as "aliens to the nation state," and have emphasized the difference between themselves and the migrants. For their part, the new migrants have treated

the settled Tuareg with an attitude of “belittling avoidance,” viewing them as representatives of the Libyan state rather than ethnic kinsfolk (Fischer and Kohl 2010: 145-146).

The attitudes of the Tuareg toward Libyan citizenship under Gaddafi are thus complex and varied. While many embraced a new territorially rooted conception of national identity, others adopted a more instrumental view, in which national identification papers are merely tools that allows them to continue a migratory nomadic existence.

Rebellions and a New Conception of Territory

Alongside the politics of postcolonial nationalism, the idea of a trans-Saharan nation continues to hold appeal for the Tuareg. These projects have been proposed by various actors over the years but have always fallen through due to the resistance of African post-colonial governments. First, in 1957 France proposed the creation of a united Saharan region to secure their access to the rich mineral deposits in the area. African independence movements, particularly in Algeria, vehemently opposed the idea, and it amounted to nothing (Butler 2015: 129-130). Roughly thirty years later, Gaddafi’s ambitions in the Sahara led him to support Tuareg separatist demands in the Sahel, including the establishment of “The Popular Front for the Liberation of the Arab Central Sahara” in the military training camps he presided over. However, after his defeat in the war with Chad, Gaddafi sought to diffuse tension with France and therefore outlawed the Tuareg movement he had helped orchestrate. Even though he withdrew his public support, the Libyan leader continued to discreetly fund Tuareg militants in the Sahel (Ronen 2013). In 2006, Gaddafi financed a *Mawalid* Islamic celebration in Timbuktu, Mali, which was attended by thousands of Malians and several Sahelian heads of state. At this

event, Gaddafi unveiled a proposal for a “Greater Saharan State,” including the Tuareg lands outside the Libyan borders, which would “form a federation with Libya.” Once again, Algeria voiced its opposition, and Gaddafi never advanced to actually implement his proposal (Ronen 2013).

The aforementioned examples are all attempts by state powers such as France or Libya to grab more territory for themselves. However, the notion of an independent state for the Tuareg notably been taken up by the Tuareg themselves. After the fall of Gaddafi’s regime, many armed and trained Tuareg who had fought in his military against the rebel forces fled to northern Mali and declared the MNLA (Mouvement National pour la Libération de l’Azawad). A military coup (not led by the Tuareg) in March 2012 overthrew the president of Mali, and the Tuareg claimed large swaths of Mali’s territory as a new Azawad state that would represent all the peoples of the area. They emphasized the secular nature of their new state and said they would be partners with the West in the war on terror in an attempt to gain Western support and international recognition. However, the Tuareg rebels found no backers, and decided instead to ally themselves with a local radical Islamic group called Ansar al-Din, who has links to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Ansar al-Din is itself ran by a prominent Tuareg militant who had participated in earlier attacks against the Malian state named Iyad ag Ghaly. This fragile alliance quickly collapsed, and the two rebel groups found themselves in violent conflict with one another (Ronen 2013).

The overthrow of Gaddafi and the Tuareg rebellions in northern Mali are clearly linked; in some ways, the revolt can be seen as a desperate attempt to establish a Tuareg nation in response to the de-nationalization occurring in Libya. Gaddafi’s Libya was the only regime that

provided the Tuareg with hope and gave them the autonomy and opportunities they desired. Furthermore, the Libyan state provided the Tuareg with a national identity and a message of belonging, rather than exclusion. When the Libyan dictator was violently overthrown, the Tuareg lost their only haven which valorized and accepted their way of life. Indeed, many Tuareg had abandoned aspects of their nomadic identity to become rooted in Libya. The rebellion in northern Mali and the attacks by Tuareg fighters in AQIM are not simply 'raids' of the Tuareg's long-gone traditional past; rather, they represent the desire of many Tuareg to become rooted in a specific territory, adopting a conception of 'belonging' that includes land and not just kinship. From decades of powerlessness at the hands of the various states that divide their traditional lands, many Tuareg seem to have recognized the necessity of claiming sovereignty over their territory. The attempt to establish a state in northern Mali, rather than trying to assert the rights of Tuareg to cross borders freely and be left to their own devices, demonstrates the changing attitudes of the Tuareg towards the state and even the land itself. The Tuareg are no longer content to exist at the margins of more powerful, settled forces; they want to be rooted and have territory for themselves in order to determine their own path.

The Tuareg in Post-Revolutionary Libya

The Tuareg had been integrated into the security forces of Gaddafi, and they remained some of his staunchest supporters during the rebel uprising in 2011. They continued to fight by his side against the rebel forces until the day he was killed on October 20, 2011. This did not endear them to the rebel forces, who violently harassed them. One faction based in Misrata, Libya's third-largest city, even called openly for the Tuareg to be excluded from the new Libyan

state and for all of the migrants from Niger and Mali to be deported (Ronen 2013). Within months, Libya had been transformed from a welcoming home conferring citizenship and providing opportunities for the Tuareg people to another site of persecution and exclusion.

Those Tuareg who have chosen to stay in Libya will face numerous challenges in any state, even beyond the frightening violence, unstable economic conditions and persecution by vengeful militias. Although Gaddafi's Tuareg ID cards helped integrate the nomads and migrants into the state, they were issued haphazardly and inconsistently. Some read, "this identity card is exclusively for the Tuareg's sons," while others are designated "pass for entering and moving." Still others cite the member's birth as being in Mali or Niger but declare the holder to be Libyan anyway (Kohl 2014). Furthermore, these ID cards do not convey full citizenship, which most migrant Tuaregs were never granted and is difficult to obtain without written records. Even if the Tuareg can escape persecution and a stable state in Libya is established, they risk being even more excluded and powerless in a new state.

Though circumstances across the Libyan territory are dire, the power vacuum and instability in Libya since 2011 have provided the Tuareg with relative autonomy and novel opportunities, as well as challenges. When the central government dissolved, the patrols that had once monitored the southern border evaporated, and the Tuareg reasserted control of southwestern Libya. Another minority group called the Tebu — who had been severely repressed under Gaddafi's regime, not welcomed like the Tuareg — controlled the southeastern section. The two groups agreed to divide the border, with the Tebu controlling the Tumu border post and the Tuareg controlling the pass of Anay. Until mid-2014, the groups collaborated to share control

of the zone between the two passages, and they profited from the trafficking of drugs, alcohol and weapons between the Sahel and Libya (Kohl 2014). With few economic opportunities, the Tuareg returned to their traditional role as trade intermediaries between northern and southern Africa — this time smuggling illicit goods instead of salt and cloth.

In late 2014, however, the fragile agreements between the Tuareg and Tebu fell apart, and the groups began to fight for control of these border regions, which also contain oil deposits. The warring tribes were backed by the two governments of Libya's north who are competing for supremacy. The Misratan forces, who had earlier called for the Tuareg to be expelled, began to see the Tuareg as potential allies. The Misratans are key players supporting the Tripoli-based coalition in northwestern Libya, and they provided the Tuareg with medical aid, gasoline and some financial backing. Meanwhile, the Tobruk-based northeastern Libyan government supports the Tebu against the Tuareg (Murray 2015). Once again, the Tuareg were co-opted by more powerful actors to do the dirty work for them in a brutal war.

However, relations between the groups have improved since 2014. The Tobruk-based government continued to favor Arab over non-Arab militias and formed an alliance with a historic Tebu enemy, the Arab Awlad Suliman tribe, in 2017. The Tebu broke their alliance with the Tobruk-based government and allied themselves with the Tuareg once again, this time united with the Tripoli-based government against the Eastern government's military advances. The joint Tuareg-Tebu force has so far managed to maintain control of southeastern Libya, although their fate remains uncertain as the civil war continues to rage (Westcott 2019). The alliance shows that

the Tuareg are not motivated by deep-seated animosity towards other ethnic groups; instead, they are used to co-existing with other groups and make their alliances strategically.

Some Tuareg have sought to escape the smuggling, war and violence in southern Libya, and have migrated to Zuwara on the northwest coast of Libya. The city is an enclave for another group of North African indigenous people, the Amazigh or Berbers. Tuareg migrants choose Zuwara not just because the security conditions are relatively safe, but also because they feel close to other indigenous minority groups in Libya like the Amazigh (Zurutuza 2018). The Tuareg's ethnic identity has changed dramatically from the days when Gaddafi declared them the "Arabs of the South;" rather than finding kinship with Arabs, they have made alliances with other indigenous minority groups like the Tebu and Amazigh.

Adapting to changing security conditions and a stateless environment, the Tuareg have found their traditional mobility, flexibility and knowledge of the desert useful in the chaos of post-2011 Libya. Echoes of their pre-modern traditions of raiding and trading have reappeared, such as the cross-border trans-Saharan smuggling and mobile raids against Eastern Libyan government targets. The Tuareg are uniquely suited to take advantage of the porous borders, shifting alliances and vast ungoverned stretches of territory, and have managed to persevere despite enormous challenges.

Since the revolution, the Tuareg in Libya have found the national identity and belonging extended by Gaddafi ripped away from them. Although their traditional nomadism denies the concept of state borders and many Tuareg remain more attached to their conception of tribe than any state, the Tuareg have also accepted in several ways the importance of national belonging

and sovereignty over territory. The declaration of a state in northern Mali, Tuareg negotiations with Tebu over the control of Libya's southern borders, and the attempts of many Tuareg to find stability and community with the Amazigh in Zuwura represent different methods to stake a claim to territory and establish a home for the Tuareg. Ironically, to preserve a nomadic lifestyle they must tie themselves to the land.

Conclusion

The Tuareg's traditional lifestyle depended on the fact that no greater power could establish real control over the Sahara Desert; even though the Tuareg did not possess their own "state," they still had de-facto ownership over the land. When the French with their superior technology and organization were able to control the Tuareg and challenge their dominance over the desert, the Tuareg received their first shock and had to give up parts of their traditional lifestyle like raiding. The French pressure also coalesced the Tuareg into a more united force, reinforcing a larger "Tuareg" identity beyond clan affiliations. When the French left, their borders, which had been relatively accommodating to the Tuareg's nomadism, remained and hardened as the new nations asserted control over the desert. The Tuareg's land was divided and they became a minority distributed among several stronger powers, excluded from and persecuted by the new states in Mali and Niger; their relationship to the state was oppositional and they continued to pursue traditional ways of life despite the new borders.

However, Gaddafi opened a new chapter in Tuareg's relationship to the state. When Libya opened its doors to the Tuareg and declared itself their homeland, many became fully integrated into Libyan society, or at least employed the benefits of national belonging that

Gaddafi offered. Even though most Tuareg continued to see themselves as Tuareg first, Libyan second and regularly crossed borders, the inclusion into the Libyan state demonstrated the importance of sovereignty over territory for Tuareg. When the Gaddafi regime was overthrown, the Tuareg adapted traditional skills and ways of life like trading and raiding to the new chaotic landscape of post-revolutionary Libya. Furthermore, Tuareg began to search for ways to protect themselves from persecution by establishing sovereignty over territory, whether in northern Mali, at the Libyan border or among perceived ethnic allies in northwest Libya. Based on these developments, many Tuareg are likely to continue traditional ways of life and serve as cross-border traders and migrants. Additionally, the Sahara will experience continued unrest as the Tuareg search for territory where they can be safe from persecution – whether that is in a new Saharan state or inclusion into an existing state.

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