That Desert is Our Country: Tuareg Rebellions and Competing Nationalisms in Contemporary Mali (1946-1996)
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Some conclusive remarks

I began the introduction saying that this thesis is an attempt to answer a few simple questions of a 'factual' nature. These could be summarised as 'why was there a violent conflict between the Malian state and its Tamasheq and Moorish inhabitants'? I started this research expecting answers to be limited and the questions to be answerable within the then so popular frame of 'ethnicity'. Perhaps I was too enthusiastic in asking such a broad question and only looking at such a small range of explanations. As was to be expected and as it should be, I came away from 'the field' knowing that things were more complex. A question of this nature does not lead to one clear-cut answer which can be formulated within the scope of one specific theme in social science. The conflict had many reasons and various causes, but one all-encompassing answer can be given. Throughout this thesis I have argued that the conflict found its origins in a Tamasheq desire to regain political independence which had been lost after French colonial conquest.

The conflict was also about the nature of the state and who holds power in it; about racial prejudice and stereotyped images of self and other; about various forms of nationalism; and about political and social developments within Tamasheq society. As I tried to do justice to the complexity of the history told and the questions and issues raised throughout the preceding chapters, I do not think it worthwhile or even possible to shortly summarise them all here. Instead, I will concentrate on the few issues that struck me most.

Nationalism and the state

After the Second World War, colonial politics were restructured worldwide. In French West Africa and the Maghreb, this restructuring led to the establishment of a new political elite, political parties and a gradual transfer of power in AOF and Morocco from the French to this new elite. At the same time, as mineral wealth was discovered in the hitherto worthless Sahara, various conflicts broke out over attempts to retrace the Saharan borders – culminating in the French-Moroccan war over Mauritania between 1957 and 1958 – while further north-west, a ferocious colonial war of independence ravaged Algeria. In this geo-political configuration, the Moors and the Kel Tamasheq were both figuratively and literally at centre-stage as inhabitants of the Sahara. In this period the bases for a future conflict were laid.

Most striking about this period is the fact that the multifarious political projects in which the Kel Tamasheq and Moorish political elite engaged were all more or less directed against something: Kel Tamasheq and Moorish incorporation in Mali. The OCRS sought to keep the Sahara under French tutelage, which precluded Tamasheq and Moorish independence. The Nahda al-Wattaniyya al-Mauritaniyya sought to incorporate the Moorish and (partly) Tamasheq inhabited parts of Mali in either Mauritania or Morocco. Even those leaders who participated in party politics and elections in French Sudan, did so in an attempt to curb the political power
of the ‘southern’ political elite. In this period, Tamasheq nationalism was only formulated as a negative nationalism. It was about what they did not want to be – Malian – with hardly any idea what they did want to be, except Kel Tamasheq.

When in 1960, French Sudan became independent as the Republic of Mali, the various political adventures of the Kel Tamasheq elite had made them highly suspicious in the eyes of the Malian leaders, who feared a Tamasheq rebellion with the support of French troops still present in the region. The Kel Tamasheq attitude towards their incorporation within the new state was, in the eyes of the Malian political elite, as threatening as before independence. The Kel Tamasheq made demands about government and administration which can be summarised as a demand for virtual autonomy: No state interference in internal affairs; administrators should be Kel Tamasheq or Moor; tribal leaders were to keep their power; Arabic education should be equal to French education. These demands do show a certain contempt for the Malian leaders from the side of the Kel Tamasheq and Moors. Such mutual fears and contempts, combined with no small amount of prejudice from both sides, and small personal conflicts exaggerated in rumour, could only lead to the Malian fear of revolt becoming a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. Indeed, in 1963, the wish not to be Malian led a small group of Kel Adagh men to start an armed uprising which was bloodily suppressed by an anxious and inexperienced new regime. Although it was only partly clear what the rebels wanted, it was clear what they did not want – to be part of a state ruled by black Africans. Only in the 1970s and 1980s was a more positive Tamasheq nationalism created which made clear what it wanted – an independent Tamasheq state.

A few things stand out when looking at the Tamasheq national idea as it was imagined in the 1970s and 1980s by the ishumar – the young Kel Tamasheq migrant workers who shaped both this national idea and the political movement that would fight for it. The first characteristic is that a people which organised society and politics on the basis of fictive kinship ties, based its nationalist ideal on territorial notions. The desert they had fled during the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s was nevertheless imagined as a possibly fertile national space. There were very specific reasons why ‘soil’ was taken as the binding national factor, instead of ‘blood’. The Tamasheq nationalists perceived the already existent use of kinship ideology in Tamasheq social political organisation as a major obstacle to successful political unification of the Tamasheq nation.

Indeed, the social political structure of the Kel Tamasheq in tewsiten – clans – kept hindering the nationalist movement throughout its existence as various clan-based factions fought for political dominance within the movement. These fights started in the mid-eighties, continued during the rebellion, and even after the rebellion violence between clans continued to haunt Tamasheq internal politics. Nevertheless, the idea of a Tamasheq country to be united proved just as ineffective and was abandoned rather quickly. The Kel Tamasheq indigenous to Algeria and Libya, the Kel Hoggar and the Kel Ajjer federations, never joined the liberation movement.
Already during the 1980s the Kel Tamasheq from Mali and Niger, once united under the name Kel Nimagiler, had broken up along the lines of the nation states they sought to overthrow – Mali and Niger. The fact that they garbled the names of Mali and Niger to form their own name as a political entity shows how strongly the idea of the existing nation-states was engraved on their minds.

The second characteristic is that the tanekra nationalist movement incorporated certain ideas on the nature of Tamasheq society and the need to reshape it, which its predecessors – the political leaders of the 1950s and the fighters of Alfellaga – had actively resisted. The USRDA had sought to curb the power of the tribal chiefs, which had been created or strengthened during the colonial period, and to promote the interests of the lower strata of society – the bellah, or former slaves, and imghad, or free non-nobles. Although these policies had not been successful, they had formed a major cause for the discontent and subsequent violent rebellion of the Kel Adagh in 1963.

Now, only a decade later and with the Keita regime gone, the new Tamasheq revolutionaries not only sought to liberate their country from 'foreign occupation', they also sought to liberate it from tribal and 'feudal' leadership and social relations. The prejudices once held against them were now part of a Tamasheq image of self. In the end, the attempt to rid society of its 'feudal' chiefs and social relations failed as much as the attempt to liberate the country from Malian rule. After the 'fratricidal war' between the competing rebel movements MPA and ARLA in 1994, and especially after the initiative for a lasting peace in northern Mali in October 1994 from the tribal chiefs of the Bourem Cercle, the power of the tribal leaders was even strengthened at the expense of the revolutionaries. The failure of the movement to incorporate the bellah as a social group would eventually lead them to join the Ganda Koy, a vigilante movement which sought to end the Tamasheq rebellion through counter-violence.

**Race and stereotypes**

As I noted in the introduction, in a way, the conflict between the Malian state and the Kel Tamasheq and Moors forms part of a problem that haunts all of the Sahel, a problem often seen by foreign experts as one of ethnicity, but locally phrased in terms of race.

Perhaps the most interesting side to the racial aspect of the conflict between the state and the Kel Tamasheq, is that both sides were equally obsessed with race and that both used racial discourses. One could safely say that Alfellaga was the result of relations between two different political elites based on mutual distrust and negative preconceived stereotyped images. While the Keita regime perceived the Kel Tamasheq as white, anarchist, feudal, lazy, pro-slavery nomads who needed to be civilised, the Kel Tamasheq elite saw the Malian politicians as black, incompetent, untrustworthy slaves in disguise who came to usurp power. These ideas resurfaced with the outbreak of the second rebellion in 1990 and were openly expressed in a mutually hostile discourse on 'the other' at the height of the conflict in the summer of 1994, when the Mouvement
**Patriotique Ganda Koy** set out to defend the ‘sedentary black’ population against the ‘white nomad’ threat against national unity.

On a theoretical level one could argue about whether racialism is or is not a subcategory of ethnicity. The answer is: It depends on what one means with both terms and from which side one looks at the problem. Indeed, until the 1970s the term ‘race’ remained a significant concept of analysis, used in ways akin to the present-day use of the term ‘ethnicity’.\(^{556}\) As Ashcroft et al. remark –

> ‘In practice, “race“ may be a major constitutive factor in determining ethnic categories, but to revive the idea that it is somehow “objective” and less socially constructed than ethnicities founded on religious, linguistic or other more obviously culturally determined factors is to fail to recognize that race is a cultural rather than a biological phenomenon, the product of historical processes not of genetically determined physical differences’.\(^{557}\)

Racialism is the construction of social groups and identities on the basis of perceived (or imagined) physical characteristics. One belongs to a race when oneself and/or others say so on the basis of one’s physical appearance.

Throughout this thesis, I have indicated a congruence between the social categories ‘ethnic group’ and ‘nation’ – a social political group of a size that does not allow all members to know each other, which means it is partly an imaginary community which members recognise each other’s membership on the basis of certain shared traits. The distinction often made between ‘ethnic group’ and ‘nation’ is a political choice stemming from the idea that ‘nation’ is inherent to ‘nationalism’ which in turn is linked to ‘state’, as becomes clear from the standardised usage of the term ‘nation-state’. I have also indicated that I see ethnicity as an ‘ideology’ forming the imaginary framework of an ethnic group or nation, whereas nationalism, and here I take Gellner’s definition, is ‘primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent’.\(^{558}\) In these definitions, race is not a subcategory of ethnicity. One can imagine members of various racial backgrounds to be members of the same nation and this is indeed the case in Tamasheq society.

The Kel Tamasheq are perceived both by themselves and by the Malian government to be racially divided. The Kel Tamasheq themselves discern three types: *koual*, black; *shaggaran*, red; and *sattelen*, greenish black. Each type roughly corresponds with a certain social group within society, but none of these groups is seen as non-Kel Tamasheq. However, the colonial administration, the Malian administration of the 1960s, as well as the *Ganda Koy* movement of the 1990s only saw two ‘racial’ categories of Kel Tamasheq – white and black. But regardless of whether one

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\(^{556}\) Ashcroft et. al (2000), op. cit., 204.

\(^{557}\) Ibidem, 205.

\(^{558}\) Gellner (1983), op.cit., 1.
distinguishes between two or three categories, one distinguishes racial differences within one and the same society, or nation or ethnic group. Whether the white and black (or red or green) racial types can be seen as ethnic subgroups is arguable. Although there seems to be a tendency for the former Tamasheq slaves to see themselves as a distinctive group within Tamasheq society, with some racial overtones next to the main social reasons (being discriminated against as slaves), it seems this process of sub-ethnic differentiation is hardly on its way. However, it cannot be excluded that, say, ten years from now, one speaks of the bellah as a different ethnic group or nation.

**A last question**

Throughout this thesis, in chapters IV and VI in particular, I have stressed the importance of a particular Tamasheq concept in explaining the outbreak of rebellion – *egha*, a mixture of hate, powerlessness, and longing for revenge, or a contracted honour debt. *Egha* as revenge and the paying of one’s honour debt formed the start of Alfellaga. *Egha* was the one feeling that bound all *ishumar* of every political persuasion in the tanekra movement which prepared for the second rebellion. *Egha* is created when one is powerless in the face of an attack on one’s honour, and on one’s existence. *Egha* created the link between the first and the second rebellion. Given the fact that the atrocities committed during the first rebellion were repeated in the second rebellion, given that yet another generation of young Kel Tamasheq was confronted with war and misery, it is pertinent to ask whether *egha* will not link these two rebellions to a third one in the future. Of course, it is impossible to answer this question. But I have asked it myself and so have others. I can only provide the answer others have given me:

Whether or not the current generation of youngsters has taken up *egha* will be clear when they grow to adulthood. Their future actions are then dependent on the social political circumstances. In the wake of the second rebellion and partly as a result of this rebellion, Mali is undergoing a process of democratisation and decentralisation. The communal elections of June 1999 were the first ever in which the Kel Tamasheq could vote other Kel Tamasheq into power at a local level. The rather bitter and intense struggle for votes between some of the candidates indicates the enthusiasm for this relative form of political independence. In a way, one could say that the Kel Tamasheq rebels have won, or at least that they haven’t lost the fight they started in 1990. All people I spoke to in Northern Mali realised that it is now the Kel Tamasheq community itself that is responsible, hence empowered, for its future, and feelings of empowerment and *egha* are mutually exclusive.