

In Search of the
TUAREG

The Veiled People of the Sahara

Gerbert van der Aa

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INTRODUCTION

The Tuareg are the best known inhabitants of the Sahara; desert people where it's the men who wear the veil, not the women. Traditionally camel- and goat-herding nomads, in recent decades the Tuareg have endured great upheavals. A significant number have forged links with al Qaida or ISIS, and from hideouts in the desert they attack targets in the north of Mali, where a UN mission endeavors to protect civilians.

Among Westerners the mystique of these veiled nomads generates a romantic allure. In the nineteenth century French scholars portrayed them as heroic figures. Nowadays, Tuareg musicians like Tinariwen and Bombino perform across the globe.

This Western fascination stands in contrast to the hostility directed towards the Tuareg from other ethnic groups in the sub-Saharan Sahel of West Africa. In Mali, Niger, Algeria, Libya and Burkina Faso – the five countries which encompass the homeland of the Tuareg – they're regarded as haughty, arrogant racists, or whining, victimized troublemakers.

Why do Western and African views of the Tuareg differ so widely? Are the Tuareg notably different from other African ethnic groups? Do they have a better PR machine? Or are there other reasons?

KIDNAPPED

MALI 1992

Ahead of us dozens of tracks wove across the sand, dodging low shrubs, rocks and thorny acacia trees. Once in a while I glimpsed a nomad camp set back from the track. Snotty kids stopped to stare at our passing cars, then resumed their play. We came to a broken bridge, the concrete slabs jumbled like earthquake rubble by a brief but violent flash flood. I drove into the dry riverbed and soon got stuck in the fine sand. After some digging and pushing – I knew the routine by now – we were rolling again.

It was July 1992 in the barren, hilly scrublands of northern Mali, and it was hot. I was driving across the Sahara with Michel, a vacationing student like me. We'd left the Netherlands 10 days earlier, me in an old Peugeot 505, him in a Honda Accord, camping our way across summertime France and Spain.

From Algeçiras we waited for hours with thousands of Moroccans heading home for their vacation, then took the ferry to Ceuta. Soon after dawn we drove out of the tiny Spanish enclave on the Moroccan coast, and a day or two later crossed from Oujda into Algeria.

The Algerian border guard eyed us up and down, a couple of newbies heading into the hottest corner of the Algerian Sahara at the hottest time of the year.

‘Be careful in the desert. Every year people like you disappear or break down. If a sandstorm strikes, stop and wait – and hope your water lasts.’

Sobered by his advice, we stocked up on bottled water and a day later saw our first huge dunes, looming above the white-domed dwellings of Taghit.

This was the Sahara all right, and at this time of year it never cooled down. At night we lay on the sands by our cars, but the ground was baking and small scorpions scurried around. So we stretched out on the back seats of the cars with the doors open, hoping to catch what breeze there was.

Near the town of Reggane, the southbound asphalt ended. Ahead of us a 1,300 kilometer track lead across the border into Mali and ended in Gao on the shores of the Niger river, south of the Sahara.

The northern section in Algeria was a featureless gravel plain, a notorious void known as the Tanezrouft. We navigated by following five-meter-high marker poles set a few kilometers apart. Unfortunately, over the years many had been run over by trucks and smugglers were known to follow parallel tracks several kilometers to either side of the marked route. We didn’t want to stray into their path.

At one point, when we’d not seen any poles for an hour we became worried. Were they all missing? We decided to turn back to the last pole. It turned out we’d indeed strayed west onto a wrong track. It was another sobering experience.

Bordj Moktar was the last town in Algeria. The head of customs, a big man with a moustache, stamped our temporary importation permits and warned us as we left his office.

‘Are you sure you want to go there?’ he asked. ‘Here in

Algeria your safety is guaranteed. In Mali they’re all thieves and bandits.’

It was not all hyperbole. Tourists had recently been robbed in northern Mali, but I tried not to worry; the dangers of traveling in Africa were almost always exaggerated. And anyway, so far all had been freed unharmed. It was a tiny risk I was willing to take, galling though it would be to be relieved of our possessions at gunpoint.

In the weeks before our departure I’d read up on the situation in Mali, spending days in university libraries reading specialized journals and newspapers. In the spring of 1990 Tuareg rebels in Niger and Mali had begun an armed struggle for independence and to help finance their campaign they robbed tourists and aid workers. But in April 1992, a few months before our trip, a peace agreement had been signed and when applying for our visas at the Malian embassy in Brussels we’d been reassured that peace had returned.

‘All the problems have been solved,’ said the lady at the front desk, smiling. ‘You’re as safe in Mali as you are here in Brussels.’

But now in Mali I didn’t have a good feeling. Three years ago when I’d first traveled across the Sahara, I’d met many tourists heading south through Algeria. Now there were none, and even local traffic was almost non-existent.

Once we’d got used to the absolute desolation, the flat Tanezrouft of Algeria (the word in fact means ‘desolation’) was easy driving. But that was behind us now. In Mali the terrain was much rougher and at the lower speeds it felt even hotter and more oppressive.

Three hours from Bordj we reached the town of Tessalit, parked the cars and walked up to the hilltop fort to complete the immigration process.