Neither Segmentary, nor Centralized: the Sociopolitical Organisation of a Nomadic Society (Tuaregs) beyond Categories

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The patterns of the Tuareg sociopolitical organisation combine several principles which are generally deemed incompatible in current anthropological theories. How can one capture realities which defeat classical analytical categories? The aim of this paper will be to describe and analyse the workings of the Tuareg political system in the early XXth century, its various manifestations and transformations during the anticolonial war.

The "Segmentary theory" – in the different ways it developed from its premises by Durkheim (1893) who spoke of "agrégats semblables entre eux, semblables aux anneaux de l'annelé", to Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940) who systematised it, to authors like Gellner (1969) and Hart (1983) who focused on North – Africa, contains the general idea of the equality or the equilibrium between the different segments that form the group or the society as a whole. This type of social organisation, i. e. the segmentary lineage system, has often been opposed to hierarchical and centralized structures. This opposition has also been expressed as a gap between a kinship age and a political age of the human societies. This evolutionist vision is highly present in the early French literature concerning Africa and the Sahara, and continues to be influential today.

This explains why the question of the political structure of the Tuaregs was never really addressed during the colonial period. From the start, the Berber-speaking nomadic or semi-nomadic groups of Tuaregs were said to be anything but the embodiment of "civilisation". And this all the more so as the Tuaregs had been particularly hostile to the first French incursions into their country and had dared, in 1881, to slaughter the mission led by Flatters.

As a result, all the colonial writings present the Tuaregs as a mixture of aggressive and pugnacious tribes, always waging wars with one another, ever ready to vent their instinctive tendencies, that is to steal, despoil the weaker ones of their belongings, in short to plunder. The theories of Berberic anarchy and the endemic uncontrolled character of the nomadic peoples merged and were both applied to the Tuareg case by observers of the first part of the XXth century.[1]

Within this perspective, Captain Benhazera for instance explains in his book about the Kel Ahaggar published in 1908 (122) that "the writing of the history of the Tuaregs would amount to constantly telling stories of raids", raids against their own tribes and against their neighbours: "Ecrire l'histoire des Touaregs se ramènerait à raconter une série de razzias conti-nuelles entre eux et leurs voisins (les gens de l'Aïr, les Berabich, les Aoul-limminden, d'une part, les Chamba de l'autre." And the author concludes : "It is impossible to make any sense out of this" ("On ne s'y reconnaît plus").

On the other hand, the social hierarchy of the Tuaregs – which made a clear distinction between the nobility, the men of religion, the tributaries (often called by the French observers "vassals"), the artisans and the slaves – was often equated with European feudal models. Thus, the Tuaregs were also rejected as archaic men rooted in the past.

In the 1960's, during the "Independence" years, the Tuaregs were divid-ed into five different nation-states: Libya, Algeria, Niger, Mali, and the then Upper-Volta. But if we accept the rationale of the Colonial vision, that is the absence of any social or political unity among the Tuaregs, then this partition would not hold to be true and it would only add administra-tive divisions to disorganized groups that were already isolated.

Nowadays in the press or in various scientific journals comments re-garding the Tuareg situation in the 1990's – dealing with the movements of rebellion and the emergence of armed fronts in Mali and Niger – are not very different from the colonial representation of the Tuareg world. They allege that the revolt sprang from their isolation and their basic incapacity to really adapt to the modern world, the workings of which they cannot understand. These acts would be their last attempt to perpetuate the raids

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[1]   See on this point Claudot-Hawad 1990.

of yore, their last feudal reflex. Also, the repression waged against the Tuaregs is explained as "a backlash against their former enslavers".[2]

Finally, it is also imagined that the Tuaregs have only recently discovered the concepts of "nation", "revolution" or "territory" borrowed from modern states by western-educated Tuaregs who are thought to have been at the root of the present agitation.[3]

In such a context, it is indeed difficult to formulate the original question concerning the political organisation of the Tuaregs. Yet, this is a constantly recurring theme of the ethno-historical study of the Tuaregs during the colonial period. On the one hand, colonial documents saw no coherence in the facts which they reported about the Tuaregs: their approach to the war led by *Kawsen* (Kaosen, Kaocen) against the French invasion in 1915–18 is one obvious example. On the other hand, the Tuareg versions of the same event stressed a very strong internal coherence based on their political organisation.

Therefore, it is not surprising for any scholarly attention to infer that this political order was not built at the level of encampments or tribes as the French colonial postulate of Berberic anarchy wants it to be, but that it existed at the level of much larger political formations binding different confederations (*tegéhé*, *tighmawin*) and different tuareg political poles (each including also various "ethnic" and linguistic groups in their political definition).

To refer to the whole as well as to its various constitutive parts, the word *temust* is used. *Temust n imajaghen* means "The society or the nation of the Tuaregs", a translation that is always a matter of passionate semantic polemic within the academic context which shares with the colonial perspective the idea that the Tuaregs never thought of themselves as an organised political entity and therefore cannot be considered as a community, a people or a nation.

The analysis of Tuareg political conceptions and their institutional aspects offers another insight into these realities. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Tuareg world appears structured into five great confederations: in the North-East the Kel Ajjer; in the North-West,the Kel Ahaggar, in the South-East the Kel Aïr, in the South-West the Kel

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[2]   For a detailed analysis about this literature, see Claudot-Hawad/ Hawad 1996, 13–36; Claudot-Hawad 2000a.

[3]   See for example Bourgeot/ Casajus 1993.

Tademmekkat; and between these powerful political poles there was a new formation: the Tagaraygarayt meaning "the middle" or the "go-between", to be taken in a political rather than a geographical sense.

The Tuaregs use several registers to express their political relationships.

Kinship

The first register favours kinship concepts to determine the connection between the various units within the same genealogy. When the context is matrilinear, as it is for the Ahaggar, when two groups are said to be equal, they are presented as being "the children of two sisters". On the other hand, "the children of a sister" will be set in opposition to "the children of a brother" to mean that the former are the rightful owners of power, titles, goods, etc. while the latter are excluded from these rights and possessions.

When there is a change in leadership, the genealogy is remodelled accordingly. For example, in the Kel Ahaggar confederation, the female ancestor called *Tin-Hinan* that is "the one (woman) of the tents", is sometimes presented as the mother of the three noble tribes between which chieftancy passed round until the seventeenth century: Kel Ghela, Taytoq and Tégéhé Mellet. Other times she is presented as the mother only of the Kel Ghela, of those who had toppled the other tribes.

If at one point the right to command is confiscated by a group which keeps out the other aspiring parties, the latter will be considered either as the descent of a younger sister, or excluded from the genealogy.

Concurrently, the relationships between suzerains and tributaries can be interpreted as the relationship between older and younger branches.

Finally, the relationships of negative exchange – that is honor's pillage according to very strict rules (Claudot-Hawad 1987) – that the Kel Ahaggar practiced for instance in the second part of the XIXth century with regard to the wealthy Iwellemmeden of the south-west – can also be translated into the language of kinship through the relationship between a nephew (*ag elet ma*, "son of the daughter of the mother") and his maternal uncle (*aŋa*, litteraly *ag ma*: "son of the mother"). The matrilinear rule – which established the transmission of some undivided goods, of rights and of power between uncle and nephew – allows also this nephew to "pillage" whatever he needs from the belongings of his uncle.

Thus the relationships of pillages made according to the rules of honour (as opposed to other types of aggressive actions) that exist between these various confederations are incorporated into the social norm.

Among the Tuaregs, there are also some very interesting metaphorical ways of expressing political and social relationships.

The body

First, the society can be viewed metaphorically as a body, each part representing in its turn some kind of body in miniature, built according to the same structure as the bigger one.

The smallest social unit: *aghiwen,* "encampment", is placed within *tawsit*, a term meaning both "tribe" and "wrist"; this unit itself finds its place within a confederation of tribes called *ettebel* in the Ahaggar: *ettebel* refers to the commanding drum, while in the Aïr, it is called *taghma* and means also "thigh". At last, this unit is included in a *tégéhé*, a federation of confederations, a term meaning "hips". The gathering of "hips" makes up *temust n imajaghen*, that is the Tuareg society at large, and this notion is associated with the anatomic image of the "chest", which is the seat of identity (called *temusa* that has the same linguistic root as *temust).*

The tent

If the various levels of social and political articulations are expressed through body metaphors, the whole society is seen also as a tent. Each stake which makes up the frame of the tent is also perceived within a narrower perspective as a complete unity, built upon the same pattern as the bigger unit. In addition, the word *ehan*, which refers to the "home" (here a tent made of leather or mats), is used to define social units from the smaller unit – the nuclear family – to the larger one – the society at large and even the whole universe.

The tent represents a shelter and this image connotes other notions as well. For this shelter to exist, it needs a foundation, that is a space upon which it can be built. If this shelter is to last long, its foundations must constantly be strengthened. In other words, this means that the attributes that are necessary to establish a human group, whatever its size, are at the same time the territory and the resources used to "feed" it.

Thus, the sociological metaphor of the tent, in a very graphic and effective way, establishes a vital link between organized social units and access to the land and goods that are necessary for the survival of the group and all its constitutive parts.

In legal terms, these vital goods (called *akh iddaren*, the "living milk") can be analysed as a matrimony that can neither be divided up nor alienated. Access to them is given to the members of the tent and is always temporary. These rights concern material possessions (herds, land, slaves, etc.) or symbolic ones (chieftaincy, suzerainty, status) that imply various dues.

Political models

But how is this shelter, representing the greater society tent, to be built? There are two different types of architecture. The first one is called *titek*, a term which refers to the screens made of matting and leather that help separate the tent into different parts. In the figurative sense, *titek* expresses the movement that pushes away and the gesture that rejects. Thus, this evocative image defines the hierarchy in which each social category is included according to its functions, and in which only a part of society has the political power. In this context, the same actions have different meanings depending upon the status of the protagonists. If the warrior's code of honour, for example, is very strict for the noblemen, it is not the same for the other members of society who, up to a point, are not considered as being completely "responsible" for their behaviour.

The architectonic metaphor is further extended: it equates the suzerains and the central stake (*tamenkayt*) which supports the leather roof of the tent, surrounded by the side stakes which represent the dependants. The distribution of the tribes within the political territory of the federations reproduces the frame of the nomadic leather tent that is very widely used in the Ajjer, the Ahaggar and the Tadmekkat. This frame conveys the prominent roles of the leaders: not only their protective function but also its counterpart, that is their domination over the "weaker ones" who must pay them their tribute. Thus, all the goods that are necessary to the community are controlled and even distributed by the chief, *amenukal*, who, for example, manages the organisation of the territory, the distribution of the grazing areas and the sharing of the vassals' dues. Within this context,

the role of the chief – and at least of a fraction of the lineage he represents – is associated with power and the advantages that go with it.

This system based on hierarchy is contrasted with another model defined in philosophical discourse as *igagan* meaning "vertebra", "vaults" and "arches". This refers to another architectural concept which eliminates all separations inside the tent as well as the central stake. *Igagan* are the wooden arches supported by the lateral stakes that make up the frame on which the roof of the shelter rests. This model corresponds to the tent made of mats which is used in the Aïr.

The Aïr went even further in this egalitarian conception of society by which all the stakes of the tent have similar functions. This model is made concrete in the political system of the *ighollan*. The various tribes that compose this organisation are placed on equal footing and they have given up tribute and status, even if in some other fields, such as history or culture, they sometimes "recall" the noble or vassal origin of their members.

One can easily understand that this system leaves no room for a chief who would be inclined to hold the power or supremacy over the others. Yet, one must note that it rests on two complementary institutions: the assembly and the chief-cum-arbiter, the latter incarnated by the man whom the French called the Agadez "Sultan".[4]

The Kel Ahaggar

The Kel Ahaggar correspond to the first model of political organisation. The occupation of their territory is thus conveyed by the central place the leaders occupy while their clients and dependants are placed all around it like the lateral stakes of the tent.

At the beginning of the XXth century, the Kel Ahaggar constituted a *tégéhé*, that is, according to the body metaphor, the "hips" where the three confederations of tribes called *ettebel*, commanding drum, met: they were the Kel Ghela, Taytoq and Tegéhé Mellet. Each confederation was composed of different tribes ("wrists") with non-egalitarian status: the suzerains (*ihaggaren*) and the tributaries (*imghad*).

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[4] For further discussion of the invention by the French colonial administration of such a political function among the Tuaregs, see Claudot-Hawad (1996) 2000a, chap. II.

Power was transmitted matrilinearly. Those who were entitled to rule were called *kel ettebel*, "those of the drum".

The chief of the whole confederation of the Kel Ahaggar was chosen solely from the Kel Ghela tribe and took the title of *amenukal* in contrast with the other chiefs of equivalent units (Tegéhé Mellet and Taytoq), called *amghar*, meaning "old man, wiseman" which applies to all men after a certain age.

The chief was elected by all the respresevatives of the tribes, including the dependants. In fact, the chief's power was limited and mitigated by a consensus from the subjects. In the absence of coercive power which was the case, his arbitrage was only accepted in a fair trial.

All in all, chieftancy among the Tuaregs assigned as many duties as there were rights. The duty of "protection" was bound up both with economy and war. The collective assets belonging to each political unit had therefore to be distributed among those in need in case of famine or epizootic disease.

The hierarchy

A reading that singles out the integrative pattern of kinship shows every unit, emerging both at the tribe level and the tribes confederation level, as an ensemble of relatives organised matrilinearly. As a result, the Kel Ghela, Taytoq and Tégehé Mellet are sometimes defined as the respective descendants of three sisters.

This equality in theory, however, expressed through the parental-lineage vision of the society, is counterbalanced by the political categories which on the contrary emphazise hierarchy by differentiating the nobles (*ihaggaren*), the tributaries (*imghad*), the religious (*ineslimen*, i. e. the "muslims"), the artisans (*inaden*) and the slaves (*iklan*).

Similarly, a deeper investigation into the genealogical Tuareg data shows that the "egalitarian" representation of clans – each of which is viewed as a group of uterine relatives with a common ancestor and who, by definition, should attain power and rights transmitted matrilinearly – is some kind of mystification.

Indeed, the unilinear form of rules of social order, i. e. filiation, inheritance, the transmission of power, are juxtaposed by another principle, that of endogamy allowing for marriage between the members of the same line-

age. In other words, a man who holds the power through his mother, i. e. who is a "son of the drum" (*ag ettebel*), can marry the daughter of his mother's sister – a classificatory "sister" – who will hand down chieftancy to her descendants. Such a marriage will result in mixing the categories of "son" and "nephew" in the next generation and will have apparently transmitted power patrilinearly, whereas it is because power is passed down by his mother that the son of a chief will succeed his father.

Thus, endogamy combined with matrilinear determination of political rights offers the ideal way to model and reduce the group of potential successors and opens the way to hierarchy.

Among the Kel Ghela, the matrilinear nucleus in power for five generations corresponds to thirty four per cent of the tribe.[5] This is a privileged endogamous group in which the marriage with a classificatory sister will be sought to keep the power within the lineage: those who rule set store by this type of marriage, they are also however ready to establish new marriage bonds outside their confederation in order to widen their political zones of influence.

A society in movement

What is most striking among the Tuaregs, in their political theory as well as their cosmogony, is their dynamic vision of the order of the world, the universe or society. Each state is seen as only one step leading to another step that will, exactly like in the nomadic cycle, eventually leads back to the initial steps.[6]

According to this theory, slaves are bound one day to become free men, tributaries to become suzerains, and suzerains to go back to where they had started. Social movement and changes are always underlying the social order that will always be temporary.

Some social rules illustrate this mobility in practice: a slave can change masters, a dependent tribe can choose another suzerain, thereby depriving worthless masters of their power. Also, when a slave has acquired the Tuareg culture, he must be given his freedom.

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[5] For a detailed analysis, see Claudot-Hawad 1986; *id*. 1987.
[6] About this philosophy and its relations with the political and social institutional order, see Claudot-Hawad 1993d; *id*. 2000a.

So, two contradictory orientations influence the itinerary of each tent. The first one is to "put on weight" through the development of its various branches (through its descendents, the extension of its allies and clients). The second orientation is the tendency to become completely independent from the mother tent: that was for instance the case of the Kel Ahaggar when they became independent from the Kel Ajjer in the XVIIIth century.

The evolution of political power

In conclusion, let us stress that what the Tuaregs privileged politically was a confederal model. In this schema, the power of a chief was never coercive; it was based on the community's wishes as expressed through consensus so that in fact the role of the chief was no more than that of an arbiter. It was the arbiter-chief's responsibility to maintain the balance between the various equal units as well as the partnership between the different social categories. In the early twentieth century, the political decisions of the five great confederations and the relations between them could be coordinated by the correspondent assembly summoned each time it was deemed necessary (for wars, conflicts, peace agreements, etc.).

With the growing encroachment of the colonial forces within the Tuareg country, the attitude to be adopted on the political scene regarding the French occupation became of paramount importance. It was around this new problem that competition for power and rivalry between political candidates emerged.

In the Ahaggar, after the Tuaregs' total defeat in Tit (1902), the party for peace with the occupying power, led by *Musa ag Amastan* (Kel Ghela) gained the upperhand while the party for resistance joined the Tuareg forces who fought on the side of the Ajjer or in the Fezzan, and then in 1916 with *Kawsen* in the Aïr.

A great number of tributary groups (*imghad*), such as the Dag Ghali, joined the resistance: this, once more, underlines their relative independence from the nominal chief of the confederation.

Because of the intervention of the colonial forces and their prevailing logic, the very nature of Tuareg power was transformed. Legitimacy was no longer a matter of being elected or being chosen by one's subjects but rather a question of subservience to the colonial power. Many small local

chiefs, with the help of the colonial military forces, became arbitrary and despotic rulers (Claudot-Hawad 1990, 1993b, 1993c).

Henceforth, the mobility that characterized social hierarchy came to a stop. The links established between the various confederations were interrupted as well as the elaborate networks of political, social, economic and cultural relationships woven with the neighbouring societies.

The political and economic space of the Tuaregs shrank, was shattered and became petrified.

To conclude, the words pronounced in *tamajaght* language at the end of 1989 by Ghayshena welet Akedima, a political feminine figure of the Aïr, perfectly encapsulate the transformation of the Tuareg situation, passing from a broad and open collective identity to an isolated individualistic perception:

"Our space shrank from the 'nation' (*temust*) to the confederation (*taghma*), then to the tribe (*tawshit*), then to the encampment (*aghiwen*), then to the mat tent (*tamankayt*), and it is now nothing but the space left between the spoon and the mouth."

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