

Ravens Reconsidered: Raiding And Theft Among Tubu-Speakers In Northern Chad

Judith Scheele

Abstract: From the outside, northern Chad has long been seen as an area of lawlessness, defined primarily by its inhabitants' alleged propensity for raiding and thieving. From the inside, northern Chad indeed appears as an area that thrives on a rhetoric of predation. This, however, is perhaps best understood not in terms of "crime," but rather as a striving for personal autonomy, as a public denial of reciprocity in a context where notions of bounded moral community and indeed of long-term social strategies of exchange are not much in evidence.

Résumé: Le Nord du Tchad a longtemps été considéré par les observateurs extérieurs comme une terre de non droit, définie principalement par le penchant supposé de ses habitants pour les rezzous et le vol. Localement, une certaine rhétorique de la prédation est également mise en avant pour expliquer les relations sociales externes, mais froid même internes, de la zone. Néanmoins, afin de mieux cerner ces pratiques et ces dynamiques historiques, il semble préférable de ne pas les analyser en premier lieu sous leurs aspects « criminels », mais davantage comme le pendant d'une aspiration à l'autonomie personnelle et du déni public de la réciprocité, dans un contexte où les notions de communautés et de stratégies d'échange à long terme ne sont que peu efficaces.

Keywords: Theft; criminalization; Sahara; northern Chad; raiding; personal autonomy; reciprocity

African Studies Review, Volume 61, Number 3 (September 2018), pp. 135–155

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It is notoriously difficult to define “crime” cross-culturally. Legal scholars have long tied themselves in knots attempting to do so, but they always necessarily revert to larger questions of socio-political ordering principles (Lacey 2009:938). “Crimes... are public wrongs in the sense that they are wrongs that the community is responsible for punishing,” writes Grant Lamond (2007:614), begging the question of who (or what) the public might be. For Lamond, as for many others, it is mostly subsumed in “community,” which in turn bears an uncanny resemblance to the modern punitive state (2007:627; see also Marshall & Duff 1998:14n18). Elsewhere, however, social life might not be organized into state-like “communities” based on assumptions of a shared common good, and this different organization leads to different patterns of responsibility and moral judgment (Dresch 2012). Homicide, the one category that tends to be used in Western scholarly and media analyses to determine “crime rates” is particularly ambiguous in this regard, as, depending on context, taking life might be regarded as negligible, legitimate, mandatory, or even heroic. Theft, on the other hand, or the appropriation of goods by stealth, seems to be a more plausible candidate for cross-cultural validity: thieves tend to be universally vilified, an impression confirmed by the most cursory perusal of legal history and anthropology. This feeds into broader trends in social analysis, where the orderly circulation of goods—most frequently expressed in terms of balanced exchange—is often seen to lie at the heart of sociality itself, or even to be coterminous with it. Few today cite Claude Lévi-Strauss to the effect that reciprocity, as expressed in kinship and language, is not merely necessary to society, but “the social state itself” (1967:562). But the thought he expressed has forcefully entered social scientific common sense (Parry 1986:466; Sneath 2006:91), to the point where even vengeance, raiding, and war are often apprehended in terms of reciprocal and balanced exchange (Fausto 1999:936).

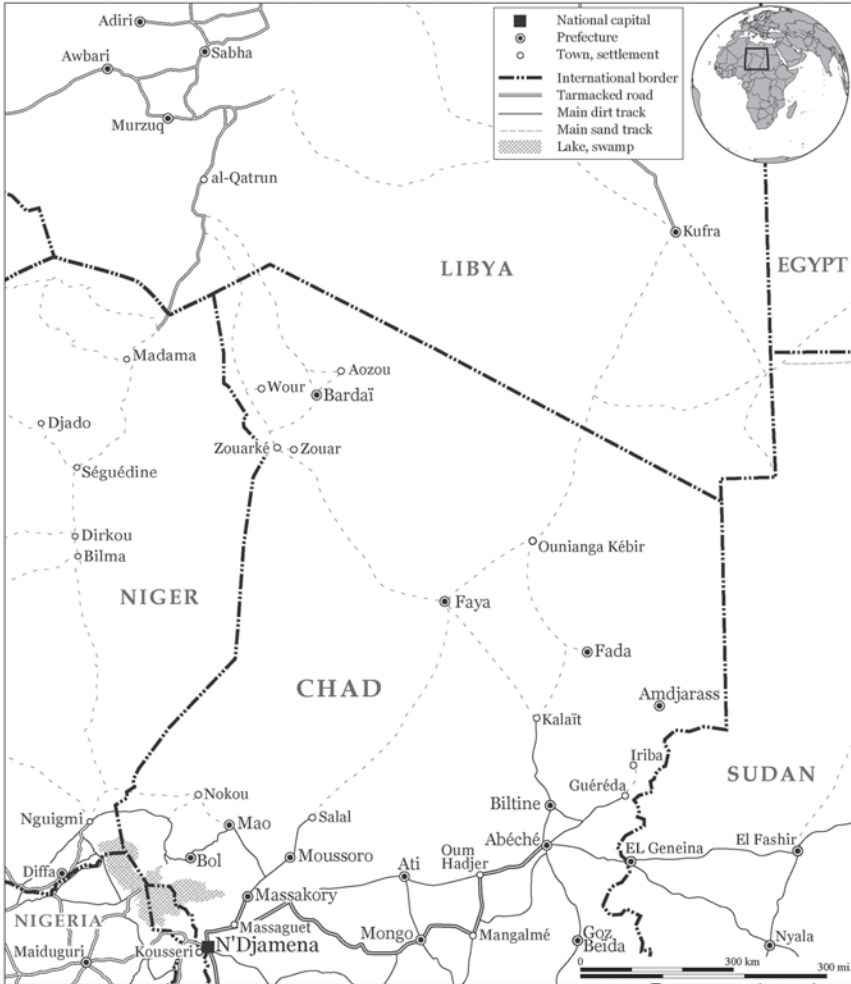
Saharan historical ethnography at first sight seems to support these assumptions. Here also, ordinary sociality tended to be defined through orderly exchange, and the licit and regulated circulation of goods as specified in Islamic law. Those who did not submit to orderly patterns of circulation were defined, in local legal traditions at least, not just as thieves and criminals, but as barbarians, as situated beyond the bounds of civilization itself (Berque 1970; Touati 1996). Yet both civilization and barbarism are archetypes, and there can be no doubt that people moved between them, and that, conceptually also, the two were in fact intimately connected: virtue, here as elsewhere, thrives on vice. Northern Chad, where the majority of inhabitants define primarily as Tubu-speakers, is a good example of this. All external historical and contemporary sources agree that “the Tubu” are inveterate raiders and thieves, and that they always have been. Some political analysts even go as far as claiming that this provides an explanation of the woes of the contemporary Chadian state (which has been, since 1979, led by people from the north of the country). More surprisingly, many

Tubu concur. This article attempts to understand why, and argues that “theft” here is best understood not as a crime, but as a public denial of reciprocity, in a context where notions of bounded moral community and indeed of long-term social strategies of exchange are not much in evidence.

Getting things for free

The term “Tubu” refers to speakers of two mutually comprehensible languages, Tedaga and Dazaga. Tubu thus defined constitute the bulk of the population of Chad’s extreme north, and minorities in northeastern Niger and southern Libya. Figures are difficult to come by, and estimations of the overall number of speakers of both languages vary widely according to the sources, ranging from 400,000 to 800,000. “Tubu” (meaning “people of the mountain,” i.e., the Tibesti) is a term originally from Kanem to the southwest that refers to both groups. There is no local equivalent; in Chad, the term is mostly used to refer to speakers of Tedaga, who call themselves Teda, while those of Dazaga are called “Gorane” (or Dazagada), but both terms are often used interchangeably, as marital connections are close, and many Tubu are in fact bilingual. Boundaries between them are thus fluid, as they are also, in a context of mandatory bilateral exogamy, with the outside. Today, Tubu are primarily pastoralists and hold large herds of camel and cattle, especially in Chad, alongside their privileged access to date palms and salt mines in Saharan oases. They also work as trans-regional traders and transporters throughout Chad and beyond its national borders—only about 15 percent of Tubu today live in their “homeland” in Borkou and Tibesti—and furnish large contingents to the Chadian army, customs, and security forces. This article is based on twelve months of field-work carried out in northern Chad in 2011 and 2012, primarily in Faya, which is today the main town and administrative center of Borkou–Ennedi–Tibesti (B.E.T.), the three regions that together make up Chad’s extreme north and cover an area almost as big as France (see map). According to the 2009 census, the B.E.T. counts 296,340 inhabitants, 97,251 in Borkou, and 10,000 in Faya, to whom, during my fieldwork in 2012, was added roughly the same number of refugees from armed conflict in Libya.

Situated in an area that was historically dominated by nomadic pastoralism and non-irrigated date-cultivation, Faya’s existence as a place of year-round settlement was (and in many ways still is) tributary to external expansionist projects, most of them military. Site of a Sanūsī *zāwiya* (religious stronghold and agricultural and commercial outpost) since 1909, the town of Faya was founded as a garrison by the French colonial army in 1913.¹ Administered by the French army until 1965, five years after Chadian independence had been granted to the rest of the country, it turned into a strategic location during the civil war that broke out in the same year,



becoming at times the *de facto* capital of the north of the country, at times (1983–87) a Libyan military outpost.² Its reoccupation by the Chadian government in 1987 was mostly effected through a massive deployment of Chadian military and civil servants, many of whom were originally from the area itself. Although Faya is today a booming market town that thrives through trade with neighboring Libya, soldiers and state officials still dominate social and economic life; the town more generally resembles a dilapidated army barracks (Brachet & Scheele 2015). People in the street are armed, many wear uniforms or what is left of them, and all carry knives, including women and teenagers. With the exception of traders, most of whom have migrated to town from eastern Chad, almost everybody has been in the military at some point, or else has taken part in armed rebellion: the distinction between both is generally blurred. And even for those who have

never worn a uniform—most of them women—relations with the army are crucial.

Even though most people in Faya have thus some kind of connection to the Chadian security forces, this in no way implies their whole-hearted endorsement of government legal institutions and categories; on the contrary. This is particularly apparent with regard to property. Property in real estate is fragile, and tends to fluctuate with political and military circumstance (Brachet & Scheele 2016:134-6). Chattels fare even worse, and everyday conversations quickly turn on the difficulties of keeping both things and money—or, indeed, on the glories of getting-things-for-free. Open theft—such as raiding livestock—in particular is put forward as a virtue. If few people now indulge in it, it is held up as a sign of courage and masculinity, one, moreover that pertains particularly to Tubu, and indeed makes them stand out among others. The paucity of most Western-language vocabulary makes it difficult to appreciate the fundamental distinctions made in this context, linguistically and socially, between what in English merely appear as different forms of theft.

If somebody goes into somebody else's house and takes something, that is really not honourable, we don't like it. But to go and take big camels, beautiful camels in the bush, we recognise that this an asset, it's not hidden, but brave. But nobody steals goats or donkeys. Only camels, otherwise it's theft. It's not the same.³

Today, raids are carried out not on camelback, but with fast jeeps, as, deservedly or not and in contrast with their Western pastoralist neighbors (Tuareg and Hassāniyya-speaking Arabs), the Tubu have maintained a region-wide reputation as raiders, of cattle, cars, and other moveable wealth. People in isolated Tuareg camps in Niger hence still blame small-scale camel theft, often on foot and over vast distances, on their Tubu-speaking neighbors (Spittler 1993:71).

Although decades of civil war and the current involvement of many Tubu in the army have clearly increased their ability to conduct raids, if only by improving their equipment and exempting them from state punishment, the positive evaluation of these acts seems to date back further. Livestock raiding was the most common way in which young Tubu could accumulate the necessary bride-price, wrote Jean Chapelle in the 1950s. It was, in fact, a central component of full manhood: “those who, too destitute, do not have the courage to steal, do not get married, or marry late; in such a way that there exist, among the Tubu, a handful of unmarried men” (1957:273). Before the colonial “pacification,” Tubu raids used to extend as far West as Djanet in contemporary Algeria, and as far East as the valley of the Nile (Chapelle 1975:52, 48; this is confirmed by Asad 1970:162). Similarly, Catherine Baroin, author of the only full-length ethnography based on long-term anthropological fieldwork among Tubu-speakers (in central Niger) concludes that

Livestock theft has never been totally checked. It remained [at the end of the 1970s] a positive act through which all unmarried young men aspired to distinguish themselves, despite the long prison sentences they were risking [in Niger]... The fact that livestock theft has so well resisted its suppression bears witness to... a key element of their cultural identity. (1986:19)

And even Ahmat Saleh Bodoumi, himself a Tubu who now works in a position of responsibility for a ministry in the Chadian capital N'Djamena, describes pre-colonial Tibesti and Borkou as a “society of predators”: “my grandfather’s generation lived off raids and the appropriation of other people’s wealth” (2010:3).

In all these accounts, the symbolic impact of raiding seems to be as important as the wealth gathered. Today, even among people of a certain economic standing and age, of a sedentary disposition, and fervent proponents of Islamic virtues, raids on livestock are glorified, rhetorically at least: “the problem with Islam, it’s not the women... but that you are not allowed to steal camels anymore. That’s difficult, because that’s what we do.”⁴ Raiding, or getting things for free, by ruse or force, is commonly used to define Tubu excellence more generally, and even to describe their involvement in national politics. Contemporary Tubu hence love to quote Abba Sidick, historical leader of the Frolinat (*Front de Libération Nationale du Tchad*, the Chadian armed opposition movement which came to power in N'Djamena in 1980) who described the successful attack on N'Djamena by Hissène Habré (a Tubu native of Faya) in 1980 as “the biggest *rezzou* of the twentieth century” (cited in Buijtenhuijs 2001:152), which allowed those who participated in it not only to capture the wealth of the capital city, but also a state apparatus. Habré’s subsequent reign (from 1982) was marked by periodic looting by his armed forces and presidential guard, who were predominantly recruited in the extreme north of the country (Lanne 1984:40). Arguably, the state Habré built in Chad was mostly focused on the violent suppression of dissent and on the confiscation and redistribution of “enemy property” (Bercault & Brody 2013:116, 266–7, 427–8). As indicated above, Tubu-speakers remain prominent in the state and security apparatus today, thirty years and a military coup later.⁵ As a former rebel turned military officer put it laughingly, “the customs, the presidential guard: wherever there is money to be made, that’s where we Tubu are.”⁶ From a local point of view, then, the military aspect of Faya and its inhabitants’ reputation for raiding are not seen as contradictory but rather as manifestations of similar principles.

The symbolic power of images of raiding goes further than military action, however. It also colors accounts of what might at first sight appear as more “peaceful” undertakings. Thus Togoï, perhaps the richest local trader, answers questions about his career as a successful businessman as follows:

In the 1990s, the WFP needed to transport goods [to Darfur] from Libya via Faya to Abéché [in eastern Chad]. The traders in Faya came together, and they said that we, the people of Faya, will hire trucks for this... At first,

there were forty or fifty of us... We needed a lot of money, so we all came together and I was made treasurer. I was afraid at first because I didn't have enough money... So we said tomorrow at 9 am we will meet next to my garage... And the next morning everybody had run away because of the money, they were afraid. Only fourteen people turned up. I had to go because I was the treasurer. Everybody gave me 500 000 F CFA... and we hired trucks from Waddaï... Nobody came to check me so I didn't give anything, I had no money anyway at that time, but nobody could check because I was the treasurer... As it turned out, we didn't even pay the owners of the trucks, they were rich; all in all we gave them 3 million... After forty days of work, we made a profit of 105 million F CFA, without owning even a single truck or paying a single jerry can of petrol.⁷

This, Togoï concludes with a smile, is the way “proper business” ought to be conducted. In fact, most of Togoï's wealth is probably derived in the exact opposite manner: slow, small-scale transactions that accrue profits over time. But this is clearly not way he thinks about it—or likes to talk about it in public. Similarly, in 2004, Tubu rebels in Tibesti captured Amari Saifi (known as “el-Para”), a long-sought for Algerian smuggler and terrorist entrepreneur, and handed him, in exchange for substantial cash payments, to the Algerian government. While, for external observers, this was a sign of “the Tubu's” resistance to radical Islam (Tubiana & Gramizzi 2017:121), from a local point of view, it was a spectacularly successful raid, given not only the booty but also the publicity it generated.

Raiding as a relation

This public emphasis on raiding, on getting-things-for-nothing in all possible and impossible ways, is echoed in the historical sources. For Ledyard and Lucas (1804:141–2), the Tubu, “thieves by profession,” were “a horde of robbers and assassins”; for Clapperton also, who traveled through what is now southern Libya in the 1820s, “the Tibboo... are thieves to a man—rob Gaffles when they Dare—& Steal from all” (Bruce-Lockhart & White 2000:258). The North African traveler al-Tūnsī described at length how, when traveling through Borkou, he was obliged to feed a whole train of hangers-on, including the local “prince.” As he was finally about to leave the region, these “hangers-on”—“a troop of ogres and devils escaped from hell”—proceeded to relieve his caravan of all remaining valuables: “They scour the caravan. Every spear they like, they take it; everything they ask for, we have to give it to them. By the end, we had nothing left of any value” (1851:534). For Gustav Nachtigal, the Tubu were first and foremost “a gang of starved and ragged bandits” and renowned camel-thieves (1879:270, 180). Thirty years and one (half-hearted) colonial conquest later, the Tibesti still was described as “a den of thieves,” the Tubu were “excellent looters” who “abduct couriers, pillage caravans, raid those native who recognise our [i.e., the French colonial] authority and enslave their women and children” (Carbou 1912:148, 150).

It is important to note here that historically, the Tubu by no means held the regional monopoly for raiding: in fact, they were quite as often victims as perpetrators. Tubu slaves were highly valued in Libya (Renault 1982:175), and Arabic- and Tamasheq-speaking pastoral nomads, most notoriously the Awlād Sulaymān from what is now Libya, had long exerted some kind of “sovereignty” over parts of the Borkou (Cordell 1985), sovereignty that was mostly expressed in periodic raiding. Nachtigal again:

The sedentary and nomadic population is reduced each year in number and wealth. The Awlād Sulaymān and the Tuareg have more than decimated the nomads or at least their large herds... and the Borkou is periodically laid waste... Gardens in most valleys have been lying fallow and desolate for years, because who feels like working if the fruits of his labour will be harvested by the enemy? The population is diminishing, as everybody who can leaves his home, where he can never be assured not to lose his life or property, and to see his wife and children abducted. I knew people who, year after year, worked and thieved, thieved and worked, without being able to enjoy even the smallest part of their earnings. (Nachtigal 1881:141-2)

Pace Nachtigal, there is no reason to think that the situation he observed was exceptional. Robert Capot-Rey (1961:90) notes that “northern Arabs” had long established themselves through what is now Chad, at least along common caravan routes; their initial migration in the mid-nineteenth century, fleeing the Ottoman army, sparked a continuous trickle of migrants, Awlād Sulaymān, but also Mghārba and other Libyan pastoralists. Many local Tubu were in fact incorporated—through marriage, capture, or slavery—into the “Awlād Sulaymān” (Chapelle 1957:61), indicating that categories of predator and victim were political rather than “ethnic.” Nor was raiding the sole prerogative of pastoral nomads; in the nineteenth century, “outside their own communities, subjects of the Baguirmi, Bornou or Waddai states [just south of Borkou and Tibesti] went thieving as routinely they went to work in their fields” (Saïbou 2010:39). And while subjects “thieved,” those who governed them raided. In the nineteenth-century Central Sahel, Stephen P. Reyna (1990:40) hence speaks of a region-wide system of “predatory accumulation,” in which state-level raiding was “an annual effort conducted as regularly as planting,” an “official form of foraging” (Reyna 1990:126, 127). This regional ecology of mutual raiding probably reinforced the image of “the thieving Tubu,” making it locally palatable: better to be a raider than a slave. It indicates, however, that we need to see the Tubu’s reputation as raiders and thieves—and their contemporary endorsement of such activity—not as a sign of their isolation or marginality, but rather of their intimate connection with the social, economic, and political worlds that surrounded them. Being “Tubu” is and has long been a relational category, one that indicates a certain position within a broader socio-political field.

Geographically, Tubu have always resided right next to “civilization.” One of the oldest attested trans-Saharan routes runs from Fazzān to the

salt-mines of Bilma, skirting Tibesti to the west (Martin 1969), while the more recent but by the nineteenth century probably busiest route, linking Kufra to Waddaï, passed through its eastern foothills (Cordell 1977). Bornu-Kanem to the southwest of Faya is perhaps the oldest continuous state-formation on the African continent (this does not say anything about the influence it exerted on the ground, but it is a powerful claim ideologically). It can be traced back to the eighth century CE (Lange 1977), and at the height of its power it controlled Fazzān, to the immediate north of the B.E.T. (Thiry 1995:181). Otherwise, Fazzān, although not the center of a regional state, was at least intermittently connected to North African political formations (Zeltner 1992) and was sporadically governed in later times by the Ottoman Empire. To the southeast, the Waddaï empire, founded in the sixteenth century, became, by the early nineteenth, regionally influential and extended some form of control over part of Borkou (Nachtigal 1881:85). From the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the Sanūsiyya established several *zawāyā* in Borkou and its surroundings (Evans-Pritchard 1945; Triaud 1995:440), although it seems that the order remained marginal to local society (Djian 1996:146, 176, 187).

There can be no doubt that Tubu regularly and successfully interacted with these formations, if not as a group, then individually. Tubu owned property in Kanem, Fazzān, and Waddaï, where they were (and still are) settled in large numbers. Knut Vikør (1985:702), basing his information on French colonial sources, described Tubu residents in Kavar as prosperous trans-Saharan traders with “trading houses” in Tripoli and Kano where they spent much of the year. Legend has it that the Kanem empire was founded by Tubu, and the ruling family regularly married Tubu wives (Chapelle 1957:55; Thiry 1995:280). According to Heinrich Barth, “the [Tubu] are a race intimately related to the original stock of the Kanuri,” Tubu used to constitute a large proportion of Kanem’s military force, and the mother of the then sultan was Tubu (Barth 1890 [1857–8]:366–7). In much the same way, the Waddaï sultans liked to marry Tubu wives, a fact that gave the families of those wives “a certain influence in the Abéché court” (Carbou 1912:189). While, as Wendy James (1977) reminds us with regard to the Funj in Sudan, it is dangerous to read history backwards through the lens of contemporary ethnic labels, these narratives indicate that Tubu have, notionally at least, always maintained close or even intimate relations with neighboring states, without ever having been encompassed by them.

The image of Tubu as external raiders is thus ideological, and needs to be read as the articulation of a particular kind of relation to the centers of production. To be “Tubu” means to act in a certain, predatory, way; it emerges as a profession, so to speak, rather than as an “ethnic” label. As pointed out above, the majority of “ethnic” Tubu in fact lived elsewhere, while Borkou and especially Tibesti have provided longstanding safe havens for those who needed to escape the surrounding polities or who were dissatisfied with their regimes of taxation. Something similar seems to be at work today, given the importance of the Chadian military—many but by no

means all of whom are of Tubu origin—for Faya’s demographics. Borkou and Tibesti, and the “Tubu slot” more generally, hence emerge as “half-worlds” (Dresch 1989:398) that only exist because of their close interaction with and structural opposition to the worlds that surrounds them. “Raiding” appears as a stereotypical description of how, from a local point of view, these relations should ideally be articulated.

Raiding and theft

This emphasis on raiding as central to social excellence and identity is in no way exceptional. It can be found in many accounts of pastoral nomads (see e.g., Fleisher 2000:751; Anderson 1986:402; Sweet 1965), and it is often cited, by the concerned themselves, as one of the elements that distinguishes them from their neighbors: the couple Nuer–Dinka is probably the best-known example here (Sahlins 1961:340; Kelly 1985). In all these contexts, raids mark relations with outsiders (although they might in fact ultimately turn raided outsiders into insiders), and they are thus seen to be clearly and fundamentally different from theft. Raiders attack external victims, thieves steal from intimates; raids are public, theft is conducted by stealth; raids are glorious moments of collective self-affirmation, “a kind of property expansion from which the entire community benefitted,” thefts are despicable acts resulting in “strong internal sanctions.” Anderson’s (1986:402) observations on the Kalenjin of Kenya can easily stand for the ethnographic record more widely. Among the Tuareg of the early twentieth century also, theft ranged from *aqqa*, “the capture of the opponent’s wealth that follows strict rules and is an act of bravery that is highly valued and takes place in broad daylight” to theft by stealth called *tikra*, “a shadowy undertaking that dishonours and excludes the culprit from the community” (Claudot & Hawad 1982:798, 804).

In the western and central Sahara, these distinctions played into broader status hierarchies. Among Tamasheq- and Hassāniyya-speakers alike, “nobles” raided, which allowed them to own nothing personally and nonetheless display boundless generosity (*juwād*, one of the Hassānī Arabic terms for “nobles” used in the western Sahara, is thus popularly derived from *jawada*, to be generous);⁸ the *masākin*, or poor, had to be protected; slaves or people of slave-descent were rumored to express their more general lack of retinue through their shameless thievery (and constant nagging for presents); while “the people of capital (*ahl al-māl*)” were “boneless meat,” delicious but unable to protect themselves, as the Timbuktu scholar Muhammad Mahmūd wuld Shaykh expressed it in a 1933 manuscript.⁹ Much of this was clearly ideological, or rather a matter of interpretation: we can surmise that many a “noble raid” contained elements of “shameless thieving,” especially to those who fell victim to it. But this in no way diminishes the fact that raiding, and its semantic distinction from theft, served as a shared idiom that expressed internal hierarchies as well as external boundaries.

Among Tubu-speakers, who lack clear status distinctions and fixed external boundaries, and who, as indicated above, variably fit into broader transregional patterns of predation as both raiders and raided, things are less clear-cut. For one, raiding has never been the sole prerogative of pastoral nomads or of a “noble” strata of society. Writing in the late 1950s, the Austrian ethnographer Peter Fuchs in fact situates raiding and theft at the heart of social interactions even among sedentary farmers:

Before the pacification of the country, the [sedentary and agriculturalist] Ounia used to carry out frequent raids. They attacked salt caravans in Demi, and went to Yarda and Tibesti. The Ounia had no camels, which means that they had to go raiding on foot. (1961:160)

Nor was theft limited to “foreign” livestock, he says: at that time, the main drink consumed in the area was palm-wine, and “since a date-palm, once it is tapped, tends to die or at least become much less productive, people do not tap their own trees but those of their neighbours who happen to be away” (Fuchs 1961:98). The appropriation of dates similarly seems to have been frequent and commonplace (Ferrandi 1930:191; Nachtigal 1879:269), not just by pastoral nomads from sedentary agriculturalists—which again is rather common (Serjeant 1981)—but also among sedentarists and nomads respectively.

This extension of “raids” to intimate venues is echoed in contemporary Faya. Despite public condemnation when pressed on the subject, it is theft by stealth rather than raiding that is endlessly discussed in daily conversations, for entertainment rather than reproach. Hence the widow who had kept all her parents’ belongings in the family house, locked in a room for safe keeping, and rarely ever left the house afterwards, to watch over them—until she realized that her adult son, given to drink, had broken in through the roof and taken it all, behind her back. That this is not the way a son ought to behave, nobody would ever doubt—but otherwise, people just shrugged their shoulders: bad luck—before admitting that really, the whole story *was* rather funny. Similarly, a friend’s brother was known to be economical with the truth, and large in his definition of mine and thine, but when a visitor’s mobile phone disappeared, nothing could be done about it, and the problem (again much discussed) was not the theft itself, or even the breach of trust and hospitality, but rather the fact that the victim was an army officer and hence might cause serious trouble. But nothing could be done to prevail on the brother to return the phone, however high the resulting risk to the family—and however much money he was offered in return. Everybody concurred that the only durable solution to theft was to keep one’s belongings under lock and key, even inside the house. Hence, in all houses in Faya, and even when everybody is at home, internal doors are always kept locked, and people who do not have access to a locked room store their belongings in metal safes, hidden under mattresses, or keep them with them at all times. Much of this is clearly symbolic, as many live in

tents, doors are often decrepit, and small metal cases can be (and often are) easily carried off, but the symbolism is potent.

This accepted need for constant surveillance, which makes the owner rather than the thief responsible for theft, seems to be based on two assumptions. First, that trust, even among close family members, is a sign of gullibility. Hence, for instance, if somebody comes to owe a *diyah* payment, it is accepted practice for him (or her) to collect the money from friends, neighbors, relatives, and patrons. Yet, as people hasten to add, most people manage to collect far too much (especially if they can tell a good story), tell nobody about it, and keep the money for their own devices, while pleading poverty to the victim's and their own family. Ruse and trickery are thus if not permitted, then at least taken for granted, even within the most intimate transactions that nominally signify internal solidarity. Second, people concur that property in all its guises is notoriously unstable, unless it is held elsewhere, in the capital N'Djamena, say, or in Cameroon. People who have too much to constantly keep an eye on it, in other words, simply have too much to keep. This in no way implies a Robin Hood-style attitude toward property, as people of means of course also have more means of surveillance and access to safer storage: the dominant value here is one of personal enterprise and cleverness—you take what you can while you can, regardless of circumstance—rather than of “social justice.” Traders and transporters who come to Faya with their merchandise know that they have to survey their goods at all times, even if (or perhaps especially if) they can claim close local ties, as the more intrepid of local inhabitants might just walk off with whole 20- or 50-kilo bags of flour and rice on a wheelbarrow, in broad daylight.¹⁰ The only way in which people who have “too much” can avoid being the victim of theft, then, is by redefining theft as a gift.

This is in particular the case with regard to dates at harvest time. Everybody in Faya claims that a considerable quantity of dates is stolen each year before it can be harvested, by the local poor as much as by those (all Tubu-speakers of some kind) who explicitly travel to Faya at harvest time to do so. Although Faya by now counts a number of sedentary agriculturalists or rentier owners of irrigated gardens, most date-palms in Faya and the seventy-kilometre-long palm-grove that surrounds the town belong to people who are primarily pastoral nomads or have other occupations that take them away from town for much of the year. They return for the date harvest, which each year sees the population of Faya triple or even quadruple. But not all of those who come are recognized to “own” particular palm-groves:

Everybody comes for the date harvest, whether they have dates or not. The old women, you have to watch them: they come with large sacks, and at night they steal. They are very fast: you only have to turn your head, and their sacks are full, so heavy that they cannot carry them.¹¹

“Whole truck-loads of people arrive,” and “one morning you will wake and hop! Your garden will be empty.”¹² Although some owners of palm-groves

chip together to pay collective guardians for their palm-groves, and others harvest their dates before maturity, most just take this “tax” levied on their property for granted, in much the same way as they accept that whoever they might employ for the harvest will never leave their garden with empty pockets or indeed an empty stomach. As the owner of a large irrigated garden in the centre of Faya put it: “It’s not a problem, it’s normal, it’s customary, these people aren’t bad, just poor... Those who don’t have their own dates can come and take whatever has fallen on the ground, as long as they do not pick dates directly from the trees”—although it is never quite clear how this distinction would be monitored in practice, and whether shaking trees is acceptable or not.¹³

Like images of raiding, notions of theft—taking things from intimates without giving anything in return—spill over into other domains, most notably kinship. Although Tubu kinship systems, marked by strict exogamy over up to seven generations, seem on the face of it to correspond to images of generalized and ultimately reciprocal exchange (Baroin 1985:381 speaks of a “general exchange of social ties”), locally, marriages tend to be described in isolation. Mothers incessantly complain about how much their daughters’ marriage will cost them, but no mention is made of reciprocal gift exchanges between the two families. Young eligible girls talk about marriage in terms of capturing as much wealth as possible, rather than as entering into long-term social relations—wealth for their families, certainly, but also for their own prestige, status, and their friends’ amusement. Men similarly stress their wives’ negotiating powers, especially before and during the first days of marriage; they say that the best possible form of marriage is “marriage by capture,” as it avoids at least some of the resulting cost, or at least removes it from the public gaze.¹⁴ “Marriage by capture” is in fact a highly staged process, with the bride-price negotiated beforehand, in secret. It does, however usually involve a scuffle and some running after the girl. Middle-aged men especially find it often repugnant to participate, as much can go wrong, and as ridicule is hence always just around the corner.¹⁵ Nonetheless, this form of marriage—and the public denial of reciprocity it implies—is routinely held up as the “best,” whatever that might mean statistically.

In a context of bilateral exogamy, marriage necessarily deals with outsiders, making images of capture and even raiding appropriate. But these are outsiders who will become kin: over time, “captured” brides become mothers to your children much as, with the benefits of hindsight, relatives stolen from can easily be redefined as outsiders. What is at issue here seems to be not so much the prevalence of non-reciprocal exchange in intimate settings as the lability of the boundaries themselves.

Thefts and gifts

As noted in the introduction to this essay, within Euro-American jurisprudence, explanations of criminalization tend to imply the existence of a

bounded community based on reciprocal obligations and exchange. In the context of contemporary nation-states, Lamond argues,

Criminal proceedings are normally in the hands of the state because it is the will of the community (as embodied in law) that is being defied. The defendant places their own will above that of the community, and punishment is the response necessary to vindicate the authority of the community. (Lamond 2007:618)

For Marshall and Duff (1998:20) also, an act perpetrated against an individual becomes a crime “insofar as the individual goods which are attacked are goods in terms of which the community identifies and understands itself.” John Finnis (1985), meanwhile, explains the moral authority of the law itself—arguably a prerequisite for criminalization—as a solution to daily occurring “coordination problems.” Although individual laws might go against a person’s immediate interest, that person knows that in the long run she or he is served by the fact that among a given set of people most submit to the laws. Some kind of bounded community is necessary for this argument, as otherwise the overall calculus of loss and profit over time simply could not work.

None of these terms has much purchase in Tubu ethnography, where, according to Baroin,

each nuclear family is attached to far-reaching criss-crossing relations of mutual aid that involve kin and affines, in such a way that it is both autonomous and bound to the others. This leads to a fluid social mesh, without centre or periphery, in which each Tubu is placed at the centre of his or her own personal network. (Baroin 2009:136)

Similarly, neither long-term calculations (“sustainability”) nor reciprocity seem to constitute values in and of themselves. Instead, people insist on their independence, material and otherwise; on the importance of short-term strategies in an environment (social, ecological, and political) marked by high and regularly recurrent risk; and on their freedom from obligation to others. That is to say, that they insist above all on their personal autonomy, in a context “of a totally different kind from that underlying social mechanisms based on the presence of groups” (Baroin 1986:26). There can be no doubt that this is often aspirational, and that in their everyday lives, people in Faya do rely on others and engage in exchange with tacit expectations of return, but the aspiration remains, and needs to be taken seriously.

It is important to remember here that “reciprocity” is a no more empirically unambiguous category than “autonomy.” Things and especially people are of themselves incommensurable (Bonte 2000:58). Equivalence is thus always a matter of interpretation and public acceptance (Graeber 2012:414). (The “reciprocities” that late capitalism relies on—a life of

labor against a precarious minimum wage, for instance—are clearly ideological, and much political activism hinges on redefining them as theft, or gifts, as the case might be.)¹⁶ Faya is remarkable in this context not because of a general “misrecognition” of exchange as theft, but because of a widely shared public disinterest in reciprocity, while both “thefts” and “gifts” are recognized as the stuff of everyday life. The two, moreover, are understood to represent two sides of the same coin, whose distinction primarily depends on interpretation. As seen above, in a context where petty theft is taken for granted, it is not so much thieving as running after thieves that is dishonorable, while, by turning a theft into a gift, admiration shifts from the thief to the owner. For those who can afford to do so, the problem is thus not to avoid theft as to be publicly recognized not to do so. Conversely, theft can be read as a refusal to accept a gift as a gift, hence returning personal autonomy and agency to the receiver (“she didn’t give it to me, I just took it!”). This ambiguity is arguably inherent in many uneven transactions: is protection money given or stolen? Even in the legalistic West, distinctions between thefts, gifts, and loans are at times difficult to draw. “There is nothing in the sensibly observable world alone that can tip the scales and can determine whether the handling of a thing is an instance of appropriation or not” (Melissaris 2007:585), and whether this appropriation was conceived to be lawful (a gift) or not (theft).

In Faya, this means that stories of giving and getting are mutually exclusive, as only one interpretation can be given at a time. Either the getter is portrayed as a resourceful trickster or honorable raider, or else getters are excluded from the picture altogether, and giving becomes heroic. This is perhaps an additional reason why giving cannot be publicly acknowledged as creating social ties, as this would make it necessary to contain the two parties to a transaction in the same narrative. In accounts of glorious giving, receivers thus all but disappear into anonymity. Hence one of the people my friend Cortegue most admired was her (distant) aunt, after whom she had been named. Everybody referred to her as “Bangui” because she used to work at one of the Central African banks in N’Djamena. She had never lived in Faya, but

every time she came, it was wonderful: she just stood in the streets, her pockets full of 500 franc notes, new ones fresh from the bank, those that make a noise when they crinkle. She just stood in the streets and gave the money away, to anybody who happened to walk past.¹⁷

This image of unlimited, beautiful wealth, given freely without asking to whom, made Cortegue’s eyes shine with envy: this, clearly, was true greatness. The story works, of course, because it is exceptional and stands out from everyday life. But as an ideal of total autonomy, it is revealing: status is increased not by accumulating social ties and potential clients, but by showing in grandiose fashion that one can do without. Similar logics are at

work in the endless rituals of giving, mostly to praise-singers who are otherwise judged to be unworthy of wealth and social connections.¹⁸ These rituals of giving are at the heart of most public celebrations. During weddings, for instance, all attention is on the givers, and photographs and videos concentrate so much on them that not only the receivers, but even the newly wedded couple often seem to drop out of the picture altogether.

Not everybody can give like this, of course, and nobody can do it all the time. This is widely accepted, as is the axiom that wealth is by its nature unstable, a windfall rather than a permanent condition. While one has access to wealth, however, one ought to give freely, and failure to do so is judged severely, in terms of pathology rather than crime. The image of the “poor rich man” is thus as central to local imaginations as that of the freely giving hero:

There are some very rich people in Faya, but they hide their money. They wear dirty clothes, they don't eat properly, they grow weak... One day one of them fainted in the street. In the hospital, they said he had been starving himself... For these rich people, to take 5000 F CFA out of their pockets, it's a big deal, they start shaking – it's like an illness, they simply can't spend their money.¹⁹

Criticism here is not focused on the needs of others—“he is a rich trader but his family are starving”—but with regard to the “poor rich man's” own state of health and sanity: this is a problem of personal integrity, not of communal well-being.

This emphasis on getting-things-for-free and giving-things-for-nothing only “works” in a larger system of relations with people who live according to different norms and values, if, in other words, we see the category of “Tubu” (the “Tubu slot,” or “Tubu niche,” that sheds people and regularly gets filled with newcomers) as growing out of a dynamic relation with social orders based on different assumptions about the rightful circulation of goods and the constitution of worthwhile personhood. Purely locally, there would be little to steal (beyond the date harvest), and although boundaries between inside and outside are fluid, directions from one to the other are clear, and there is a general agreement in Faya that wealth ought to be gathered elsewhere and brought back to be squandered freely. As seen above, historically, Tubu social and economic systems have always been turned outwards. They continue to be so, as Faya's contemporary inhabitants live off the dividends generated by their investments in state institutions or the Chadian armed forces. The latter, thirty thousand men strong or more, have recently reinvented themselves as a “major actor against terrorism in Central and West Africa” (Tisseron 2015:1), or as an ever-ready peace-keeping force, thereby generating rent both for the Chadian government and for individual soldiers. Their activities are mirrored by those of the many Chadian mercenaries employed throughout the region (Debos 2008; Tubiana & Gramizzi 2017:135), who, given the “fungibility of status” (Debos

2013:31) in Chad might in fact be former and soon-to-be-again government soldiers, and in any case often originate from the north of the country.

On the other hand, given the lability of distinctions between internal and external, the high degree of mobility, and the large number of emigrants, the “outside” inevitably includes many who are also (perhaps among other things) Tubu-speakers. Throughout Chad, and in neighboring Niger, Cameroon, Central African Republic, and Libya, emigrant Tubu work as successful businessmen, traders, politicians, and administrators. Some of these figures are well-known locally, and the exact amount of their fortune is the subject of much speculation and gossip. Less spectacularly, wealthy Tubu are known to people the richer suburbs of N’Djamena, where they indulge in all the amenities of modern life, and where their life choices are more likely to be directed towards Cameroon and, even better, Egypt and the Arab gulf than towards Faya and its surroundings. As a general rule, none of these more or less legendary figures has built a house in Faya, as they know that any wealth there would literally be “eaten up” by their friends and relatives, but their (rare) visits to Faya are greeted with much enthusiasm (and lavish parties). Faya is thus set aside as a space of consumption, intimately dependent on outside funds; a place where wealth does not keep, and glory is reflected in waste. Bouts of “irresponsible” generosity, which are not so much conversion of material into social wealth as glorious spectacles that pretend that one can do without both—because the world is infinitely large, its resources plentiful, and one can always go and get some more.

Conclusion

I began this article with the observation that standard jurisprudential definitions of theft as crime imply a vision of a bounded social whole and, indeed, of a “public,” in whose name a tort can become a public offense. Clear distinctions between theft and raiding, or even between thefts and gifts, similarly assume relative stable notions of social hierarchies and bounded groups, or at least the lasting ability to impose a univocal reading of events. This is not always the case, as on the ground theft might easily shade into raiding, reciprocity is not necessarily a value in itself, and gifts can be read as thefts and vice versa. Taking northern Chad as an example, this essay has attempted to understand an internal valorization of theft and raiding as the expression both of a longstanding and intimate relationship with “civilization,” and as a more general denial of reciprocity, both in internal and external relations.

This poses analytical difficulties, as the conceptual vocabulary that we have at our disposal as social scientists is not only heavily shaped by functionalist assumptions of social order (and hence coherent and bounded units of enquiry), but also by an “exchangist” view of society. Balance, reciprocity, and a general concern for the long term are often simply taken for granted, and their stated absence might either be seen as impossible or as based on misunderstandings. Similarly, theft tends to be understood as a

direct translation of greed, marking the point at which explanation comes to rest. Yet this is often unsatisfactory, especially given the concomitant emphasis on boundless generosity that is apparent in Faya. If nothing else, the example of Faya demonstrates that the apparently unproblematic, even universal, criminalization of theft assumes a number of fictions—such as “the authority of the community,” or notions of objective equivalence—that we cannot take for granted in all contexts.

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Notes

1. The Sanūsiyya is a Sufi order founded in 1837 in Mazouna in what is now Algeria by Muhammad b. ‘Alī al-Sanūsī. It was initially mainly based in Cyrenaica (in what is now eastern Libya), but, in the late nineteenth century, moved its headquarters first to Kufra in the Libyan south, and then to Gouro in northern Chad.
2. Buijtenhuijs (1978, 1987) remain the standard works on the Chadian civil war.
3. Galmaï, Faya, March 4, 2012 (all names have been changed).
4. Galmaï, Faya March 4, 2012 and March 27, 2012.
5. The current Chadian president, Idriss Déby Itno, Habré’s former head of staff and close ally, came to power in a military coup in late 1990.
6. Commandant T., Faya, 12/08/2012.
7. Togoï, Faya, March 5, 2012.
8. “In the desert, the power of the rulers depends less on material wealth than on being unencumbered by possessions and yet capable to access needed resources at any time” (Rossi 2015:157).
9. Muḥammad Maḥmūd wuld Shaykh, *Kitāb al-turjamān fī ta’rīkh al-ṣahara wa al-sūdān wa bilād tinbuktu wa shinjīt wa Arawān wa nubadh fī ta’rīkh al-zamān fī jamū‘a al-buldān*. The copy consulted in 2008 was held at the *Centre de documentation et de recherches Ahmed Baba* (CEDRAB) in Timbuktu, MS n° 762.
10. Ahmat, trucker, Faya, 5/04/2012.
11. Amina, Faya, August 2012.
12. Togoï, Faya, August 13, 2012.
13. Chidi, Faya, September 12, 2012.
14. On the imprecision of this term, which can cover a broad range of practice ranging from actual abductions to stylized ceremonies, see Barnes (1999:57). For the symbolic value of “marriage by capture” as a way of avoiding gifts in India, see Parry (1986:463).
15. Women, meanwhile, recount the experience as deeply traumatic: “I had no idea what was going on, and one day as I was going to school they just captured me, and threw me into a car, like a sack of potatoes. They were acting like savages” (Ahta, Faya, August 2012).
16. Hence also current debates on “primitive accumulation,” or “accumulation by dispossession”: see Harvey (2003), also Sassen (2010).
17. Cortegue, Faya, February 2012.
18. On Tubu praise-singers and artisans (*aza*, singular *eze*), see Brandily (1988) and Baroin (1991).
19. Tuka, Faya, 7/07/2012.