

Global Media and Local Verbal Art Representations of Northern Malian Tuareg

Susan J. Rasmussen

Abstract: This article offers a critique of widely disseminated portrayals of northern Malian Tuareg by outside media, which tend to portray all Tuareg as warriors and criminals and to project pseudo-scientific concepts of “race” onto relationships between Tuareg and other Malians, recalling the now discredited colonial “Hamitic Myth” in Rwanda. It also analyzes local oral historical accounts that present themes of Mali as both a protected fortress and welcoming crossroads, a country that both resists and absorbs intruders, and that also express concepts of identity based on language, culture, and flexible social affiliation. The article is based partly on interviews with internationally known local musicians who function as mediating “third voices,” and concludes with a discussion of wider implications of these findings for notions of voice, authority, and the mutual construction of ideas of Africa.

Résumé: Les médias extérieurs tendent à décrire les Touaregs comme des guerriers et des criminels et à projeter des concepts pseudo-scientifiques de “race” sur les relations entre les Touaregs et les autres Maliens, rappelant le “mythe hamitique” au Rwanda. Ce papier analyse les récits historiques oraux locaux qui présentent les thèmes du Mali comme une forteresse protégée et un carrefour accueillant, un pays

African Studies Review, Volume 60, Number 1 (April 2017), pp. 77–100

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qui résiste et absorbe les intrus et qui exprime aussi des concepts d'identité fondés sur la langue, la culture et l'affiliation sociale flexible. Cet article est basé en partie sur des entretiens avec des musiciens locaux connus à l'échelle internationale qui fonctionnent comme des "troisièmes voix" médiatrices et conclut avec une discussion des implications plus larges de ces résultats pour les notions de voix, d'autorité et la construction mutuelle des idées en Afrique.

Keywords: Africa; Mali; media; Tuareg; verbal art; mythico-history

Introduction

This article presents a critical analysis of three "voices" representing perceptions of the predicament in northern Mali. Guided by theories of ethnicity, authority, mythico-history, and memory, it shows how very different categories are used to define human difference and variation among Western journalists, on the one hand, and Tuareg in northern Mali, on the other. In general, the Western media render current and recent events in terms of simplistic narratives, sacrificing local and historical nuance for the sake of clarity and brevity for mainstream readers. I argue that their portrayal of the conflict in Mali is especially dangerous and destructive, particularly in light of the effects of historic racialization of human difference by Europeans in Africa. One important example is the "Hamitic Myth," which in Rwanda projected European concepts of "race" onto local stratified society and imposed a ranking of local residents that increased dissension and eventually contributed to the horrific genocides in Rwanda and Burundi. I do not contend here that the analogy with the situation in Mali is exact or that these processes are identical on the level of political policies. Rather, I wish to warn against tendencies by some news accounts to similarly racialize social and regional affiliations and identities in Mali, which have the potential to hinder peace efforts in the country. Based on examples of prevalent Tuareg concepts of human variation derived from local oral histories and interviews with musicians, I argue that these racialized images from outside media do not match the reality of Tuareg social life. I also am inspired by more constructive critical theories of ethnicity and memory (e.g., Lemarchand 2009; Lonsdale 1994; Malkki 1995; Ranger & Hobshawn 1983) to suggest more broadly that ethnography is another voice contributing to this mix of representations, which all, in effect, reinvent and reimagine human differences selectively to suit different purposes. In this way I hope to contribute to efforts toward more nuanced ethnographic presentations of voice, authority, and memory across cultural spaces.

My overall goal here is to suggest how polarized and culture-bound discourses on local predicaments can be destabilized though all narratives—both local and outside, including ethnography—that reveal preoccupations and values and reimagine classifications. I explore the possibilities of

spatially as well as temporally situated representations to bridge outside and local voices, and analyze the different forms of power each representation has and its potential to reach different audiences. Shryock (1997), in his study of oral genealogies of Bedouin in Jordan, shows the power of “entextualization”—that is, the extraction of oral discourse from its original social context and reinsertion into a new written context—as the central state attempts to impose an official unitary version of history upon competing Bedouin variants. Di Leonardo (1990), in her study of “exotics” in the United States, shows the power of advertisements and cartoons that are apparently innocuous on the surface but have a subtle hold on many American attitudes toward difference and personhood. Lemarchand (2009), Malkki (1995), and Mamdani (2001) have shown the horrific effects of the application of the European Hamitic Myth in colonial policies in the Great Lakes region of Central Africa. Although the effects of these attitudes toward difference and “other” in Mali are difficult to assess, I explore their origins and show that, although unconscious, they tend to endure, “myth-like,” in the mental and logical classifications of some outsiders’ journalistic descriptions of events in Mali. They thereby assert a lingering power, capable of polarizing and essentializing identities in rigid, primordial stereotypes and glosses.

The article begins with representations of northern Malian Tuareg (Kel Tamasheq) in several widely disseminated international media reports—specifically in the U.S. press and on the internet. It then proceeds to discuss prevalent motifs and widely expressed self-perceptions found in local Tamasheq oral histories and in the music of internationally renowned Malian musicians. Much of the thematic content of outside media consists of politically constructed mythico-historical representations of the conflict in northern Mali that depart from the reality. They tend to emphasize male militarism and violence, and seem at times to project “folk” concepts of “race” onto relationships between Tuareg and other Malians, with the erroneous assumption that Tuareg themselves accept the static attributes of precolonial social hierarchies. They also project outsiders’ concepts of skin tone onto the conflict in Mali, portraying it as one between “white” Tuareg versus “black” southerners, central government, and army forces. Some internet voices tend to essentialize all Tuareg as alike (e.g., Whewell 2013), to equate current movements to protect their Tamasheq language and culture with “apartheid,” and to conflate earlier and more recent ethnographic observations of Tuareg society. Some outside media (e.g., Armstrong 2013; Whewell 2013) conflate Tuareg with Arabs, stereotype Tuareg as “people without cousins” in Mali, and overgeneralize about the participation of male Tuareg labor migrants in the late Muammar Gaddafi’s cadre of mercenaries. Even sympathetic media tend to stereotype all Tuareg as racists, as nomads who insist on living in the past, and as bandits, fighters, looters, and smugglers. A few news articles make misleading and oversimplified comparisons between Mali and Afghanistan based on primarily “natural” features of the terrain rather than culture and on the use of surveillance and conquest imagery (Nossiter & Tinti 2013).

Like myths, local Tamasheq oral histories that circulate in and around the Adragh-n-Ifoghas and Kidal regions reveal prevalent preoccupations, and like outside news media, they are also politically constructed from wider encounters. However, their imagery contrasts markedly with that of the outside media. Many local accounts characterize the region as both a peaceful crossroads and a protected fortress, with female as well as male founding ancestors, culture heroes, peacemakers, and warriors. According to these accounts it is the colonial and postcolonial state that disrupted the social enactment of these ideals: for example, by establishing artificial borders and new nation-states modeled on European concepts of polity, and disrupting the caravan trade and other subsistence practices (Bouman 2003; Claudot-Hawad 1993, 2002; Keenan 2004; Kohl 2009; Kohl & Fischer 2010; Rasmussen 2001).

Of course, neither global media nor local oral history constitutes objective “fact” or direct representation, and each is not identical to the other in its representations. But the selected narratives are nonetheless powerful as mythico-history that reflects and reinforces, and also sometimes challenges, social memory (Hale 1999; Hannoum 2001; Hoffman 1995; Shryock 1997). No “voice” is unitary or uncontested, but each displays some prevalent themes revealing underlying logics and classifications (Levi-Strauss 1966; Malkki 1995).

This article argues that “third voices” or the “third-party perspectives” of internationally touring musicians have the potential to bridge local and outside voices—whether “Western” or southern Malian. As neither exclusively local nor entirely globalized, these voices, I contend, have the potential to destabilize binaries and mediate between militant extremes. The musicians from northern Mali travel often, but then usually return to their homes or to refugee camps in liminal zones. Their narratives, while somewhat decontextualized, are therefore not entirely disconnected from local society, and as such they function as interesting mediators between the more polarized viewpoints of the outside “reports” and the local oral histories.

Regimes of Classification: European– and U.S.–Based Media Reports

I begin with several widely disseminated news reports. A 2013 article in the *New York Times* titled “Mali War Shifts as Rebels Hide in High Sahara” (Nossiter & Tinti 2013) reported that

The French military has carried out about 20 airstrikes in recent days in [the] mountains, including attacks on training camps and arms depots, officials said. “Mountains are relatively modest in size compared to Afghanistan. But harsh conditions make it a vast natural fortress, with innumerable hide-outs. . . . Still, water sources can be monitored without too much difficulty. It’s a sort of observation tower on the whole of the Sahara,” said General Allard.

In this account of militant surveillance and conquest one finds both the assumption of “objective” facts and the stock trope of local residents’ association with nature. Although in Tuareg cosmology, myth, ritual, and poetry there is some emphasis on naturalistic imagery—for example, the contrast between the desert and wilderness, on the one hand, and the maternal tent and civilization on the other (Ag Soliman 1999; Hawad 1979; Rasmussen 1995, 2008)—the imagery in this local context does not refer to surveillance or conquest of different humans but rather struggles between humans and spirits.

In cases of Tuareg spirit possession, for example, in which a person’s soul is believed to be under the control of *kel essuf* (spirits of the wild—but also connoting a state of solitude and nostalgia for home), a kind of musical group therapy attempts to bring the possessed person back into the human community through poetic songs containing images of the tent, maternal love, and matrilineal spirits. The meanings of *essuf* are complex. Kassim Kone (this issue) observes that *essuf* is a state of mind approximately resembling the Mande concept of *fadenya*, although the Bamana notion of *fadenya* refers to conflict that is an inherent component of the polygynous family structure, whereas *essuf* is an affliction that takes over a person’s mind on occasion. Tuareg ethnography reveals several different interpretations of *essuf*, including its sometimes positive aspect as a space of creativity. For example, some poetry is composed in a state of *essuf* by poets who are tormented, but also creatively inspired, by depression or trauma (Rasmussen 2008). Many Tuareg poets and musicians use *essuf* imagery to convey loneliness for human social contact and to appeal to dispersed people to return home. To many Tuareg it represents the desert and its resources as a home space under siege (Al-Koni 2002), a sheltering and protecting refuge (Dayak 1996), or a welcoming space of peaceful solitude (Ag Assarid 2006). However, in field research on spirit possession, mediumship, and divination in rural Tuareg communities, I found that this condition is not usually sought after as a goal by most persons. Rather, it usually strikes as an illness, in the form of spirit possession, which most Tuareg overwhelmingly regard as caused by depression (*tamazai*). It usually involves loneliness, nostalgia, and longing for social ties, and can be cured by rituals that include friends, kin, and neighbors of the possessed (Rasmussen 1995, 2001). In conversations and interviews, many characterized *essuf* as a space once full of people but now abandoned. Therefore, with some exceptions—such as diviners who have special pacts with spirits for healing and some modern writers—most Tuareg do not usually actively “pursue” *essuf*. Rather, the *kel essuf* spirits of the wild pull vulnerable persons into *essuf*, and most of the afflicted seek to alleviate their distress by pursuing a state of harmony and a return to the “tent” (*ehan*) of society.

Another complex Tuareg word is *tawsiten*. Some sources (e.g., Executive Analysis 2011) use the outmoded term “tribe” to refer to Tuareg descent groups and regional confederations, or Malian ethnic groups. But cultural and linguistic analysis reveals the inaccuracies of this translation. The Kel

Adagh regional Tuareg confederation in northern Mali comprises two major *tausiten* (large descent groups), which now reside in and around the town of Kidal: the Ifoghas and the Kel Essouk. The Ifoghas group includes the chiefly family of the traditional leaders, or *amenokals*, and several descent groups, or “clans.” The Kel Essouk descent group includes *Ineslemen*, the Islamic scholars/marabouts who serve the Ifoghas aristocracy by interpreting the Qur’an in legal matters, mediating disputes, and healing nonorganic afflictions. Until approximately the mid-twentieth century, Tuareg regional confederations were internally ranked societies, comprising occupational specialists of hierarchical but flexible and negotiable social statuses based on descent. *Imajeghen*, or “nobles,” were elite aristocrats whose descent groups elected a regional amenokal, controlled the caravan trade, monopolized large animals and weapons, and, in exchange for military protection, collected tithes or “rents” from peoples of varying degrees of client or servile status who performed domestic, herding, caravanning, and agricultural labor. *Ighawalen* (clients) owed tribute, and *iklan* (slaves), whose descendants are widely called Bellah in Mali and Buzu in Niger, were owned, usually having been taken in wars. *Imghad* (tributary peoples) were former elites who were subjugated in war by nobles and subsequently carried out raids and engaged in trade for the nobles in exchange for a portion of the booty. In some regions remnants of these relationships persisted until approximately thirty years ago, but they have now ceased. However, *Inaden* (smiths/artisans) still manufacture jewelry, tools, and weapons, serve as go-betweens in delicate matters such as bridewealth negotiations in their noble patrons’ marriages, and in some rural regions also perform praise-songs at nobles’ rites of passage. *Ineslemen*, Islamic scholars popularly called “marabouts,” still interpret the Qur’an in healing and legal matters.

It is also important to examine how Tuareg social identity—though in the past inherited and hierarchical—nonetheless could be strategically manipulated and how locally meaningful distinctions and classifications were contested and changed over time. For example, while some Tuareg, like other neighboring Sahelian and Saharan societies, once took slaves, the slaves themselves could disobey and resist (Rasmussen 1997,1999) and nobles often had to wear amulets in the hope that a spiritual force would compel them to obey. The antithesis of slavery was not freedom qua (individual) autonomy, but rather belonging to a group (Miers & Kopytoff 1977). In addition, various categories that are sometimes mentioned in the scholarly literature were in fact nonexistent or overgeneralized. For example, invading outsiders artificially divided Tuareg society into overly rigid categories. Bouman (2003) argues that the dichotomy of *iklan* (or Bellah—in colonial references, referring to so-called “black” former slaves) versus Tuareg (in colonial references, referring to “white” former slave-owners) stems primarily from colonial politics. The term *illellan* comes from the verb *ellellou*, denoting being free, a quality attached in the past to aristocratic *imajeghen*. *Illellan* does not denote “white,” but rather is related to concepts of dignity (*imogagh*) and reserve (*takarakit*), ideal character traits and

values of precolonial aristocratic elites. Most servile peoples (*iklan*) were manumitted under French colonial domination and liberated at independence. They are no longer legally owned today or required to provide tribute to their former owners, and they must be paid for their work.

Ethnographers of contemporary Tuareg society (Bernus 1981; Bouman 2003; Nicolaisen 1997; Rasmussen 1992, 1997, 1999) have noted that before independence slaves were indeed exploited. But in the Tuareg precolonial system not all noble elites had slaves. Other ethnographers and historians, while not romanticizing or denying the injustice of slavery, warn against overgeneralizations regarding Tuareg owner–slave relationships (Kopytoff & Meiers 1977). Slaves gradually became absorbed into precolonial Tuareg society on the basis of fictive kinship models, and in some Tuareg groups there was intermarriage between slaves and Tuareg, despite official endogamy (Bernus 1981). Nobles had to pay bridewealth for their male slaves as they would for their own sons, and slaves could change owners in cases of mistreatment (Nicolaisen 1997). In the postcolonial era exploitation has to some extent been counterbalanced by certain rights and obligations that former slave-owners grant to their *iklan*. In the early 1990s, for example, elderly former slaves in some rural communities received a local form of old age social security support from descendants of their former owners. Some descendants of slaves, moreover, are believed to possess powers of divination/mediumship (Rasmussen 2001), and others are widely respected as skilled musicians and singers. In towns, many have jobs in the new infrastructure because their formal education tended to precede that of the aristocratic elites, who initially resisted the secular “modern” boarding schools (called *écoles nomades*) established by the French out of fear that their culture would be destroyed (the Tamasheq language was forbidden there) and that teachers would harass their daughters. As a strategy of resistance, nobles initially sent children of smiths and slaves to meet enrollment quotas (Keenan 1976; Rasmussen 1997).

Many outside media accounts fail to convey the complexity of these social relationships—their variations over space and time, their processual nature, their constant changes—and instead present decontextualized, reductionist representations of local social and political categories. Although the media reports critiqued here are not necessarily representative of all outside portrayals, their influence on public and nonspecialist perceptions of Mali is powerful, since these sources are popular and easily accessed. Even well-intentioned reports—such as those drawing attention to Tuareg suffering—can distort and oversimplify complex regional and ethnic-social identities and affiliations by racializing Malian social and regional differences. Through careless terminology, the author’s meanings can be taken out of context and escape the author’s control.

Consider a 2013 news report from Bamako entitled “Why Mali’s Tuareg Are Lying Low,” by Tim Whewell of BBC News. The report warns that all Tuareg, including those who did not support the revolt by the Tuareg separatist movement (the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad,

or MNLA) in 2012, now live in fear of reprisals. The reporter quotes a story allegedly told to him in Mali (source unspecified) to explain the origin of the unique relationship that exists between two of country's ethnic groups, the Bozo and the Dogon. According to the story, current members of these groups are the descendants of two brothers who were lost in the wilderness but managed to survive partly through the sacrifice of the older brother, who cut off a piece of his thigh to save the younger brother from starvation. The ties between Bozo fishermen and Dogon hunters and farmers are now those of fictive kinship, reciprocity, and joking "cousinage" (*plaisanterie*). But this report then states that the Tuareg, unlike the Bozo and the Dogon, have no such cousins, and concludes with the opinion of one informant that "This is not time to be a white Malian, they say when I ask where the Tuareg have gone. Their pale skin's enough to get them arrested or even killed. . . . This is a bad time in Mali to be a people without cousins." The implication is that Tuareg have no relationships with any other ethnic or social group in Mali.

The intent of the BBC reporter was ambiguous—clearly he was sympathetic to his informants and also wished, for commendable reasons, to conceal their personal identities. Nonetheless, without some discussion of whose viewpoint was being expressed here, one naturally asks what the speaker's intentions were: to protect Tuareg? To warn? To threaten? Perhaps inadvertently, this account encourages what John Lonsdale (1994:132) terms "political tribalism" rather than "moral ethnicity," a fixing and freezing of social and regional differences into rigid primordial categories with pseudo-phenotypic attributes, rather than a description of salient but malleable identities. Similar processes occurred, tragically, in Rwanda (Lemarchand 2009). Missing here are key social elements and their local significance, which are necessary in any fair account of who the Tuareg are and what their lives are like.

The BBC representation of the Malian conflict also contains echoes of the European Hamitic Myth propagated by Belgian colonial authorities and missionaries in Rwanda, which emphasized the supposed racial superiority of the "Caucasian-like" Tutsi, the outsiders who invaded and conquered the darker-skinned, inferior Hutu, who were relegated to the status of the cursed Biblical sibling, Ham (Lemarchand 2009; Mamdani 2001). Another report on the internet, entitled "Mali's Light-Skinned Loyalists Defy Mounting Sectarianism," by Hannah Armstrong (2013), while also perhaps intending to be sympathetic, again reinforces a stereotypical conflation of physical attributes and folk concepts of "race" with local ethnicity and culture. This author states that "Mali's loyal 'light-skinned' populations are trapped between ethnic and national identities, since separatist 'light-skinned' Tuaregs launched an ethnic insurgency last year." Astonishingly, she also describes the highest-ranking Arab officer in the Malian army as "pinkish white, clean-shaven and surprisingly gentle, with a high-pitched voice like Mike Tyson," a representation that perpetuates nineteenth-century pseudo-scientific theories of "race" that associated a phenotypical appearance with a particular mind-set.

Where do these categories derive from? Relevant here is Di Leonardo's (1998:8) observation of a dichotomy that exists in the U.S., and is expressed in advertisements, cartoons, and attacks on cultural relativism, between the "cumbered" and the "unencumbered" self, with the latter referring to mainstream notions of white, male subjectivity in (unadmitted) relation to "raced," classed, and gendered "others" in contexts of power and domination. From the 1840s through the Reform and Depression eras, populations labeled as "white ethnics," often from southeastern Europe, were subject to intensive and largely deprecating or patronizing public scrutiny and surveillance and portrayed as mentally deficient, dirty, diseased, and/or innately criminal. The term "race" is still conflated with ethnicity in many regions, and as recently as 2010 the U.S. census (Tolson 2010) used similarly rigid, essentialized categories.

But while such discriminatory categories arising from U.S. representations of minorities, as well as some themes in the European Hamitic Myth, continue as the underlying mental logic of many "mythical" Western media representations of Tuareg and Mali, many Tuareg defy these stereotypes in their behavior and maintain harmonious relationships with persons of diverse origins in social connections that feature joking, reciprocity, intermarriage, and trading partnerships, not solely conflict or exploitation. These relationships are conveyed, for example, in tales related by women in the moral education of children. In several regional Tamasheq variants of a tale about the legendary fourth-century Tuareg queen Tin Hinan and her servant (or in some versions her younger sister) (Rodd 1926; Nicolaisen 1997), the two women were lost in the desert and the servant (or the younger sister) saved the life of her companion by bringing her dates. Expressed in this tale is the ideal mutual dependence between two women who are, in effect, the matrilineal ancestors of different social strata or categories in the precolonial Tuareg system, aristocratic nobles and persons of varying degrees of clientage and servitude who coexist harmoniously. The Tin Hinan myth emphasizes ideals of complementarity and mutual dependence between groups in stratified social relationships, based on hierarchical but not naturalized "racial" distinctions or "cursed" status. The BBC report, by reproducing elements of the Hamitic Myth and excluding the so-called "white" Tuareg from (fictive) kinship relationships in Mali, thus "re-imagines" (Ranger & Hobshawn 1983) ethnicity.

Of course, as in any society, the harmonious ideals expressed in the Tin Hinan myth are not always practiced by everyone, and those who narrate this tale are not disinterested parties, since it serves to validate relationships between dominant and subordinate social categories in the old hierarchy. In addition, social tensions certainly exist. Much like other Africans of aristocratic origin who can no longer, for example, support their griots, many Tuareg nobles can no longer easily fulfill their role in traditional patron-client relationships whereby they provided food and cash to their smith/artisans in exchange for goods and services. Although these patron-client relationships are now less significant in the towns, many rural Tuareg of

aristocratic origin still depend on mutual good will between patrons and clients, and they fear the consequences of a breakdown in these relationships. Even more than the withholding of goods and services they worry that their reputations will be tarnished and that their clients have the potential to transmit “evil eye”-like illnesses if nobles do not share resources—a traditional leveling mechanism that limited the unequal accumulation of wealth and therefore placed a check on potential violence (Rasmussen 2013). And as in other societies, there are also lingering uses of derogatory terms for those of servile background by a few persons (Lecocq 2005). Nevertheless, among many Tuareg, precolonial practices of social stratum endogamy have been breaking down, and many Tuareg emphasize social inclusiveness. Families of noble and chiefly origin now often arrange economically advantageous marriages for their daughters with prosperous suitors, regardless of the suitors’ class or ethnic origin, and many urban households are multiethnic and multilingual. And the Tin Hinan tale reminds former elites of their obligations to (former) subordinates and that ideals of mutual dependence still have relevance.

The important point is that many Tuareg now disavow these fixed categories that are still promoted by the Western media (see Ag Erless & Kone 2013). Both longstanding and changing social roles, as well as emergent socioeconomic class interests, are more significant markers of identity than essential, fixed physical traits, and in most current discourse culture and language are more important than naturalized phenotypical distinctions. Not all Tuareg agree with the separatist/nationalist movements, and even many leaders emphasize not the significance of ethnicity or “race” in Tuareg identity, but rather culture (*temoust*) and the Tamasheq language. Significantly, even those dissident leaders who declared northern Mali to be the independent Republic of Azawad in 2012 called on all Azawadis, not solely Tuareg, to return there. Similarly, cultural revitalization and NGO organizations that promote varying degrees of local cultural autonomy also adopt names that convey unity. For example, the name of Radio Tisdas in Kidal refers to the beading in a necklace, a metaphor for the concept of “assembling together in a pattern.” An NGO organization in Gao is called “Tassaght,” denoting “connection,” and its director, as well as some other Tuareg, asserted to me in an informal conversation that “We’re all under the same tent” (*ehan iyan*) despite regional and class variations. There is thus a need to critique the slippage between outsider and local categories through a situated grounding of their respective mythico-historical motifs in social memory, practice, and encounters over time and space.

The next section summarizes the wider context of Tuareg relationships and encounters with “others” in northern Mali. This is followed by an analysis of local concepts of identity and difference as expressed in oral histories that I collected in and around the town of Kidal which explicitly contradict some outsiders’ applications’ of simplistic naturalized labels.

Historical and Sociopolitical Background of the Adragh-n-Ifoghas and Kidal Regions

Colonial policies in French West Africa and French Sudan, now the nation-states of Niger and Mali, tended to favor the sedentarized farming peoples from these countries' southern regions. These policies marginalized many Tuareg, who were predominant in the northern regions and many of whom, led by such figures as Kaousan and Firhun, resisted the French. Colonial administrators initially neglected the north, only changing their policies upon the discovery of natural resources in the Sahara and the region's value as a military buffer zone.

Following Malian independence, most decision-making and policies emanated from Bamako, nearly two thousand miles away from the northern Tuareg regions. The historical marginalization of nomads—beginning with the establishing of artificial state borders, followed by massacres in the north by some army and paramilitary forces, and exacerbated by a series of droughts—culminated in several Tuareg armed rebellions in 1962–1963, 1990–1996, and most recently in northern Mali, following the declaration of the region around Kidal as an independent Republic of Azawad (Claudot-Hawad 1996; Boilley 1999; Rasmussen 2001). The causal roots of these conflicts were primarily regional and economic. Tuareg rebel leaders have never been unified in their demands, but many have sought equal economic opportunities, political representation, and integration of more northerners into national armies, functionary jobs, and universities. In 2013 French and African armed forces drove the Islamist-reformist militants and some affiliates of AQIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) out of the northern Malian towns they had seized from the Tuareg MNLA Azawad separatists, but the shadowy presence of the rebels remains in the desert, and efforts at peace negotiations in June 2015 have been inconclusive in their effects, as of this writing.

At the same time, identities and belonging, though ossified by much outside media, are now even more fluid and uncertain in a region that has been characterized by both migration and return of local residents, absorption of newcomers, and resistance to invaders. In their long history of migration, mobility, and flexibility, as well as diversification in their exploitation of regional resources, the Kel Adagh, the major Tuareg confederation in and around Kidal, have shown that they are not only vulnerable, but also adaptable; for a time they followed a strategy of autonomy that tended to isolate them from their powerful neighbors (Boilley 1999). Today, according to Kone (this issue), some Tuareg in northern Mali have attained dual Malian and Algerian citizenship, another strategy that implies an adaptation to uncertain political and economic conditions in their home communities since dual citizenship facilitates travel for trading, intermarriage, and labor migration.

Regional verbal art themes therefore reflect social hierarchy and domination, but also flexible negotiation. These antinomies reverberate in

tropes portraying northern Mali alternately as a fortress and as a crossroads. According to a Kidal elderly poet, playwright, and actor who related several oral histories of this group to me,

The Ifoghas group within the Kel Adagh originated in marriage between an Arab man and a Tuareg woman, and had eight children. They are related to the Imujagh Tuareg of Libya, who came from Chad and were Berbers [Amazigh]. The Ifoghas and Iwllemeden [later] fought against the Arabs. The Ifoghas were the first inhabitants of Kidal. The current traditional Ifoghas leader [amenokal] is Intala. [Note: Intala died in December 2014; his son, Mohamed Ag Intala, was appointed as his successor.] Intala's father was Attaher, his grandfather was Illi, his great-grandfather was Khamadan, who won this hill [and water source] [of Kidal], but he was killed by Arabs. Their tombs are at Taghaghagh, 60 kilometers from Tessalit. Khamadan was buried there after the battle against Arabs. Khamadan was first to win the [disputed] hill of Kidal [which was fought over for its water]. (Interview, Kidal, November 2006; my translation)

According to another account of Ifoghas origins (Boilley 1999), the Ifoghas came from Morocco, and their sons married the daughters of the Taghat-Mellet, a smaller noble *tawsit* whose name means “white goat” (describing not their own color, but rather the color of their herds). As they were *echerifan* (descendants of the Prophet), they were served by Islamic scholars/marabouts of the Kel Essouk descent group, and they took over the chieftaincy when Illi built a defensive wall against the Ihaggaren Tuareg. In order to ensure their independence, the Ifoghas had to increase their power and find alliances. The French invasions in the early twentieth century introduced an additional political challenge.

Kidal was only recently settled by Tuareg traditional ruling families, who formerly were more nomadic. It had been used by the Ifoghas and Kel Essouk nomads as a source for well water until the French settled there and brought the chiefly family from near Tin Essako. The French also established a prison, built schools, and initiated policies aimed to keep track of the nomads (censuses, taxes, and interfering with caravans). Despite, as we have seen, resistance to schools from many aristocratic nomads, Attaher, the Ifoghas amenokal (traditional leader) at the time of French colonial intervention, nonetheless built the first lycée, initially enrolling children of subordinates as a negotiated compromise. Tensions between Tuareg of aristocratic and servile origins therefore reflect not rigid concepts of “race,” but rather changing socioeconomic opportunities derived from colonial and postcolonial disruptions of social and ecological practices, and from local Tuareg groups' strategies in adapting to them.

In Kidal more recent tensions concern the growing gaps between rural semi-nomadic Tuareg and a newly emergent urban bourgeoisie comprising culturally and linguistically distinct groups, such as more settled (sedentarized) Tuareg, Bambara, Songhay, and Arab/Moors (Bidan). In urban plays I observed in Kidal, some plots portrayed rural and nomadic Tuareg

as ignorant “bumpkins” being instructed on literacy and health by “wiser” urbanites (see Rasmussen 2015).

In Kidal, the term “Bambara” usually designates anyone from the south, without finer ethnic distinctions specified (Claudot-Hawad 1996). In the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, most Bambara in Kidal were there temporarily, stationed on the army base. Soldiers from the south thus represent state power to the local population, and in the past they represented oppression. Around 1963, after Mali’s independence from France, a commander abducted Tuareg girls and forced them to sing in Bambara, Bobo, and Songhay. Also around that time, as the government of President Modibo Keita, who was himself from the south and of Mande background, pressured nomads to settle in town in order to receive food aid, an army commander responded to a Tuareg rebellion over grievances concerning taxes and food relief distribution by ordering elders and marabouts shot. In 1968 that commander was brought to justice and was sentenced to a prison at Taodeine by President Moussa Traore. Despite these historic tensions, in sedentarized centers recently there has been some intermarriage between Bambara men and a few Tuareg women who have been dispossessed because of drought and wars from their matrilineally inherited wealth in herds. Such marriages often result in multilingual households with cross-cutting ethnic ties, and they also bring substantial changes in gender constructs and property inheritance.

Relationships between Tuareg and Arabic-speaking and Arab-Berber peoples are complex, featuring trade and intermarriage, but also past wars and the resurgence of conflict recently when some Arabic-speaking Islamist-reformist militants overran towns in the north, and a few Tuareg dissident factions (e.g., Ansar Edine and MUJAO) joined the Islamist militants. Most Tuareg, however, remain cool toward Salafist Islamist reformist piety movements since their more militant adherents forbid culturally important musical performances and mixed-sex festivals, and administer harsh corporal punishments (Ag Erless & Kone 2013).

Divisions are therefore not always neat binaries. A person can be sedentarized and urban but have rural relatives, and individuals can be both Tuareg and Arab, Tuareg and Songhay, or Tuareg and Bambara through intermarriage. Northern Mali is a site of dynamic interaction, cross-cutting ties, and competing ideas. Not all Islamist reformist-piety adherents are violent. Some have spoken out against the Islamist militants (Soares 2012). Prior to the coup in Mali, some Kidal Islamic scholars and elders welcomed peaceful Islamist piety organizations because they established clinics and schools in northern regions to fill gaps left by the withdrawal of state support in the restructuring policies imposed by the IMF and the World Bank that required decentralization and privatization as a precondition for loans and aid.

Many local residents, understandably cautious from these shifting and unpredictable events, tend to consider an intruder as a raider at first, reflecting fears of the ambiguous intentions of an unknown traveler; indeed, at rural Tuareg weddings, the groom and his family are symbolically portrayed as

raiders in their circling of the bride's tent on camels. But once a stranger (*amagar*, also denoting guest) wins local trust, friendship and protection usually follow. Local classifications of persons follow the principles of interaction between exterior and interior, but as soon as there are regular relationships economically, politically, or socially, communities enter into a complementary structure and become recognized cultural partners (Claudot-Hawad 1996). The mix of cultures occurs in several steps, in a dynamic process. The interior only evolves if it is confronted with the exterior. And a counterweight to the center is indispensable; mediators and balancers are important.

Crossroads and Fortresses

The northern Malian region, though located on the periphery of state power centers and the scene of intermittent armed conflicts, has been a crossroads and meeting-place of culture, religion, and peaceful trade for centuries. One response to invasions has been the absorption of invaders into local kinship, religious, and trading networks. Another response has been resistance if intruders are perceived as untrustworthy. Contemporary oral historians, poets, and other performers often refer to the origins of place-names and groups in these terms. An elderly actor and comedian in Kidal, for example, explained that this town's name derives from the Tamasheq term *egdela*, from the verb "to refuse": "This refers to the historic role of local refusal to be dominated by invaders. Kidal is on a hill that was historically fought over" (interview, Kidal, October 2006). Others indicated that this term refers to a well-secured, barricaded house—that is, a fortress.

Many locally composed poems and tales praise male and female heroes who resisted not only southern Malian forces, but also invading Arab and French forces. In general these narratives reflect concepts of spiritual power, historic conflict over scarce water, and the shifting of political alliances in much of the north. In the early twentieth century, in the area between Kidal and Gao, the French armed the Kunta in order to defeat the Chamanamass Tuareg, and as a result the Kunta became wealthier and acquired more official authority. Water projects were initiated, but different factions perceived water as unequally accessible in the sporadic military and civilian competition over wells. In particular, residents felt pressured to give priority to soldiers from Bamako in water use (Rasmussen 2004, 2007).

Resistance and protection themes are also evident in a tale about Bagara, the matrilineal ancestress of the Idnane, another Tuareg descent group between Gao and Kidal, who fought Arabs on horseback. After relating that tale to me in her rural home, the female teller, a poet and oral historian, added comments.

[In] Adagh, [the Adragh-n-Ifoghas], if [only] there are men like [those] in the past! It is better that they use the same methods as in the past. So they will chase (away) from their territory the Arabs, so they don't return.

The Adagh people have resisted enemies' colonialism, they have long resisted . . . since the time of the Jerere [local Tamasheq term for Arabic-speakers related to the Kunta]. They [also] chased the colonialists, the *ikoufar* [denoting infidels, but used to refer to Europeans in general]. They [the Kel Adagh] battled against them [the Arabs and the French, at different times—here, referring to early twentieth century], they took prisoners, they battled them with their hands, stones, rocks, sticks, until they chased them away. Thus the Malian troops [militia], also, they [the Kel Adagh Tuareg] have battled and resisted them. They left their land. (Interview, village in rural northern Mali, June 2002; my translation)

Note that this female teller's distinctions were based partly on religion (the French colonial forces are glossed as "infidels") and partly on language and culture (the Arabic-speakers), but her hostility was directed against military actions: invasion and conquest.

Nevertheless, one tale recited to me about the origin of the Chamanamass, a Tuareg descent group located south of Kidal whose name denotes "people at the center," urges cooperation and collaboration. According to this narrative, a Tuareg and an Arabic-Berber Kunta marabout once fought over a well and the Chamanamass Tuareg marabout declared that the well would dry up if there was no mutual respect or sharing of the water (interview, village in rural northern Mali, June 2002). Thus historically and currently there have been struggles over controlling key resources and allies, but also efforts to assemble and absorb competing outsiders through intermarriage, trade, sharing, and complementary occupational specialties. In local mythico-historical memory, this experience is conveyed in themes that oscillate between tropes of unity, crossroads, and markets, on the one hand, and a protected fortress, on the other. Interior and exterior can be reconciled, however. Mediators can arise to keep the peace.

Mediators and Warriors: The Kel Essouk "People of the Market"

In the Adragh-n-Ifoghas massif, "Kel Essouk" denotes "people of the market." The respected Tuareg Islamic scholars/marabouts who belong to this descent group and who serve the Ifoghas chiefly families traditionally play an important role in maintaining regional equilibrium and mediating conflicts, though recently they have alternated between refugee flight and return in the sporadic regional violence. According to a Tamajaq-speaking male nurse in Kidal who also had acted in plays,

Kel Essouk history involves two *timenukalen* [female leaders], Sataunata and Bossaydata: Sataunata was an ancient Berber [Amazigh] queen there, very generous, who resided at Essouk and Tademekka, now archaeological sites with rock art, about 60 kilometers from Kidal, part of the national cultural patrimony program. Both female leaders were renowned for their generosity toward visitors. Sataunata gave visitors rice; Bossaydata gave visitors gold pieces. The Songhay Empire attacked Essouk-Tademekka

three times, and the site was finally abandoned in drought, reverting to desert. All but Bossaydata left during that seven-year drought. Bossaydata pounded gold pieces and ate gold powder, and lived. (Interview, Kidal, October 2006; my translation)

According to other accounts this site was founded by two pilgrims en route to Mecca. They liked the place so much that one said, “This is Mecca,” and decided to settle there; hence the name Essouk-Tademekka (*Tade mekka* denotes “That [or such] is Mecca”). According to an elderly Tuareg actor, poet, and oral historian in Kidal, “the Kel Essouk were the first men who brought Islam to this region [around Tademekka]. They live around the original home area of the Ifoghas Tuareg amenokal; these groups are their descendants” (interview, Kidal, November 2006).

In a play I saw during my field research in Kidal entitled “The Market at Essouk,” which was based on an oral history collected from a rural elder and first performed at the Essouk-Tademekka Festival in 2005, a marabout elaborates on the origins of the town.

Essouk was a place that did not exist in the past. There were trees, a stream, many things. It was among the first towns that existed. Those who left Algeria, they passed Essouk, those of Morocco, those of Algeria, those of Mauritania, those of Mali, they passed by Essouk. It was passed by in history until it became a crossroads [*intamockast*] meeting-place, then a market. Before, Essouk was inhabited by the *ikoufar* [referring here not to Europeans, but to a non-Muslim people]. It became a great meeting-place. This history our parents told us some details of, saying their old parents [i.e., ancestors, *Kel Ibda* or *Kel Arou*] had told them this history. So the history is ancient. The place of Essouk is a place of encounter, not only for Moroccans, not only for Algerians, not only for Malians. It is a historic world place for everyone. (My translation)

Note how inclusive this last statement is. Everyone is now welcome here. The basis of distinction historically was not ethnic, but rather religious: there is an implied temporal progression from pre-Islamic wilderness toward Islamic center of civilization. Thereafter, markets were historically the centers, crossroads, and meeting-places of ideally peaceful trade, blessed by marabouts’ *al baraka*, the Islamic benediction power.

In Kidal in 2006 I also collected another oral history of Essouk, recited by the poet in the form of a poem, from a Kel Essouk Tuareg Islamic scholar/marabout serving the Ifoghas amenokal.

Essouk it is our culture, heritage [*alassal* in Tadtart Tamasheq dialect].
It is for that that we became the Kel Essouk.
It was at that time that the French arrived [between 80 and 100 years ago, before Attaher; the French arrived in the time of Illi—father of Attaher—and grandfather of Intala; around the era of Firhun and Kaoussan, other Tuareg warriors who resisted the French in the early twentieth century].

They made war, people became separated, but we kept our Essouk heritage.

We were named the Kel Essouk [People of the Market].

There was this woman who was named Essouk. She had brought her products there [to Essouk-Tademekka].

Across the river, she sold her products.

At that time, there was no money, we bartered. They took on our culture, heritage, for always

Our culture, heritage was the Qur'an.

We became the marabouts.

The Kel Essouk was the name of our old ancestors.

It was with them that we became marabouts.

They called us the Kel Essouk.

(My translation)

Oral histories such as these now comprise nostalgic narratives of nation, for the Kel Essouk have intermittently been challenged by intruders with very different, and politically manipulated, concepts of moral space and practice. Spiritual and material powers and resources have become imbalanced. Indeed, in the overlaps between some local and outside militants there has been a reimagining of these narratives. Sadly, these areas have become centers of inter- and intra-regional violence. Even small-scale incidents in and around the Kidal market have reflected these tensions. In 2006 conservative Islamist-reformist marabouts stoned actors in a traveling ensemble in the Kidal market who were performing a health education play about AIDS. Around the same time, unknown strangers impersonating police approached me, shouting, and demanded my papers. I later learned that they were not “real” police. On November 2, 2013, two French journalists were abducted from the Kidal market and later killed by unknown assailants.

In a poem recited to me in Kidal in 2006 by a son of the amenokal's Kel Essouk marabout, entitled “You Are Welcome, Dear Brothers, for Experience, a Means of Living,” the poet laments past violence, exhorting others to resist oppression but also act with honor, and warning of more approaching thunder.

One makes efforts to understand and to see bad deceptions.

One is going to abandon the lie and take things seriously.

Avoid shame, and take things seriously.

Truth, seriousness bring us support.

We are going to see the country in a bad time, in which we have had trouble.

We have for a long time felt irritations [i.e., itching], we [try to] prevent from approaching us,

[like] France's lying and bad tricks.

France, believing in invading the region with tactics that Karos [a French colonial officer who arrived in the early 20th century in Kidal but was defeated in a battle] wanted to do here,

The same thing as in their other colonies,
 These men followed their destiny.
 When he stayed in France, he was not applauded [i.e., because he had
 failed to conquer].
 He knew that [Tuareg] nobles do not like shameful acts.
 The lions [i.e., the aristocratic *inajeghen*], the fighting they did has
 remained famous.
 It directs [inspires].
 Chabon [an Ifoghas warrior who fought against Karos and chased sol-
 diers away from Kidal], in combat that became hot, when he made war,
 people fled.
 His saber sword had three branches:
 One in gold, one in silver, and the other in bronze. My brothers, Chabon
 was fierce against Karos!
 (My translation)

The foregoing “voices” all provide nuanced, though not disinterested or objective, perspectives on the local experience of alternating currents of power. Much verbal art “on the ground” in northern Mali expresses both openness and resistance, and notably, resentment of French colonialism, Arab invasions, and massacres by state armies. As Badi (2010) observes, etiological myths span long periods of time: they mark cultural, political, and social transformations. They are indices and they bear witness, albeit selectively. Their variations in the stories, poetry, and other verbal arts of the Tuareg are indicators of the influence of other cultures that they have encountered, and the ways in which social categories and their representations are subjective and situational.

Third-Party Voices

Most anthropologists now recognize that the points of view conveyed in historical narratives are selective. That said, the problem remains of how to escape circular arguments of relativism, and how to situate this selectivity in written and oral ethnohistories and current social practices. Even such apparently relativistic statements as “history is written by the victors” are questionable, since, notwithstanding the power of dominant official voices, muted voices anywhere also render historical “facts” selectively (Lonsdale 1994; Malkki 1995; Mudimbe 1988; Ranger & Hobshawn 1983).

In many Sahelian African societies people acting as mediators—for example, griots (oral historians), bards of aristocratic families, as well as some Islamic scholars and smiths/artisans—serve a valuable role in destabilizing binaries in selective historical consciousness. They embellish genealogies and legends such as battle epics differently in different regions to suit each local audience—dominated and dominant alike—thereby revealing the interests underlying selective memories (Hale 1998; Hoffman 1995). A few internationally famous Malian musicians have also provided commentaries on the recent Malian crisis in public interviews promoting

their touring concerts. Perhaps polarized outside media and local (regional) verbal art representations can be partially reconciled by additional traveling voices that are not neatly local, Western, or global.

Since 2012 some Tuareg musicians—for example, members of the Tartit and Temekrist ensembles from northern Mali—have fled their region, since the Islamist militants’ targets included music, instruments, musicians, and performers of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Some musicians were stopped by militants at roadblocks, and all of their instruments and amplifiers were seized, doused in petrol, and set alight (Rohter 2013). Islamist police also demolished recording studios and radio stations and confiscated and destroyed painstakingly accumulated archives of local music. Fadimata Walet Oumar, the lead singer of the Malian Tuareg musical ensemble “Tartit,” told a *New York Times* correspondent (Rohter 2013) that

when the (Islamist reformist militant) crackdown began, I thought we were finished, we had to leave, but during that crisis we continued to hold our concerts in refugee camps, so as to keep our traditions alive. . . . We are afraid to go back home because we do not know what will happen next. The Islamists could return, and that would be the end of our lives, the end of our music. For me to think of such a thing is terrible—all the young women who would no longer be able to sing or play. In a world of crises and problems, music is therapy for us.

Mohamed Aly Ansar, a touring performance organizer, told the same reporter that “the survival of a festival mandates that we relocate far from our home in northern Mali . . . until the music can return to its roots with freedom of expression and dignity.” Another musician, Alpha Ousmane Sankare, a member of Ali Farka Toure’s band, asserted, “If a musician is forbidden to sing or play, you have taken his life. . . . They kept saying it [music] was *haram*, *haram*, sinful or prohibited. We asked them, ‘Isn’t burning everything also *haram*?’” Amadou Bagayoko, of the duo “Amadou & Mariam,” said, “The Islam of the radicals is not true Islam, they have divided the country by making *shar’ia* reign.” Ahmed Ag Abdoulaye, a Tuareg singer and dancer, added, “Everything is on standby.” When the American tour of all of these performers ended, several did not plan to return to Mali, but instead to refugee camps or other temporary quarters in Burkina Faso and Mauritania.

It should be pointed out, however, that even in this sympathetic interview with the *New York Times* reporter featuring comments from the musicians themselves, the author quotes Andy Morgan, the former manager of the band “Tinariwen,” who describes *tende* drums as “the mitochondrial DNA of all Tuareg music” (Rohter 2013)—using, tellingly, a popular American genetic (biological) rather than a cultural trope.

In a 2013 interview with the musical ensemble Temekrist from Kidal, posted on the website of the Tuareg cultural revitalization organization called Temoust (denoting culture or identity) based in France (“Our People

Want to Be Masters of Their Destiny,” temoust.org), the musicians explained that their name denotes a knot or a union. The leader of this band, Ousmane Ag Mossa, commented, “We became an international group, but not a national one in Mali. This is not the fault of the Malian citizens. That population cannot know us if [our music] is not disseminated on the radio, or if there are no articles on us in newspapers. . . . We would at least like an hour’s program for the Tuareg community on the national television. There is no journalist or communication in Tamasheq in the national media. . . .” In 2011 this group produced an album called “Toumast-in,” denoting “My culture or people.” Another recent work is called “Chatma,” meaning “My female friend or sister”—a reference to the prominence of Tuareg women and matrilineal imagery in the group’s music. As Ousmane explains, “they [women] are queens and symbols of freedom. With the war, they see their brothers or husbands dying. In spite of everything, they remain standing up. We make homage to them. We think not only of these women, but also those in similar conditions elsewhere, as in Afghanistan, in Iraq or in Palestine” (temoust.org 2013). Note how this musician expresses the ideal motifs of unity and matrilineal heritage, and appeals to culture in his comments.

Conclusions

The foregoing analysis offers a critique of some popular Western media representations of Tuareg in the context of the Malian conflict. This is intended as a contribution to African studies and also to wider theories of classification, ethnicity, culture, and memory by providing local “voices” that counter naturalizing and racializing discourse in some Western reports’ framing of the Malian conflict as an oversimplified “white” (Tuareg/Arab) versus “black” (southern Malian) dichotomy: a dichotomy which, as noted, recalls the old, now-discredited European colonial “Hamitic Myth” used to classify some Africans based on pseudo-racial characteristics and to place them on a “lower” level of the nineteenth-century evolutionary scheme, and which also recalls some official and popular American naturalized representations of ethnicity as “race.” The argument is based on a critical review of selected but widely disseminated media discourse on Mali and the Tuareg, personal interviews and local mythico-histories, other verbal art, and internet interviews of Malian musicians who are famous in the global music scene. The aim was to present a nuanced portrayal of Tuareg cultural productions, including a glimpse of how some Tuareg have mediated portrayals of themselves by outside and international media.

Levi-Strauss (1963) was correct in his decoupling of “truth” from history, but like Malkki (1995:240), I reject the idea that such a decoupling implies that “history is nothing more than a matter of competing versions.” For if all historical narratives were accorded equal validity in a version of extreme relativism, it would be possible to insist that genocide, torture, or slavery never occurred. Relativism is not the same as subjectivity.

It is therefore important to contextualize classifications in terms of their contemporary, emergent perspectives: not in order to consider different perspectives as all equally “true,” or to minimize or ignore injustices, but rather to carefully excavate different perspectives and evaluate how they became dominant in specific contexts. The Tuareg musicians as third-party voices mediating between Western and global news media reports and the local Tamasheq verbal art in northern Mali have acquired a prominent public profile; internationally, there is widespread interest in music and culture in Mali as a vital center for African music. Audiences (including readers of both nonspecialist popular and anthropological ethnographic texts) connect more easily with the internationally touring musicians and their plight than they do with local residents, whom they often perceive as very remote, “exotic” peoples in distant “peripheral” places.

Yet all of these perspectives are, to use James Clifford’s (1988) term, “partial truths” which can be taken out of context, distorted, and misused for political purposes. Anthropologists have little control over the fate of their texts, and even the critical juxtaposition of voices does not produce the “whole truth.” But like Alex Haley’s *Roots*, whose symbolism, as Hale (1998) points out, conveys an authentic African perspective to a wider, non-specialist audience, the comments of the musicians presented here express widely held memories among their fellow Tuareg. Like all memories they are necessarily selective, but they recount experiences in ways that Western and global print media, and even ethnographic accounts, do not.

There is no neat dichotomy between the “subaltern” or the “Western” voice here. But local Tamasheq voices in northern Mali stand apart from both these other voices in terms of their deeper investment and thicker description (as Geertz [1973] would term it). Whereas much outside media tends to decontextualize and essentialize identities, these musicians, though somewhat distanced from everyday realities because of their frequent touring, and though equally subjective, nevertheless destabilize ethnocentric discourses, thereby avoiding the pitfalls and slippages of both occidentalism and orientalism and also, one hopes, acting as a mediating voice between these two points of view. Here, I have hoped to tease out some meanings and raise wider questions for future discussion regarding the similarities and contrasts among ethnography, local verbal art, and other media in the interpretation and representation of other worlds. Yet all these voices cannot be regarded as some kind of hybrid “truth.” In seeking to understand the Tuareg and recent events in Mali, specialists and nonspecialists alike cannot afford to ignore local cultural concepts of social, spiritual, and political identity, belonging, and power, as these are shaped by and respond to multiply mediated encounters.

Acknowledgments

Data for this essay derive from long-term field research in rural and urban Tuareg communities over approximately thirty years in Niger and Mali,

and briefly in France with African expatriates. I am grateful for research support from the Fulbright-Hays Program, Indiana University, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, CIES, the Social Science Research Council, the *National Geographic* Committee for Research and Exploration, and the University of Houston.

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