

The Tuareg in the Modern World: A New Generation

The Tuareg, known amongst themselves as the Kel Tamasheq and often called the "Blue Men of the Desert" by outsiders, have long been recognized as warriors, traders and travelers of the Sahara Desert - as a people of grace and nobility as well as fighters of fierce reputation. They are a nomadic people descended from the Berbers of North Africa and for centuries have fought against colonialism and the imposition of strict Islamic rule. They adopted camel nomadism, along with its distinctive form of social organization, from camel-herding Arabs about thirteen hundred years ago, when the camel was introduced to the Sahara from Arabia.

"Tuareg" is a term given to these people by the Arabs, as they initially resisted Islam. To the Arabs, the name Tuareg means "rebel". They have their own language - Tamasheq - and their own beliefs in which the woman is respected and shares many rights with the men in their community. The women are not required to cover their heads and faces.

Since the 12th Century Tuareg camel caravans crossing the Sahara desert have converged in the desert cities of Timbuktu, Mali and Agadez, Niger, trading not only salt, millet, dates, perfume and spices, but also art, history and music. They would play music influenced by musicians from all over the Maghreb, from Senegal to Morocco; they were the link between cultures. In the late nineteenth century, the Tuareg resisted the French colonial invasion of their Central Saharan homelands. The desert has been their home and pastureland. It means freedom from oppressive religion, colonialism, and modernity. But that's all changing fast.

Today, Niger, a large country in West Africa, is the world's Wal-Mart of uranium. Until recently, it was a textbook kleptocracy, making the uranium trade for those in charge lucrative beyond imagination. The former dictator, self-appointed President-for-life Mamadou Tandja, was deposed in February 2010. There has been talk of elections and reform, but the new government's intentions are unclear. The uranium has attracted huge investments from mining interests in China, France and the United States involving billions of dollars. The mines, which operate virtually unregulated, have polluted the water tables. Uranium dust has spread across the region, damaging people's health and valuable pasturelands. Revenues from the operations have failed to benefit the local communities. The Tuareg are being forced off their homelands and their nomadic lifestyle is threatened.

Treaties signed in Mali and Niger during the mid-1990s ended a period of open Tuareg revolt and brought a decade of relative calm to the region. But in February of 2007, the rebel Tuareg in Niger, apparently frustrated by continuing inequalities, took up arms and formed the Niger Movement for Justice (MNJ). A series of attacks by the group on government facilities in the Sahara ignited another rebellion, which ended in late 2009. Today's Tuareg in Mali and Niger are poorly represented in governments and militaries. The result, they say, has been marginalization and a continued failure to tackle poverty endemic among the Tuareg.

The new peace is fragile and the region has not recovered economically. The tourist industry, which employed many Tuareg, has collapsed. Tuareg jewelry is recognized as some of the most beautiful in the world and yet today, most of the artisan's shops in Agadez are empty.

Many Tuareg rebels have recognized that, even though they are skilled fighters, their numbers are no match for the large army of Niger and the continued loss of lives will not solve the problems. Today they are trying to work through democratic means to get the government to respond to their needs, starting with schools and medical facilities. Some Tuareg are continuing as farmers; others have been forced to abandon herding and seek jobs in towns and cities.

In February 2010, the military junta ousted Niger's despised and corrupt president Mamadou Tandja. The junta has promised a return to democracy and has scheduled elections for 2011. Tuareg rebel leaders are currently negotiating with the junta to find a long term solution for peace. Hopes are high that the ouster of Tandja will lead to a binding resolution.

There is also a new threat to the Tuareg regions that encompass large parts of Niger, Mali, Algeria, Libya, Morocco and Burkina Faso: Al Qaeda and other radical fundamentalist Islamic groups are making inroads into the region, taking advantage of people's impoverished conditions in an effort to recruit them to join their radical movement. They are not welcome in the Tuareg communities.