

Terminal Sahara

Sub-Saharan migrants and Tuareg stuck in the desert

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Abstract

A trans-Saharan hub-town, a stop-over well, and an artificial border village in Niger build the framework for analyzing the reasons why and how people become stuck in the Sahara. This paper broaches the issue of Tuareg and sub-Saharan migrants likewise. Both groups share common means of transport, and use the same hubs but they cross the Sahara for a number of different reasons, experience diverse treatment enroute, and handle 'being stuck' differently. The Tuareg are the protagonists in crossing the desert, while Sub-Saharans depend on their strategies. Kinship-ties, alliances and know-how in dealing with deserted environments facilitate their crossings, while sub-Saharans are dependent on a special infrastructure.

Introduction

The Sahara is an area that mostly falls through conceptual grids since African Studies start their investigations in the Sub-Saharan region, and the Middle East or the Arab World considers the Sahara as lying in the outer edge of the Maghrib (Scheele/McDougall 2012: 11). The Sahara, however, is not a marginal region. It is neither a barrier, dividing the Mediterranean and Maghrib from sub-Saharan Africa, nor is it only a bridge reiterating the region as an empty interior, a gap that must simply be crossed; be it in terms of patterns of trans-Saharan-trade and more recently (clandestine) migration. The Sahara, rather, represents large-scale, long-distance, and long-term patterns of connections and interdependence with the Maghrib and the Sahel and is composed of densely interdependent networks (Ibid.: 4ff.).

Former transit passages have developed into fixed places where influences from North and South, and East and West, have been merged, and originated into new cultural assemblages, social networks, and relationships. Arlit, an intra- and trans-Saharan hub-town, Tibarakaten, a stop-over well, and Assamakka, an artificial border site, build the cornerstones for an analysis of being stuck in the Sahara. Among the reasons why people might be stuck in the desert are changing circumstances of political and security issues, running out of money, or experiencing a technical break-down of the crossing car.

In this paper¹ I will refer to Sahara crossings of Tuareg² and Sub-Saharan migrants³. Both groups share common means of transport, and use the same hubs but experience diverse treatment on the route, and handle being stuck differently. Additionally, the Tuareg are mostly the protagonists in crossing the desert, while Sub-Saharans depend on the former's strategies. The Tuareg organize transportation, provide the necessary facilities, and deliver passengers and goods through the Sahara (see Kohl 2007a, 2007b; 2009; 2010; 2013a, 2013b).

The narratives around Arlit, Tibarakaten, and Assamakka will provide the basis for the analysis on why the Tuareg experience facilitation not only in crossing the Sahara, but also under the circumstance of being stuck. Their

¹ The material for this article was collected during several ethnographic fieldworks between 2004 and 2014. The main investigations result from two research projects funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF): P20790-G14 *Modern Nomads, Vagabonds, or Cosmopolitans?* from 2008 to 2009, and P23573-G17 *Sahara Connected*, from 2011 to 2015, conducted together with Akidima Effad. All researches have been based on a methodological pluralism of multi-sited ethnography, participant observation, travelling along with mobile subjects, and visual anthropology. Qualitative narrative interviews and informal interlocutions have been proofed to be successful since they responded to the specific opportunities and challenges in terms of trust, rapport, and access.

² Tuareg is a foreign designation which found entry into linguistics. Although I prefer their emic names *Imuhagh* (Algeria, Libya), *Imajeghen* (Niger), *Imushagh* (Mali), I will use in this paper the term Tuareg, since it is easier to understand for a broader readership. It is important that Tuareg is already the plural, that is why I abstain from using the English plural s. Sg. fem.: Targia, Sg. masc. Targi.

³ Most of them are from West Africa.

transnational system of kinship ties and alliances, and their desert-knowledge and know-how facilitate operating in the Sahara.

Sahara, a zone of transition

Crossing the Sahara has historical roots. The trans-Sahara connections date back more than two thousand years. Already in Ancient Greece there has been a trade route from Egypt leading to the west through the Fezzan in Libya, the Ahaggar mountains in Algeria, ending near Timbuktu in today's Mali (Austen 2010: 1-2). Camel caravans dominated the transport over centuries, and established a space of transit and connectivity which has been characterized by the movements of people, goods, and ideas up to recent days (Marfaing/Wippel 2004: 7-26; Austen 2010: 1; McDougall/Scheele 2012; Al Awar et al: 2014).

The Tuareg have been experts in mobility, transnationality, and in establishing an overall connectivity between Maghrib, Sahara, and Sahel for centuries. The trans-Saharan trade of salt, slaves, gold, and agricultural products served the Tuareg beginning with the arrival of the camel in North Africa in the first century BCE as an additional pillar of their pastoral economy (Austen 2010: 16ff.). With European colonialism the trans-Saharan links and ties experienced disruption. Colonial rail and motorized road transport dealt the final blow to a trans-Saharan trade that has lost its global significance before the late 1800s (Ibid.: 124).

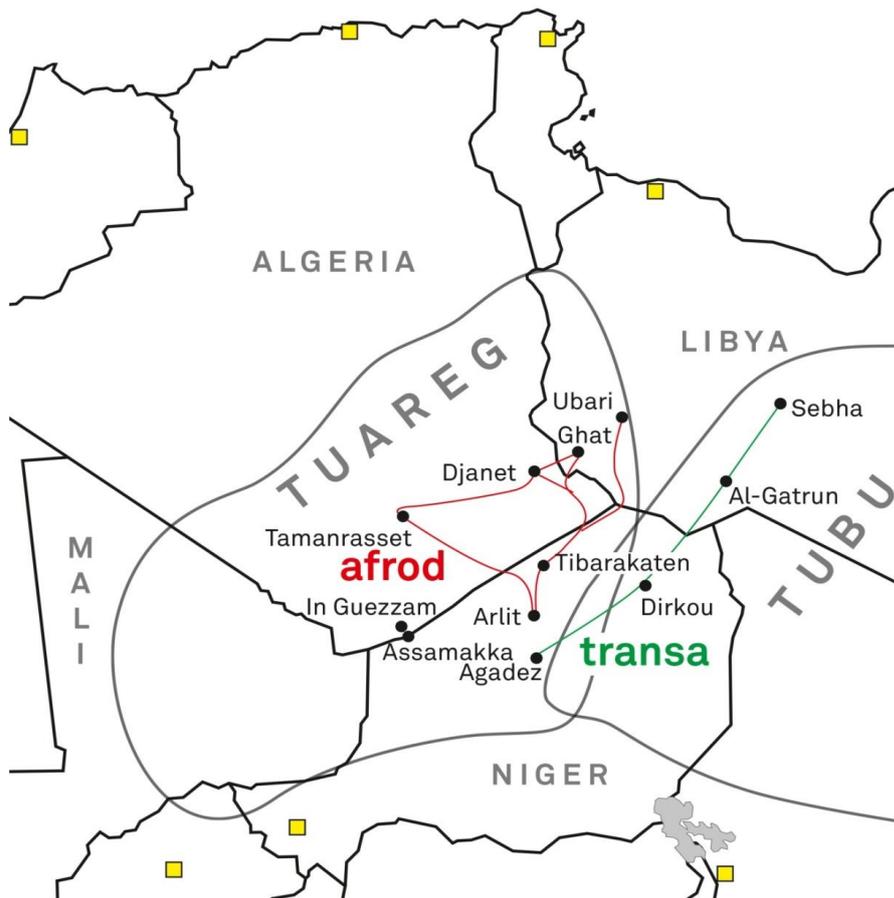
Since decolonization processes, the Sahara has experienced its final split. Not only has the radius of Tuareg's moving been limited, but also their territory experienced a downfall of cohesion and through new territorial borders the Sahara has become a periphery in terms of global flows, contact and linkages. The new states maintained their centres of power in Niamey, Algiers, Tripoli, Bamako, and Ouagadougou, thousands kilometres away from the Tuareg area. "This is why in the Sahara the modern states are viewed as machines for turning out minorities who are relegated to the margins of new the centralities which are settled and urban, and in other

respects separated from their ancient poles of attraction.”(Claudot-Hawad 2006: 655). While on the one hand complex interconnections with economic and cultural flows (Appadurai 1995: 295-310) characterize the globe today, on the other hand, we are faced with a more fortified and strengthened territorial borders (Fischer/Kohl 2010: 1). Borders, however, are not only cutting and separating traces of disjuncture and empty transitional zones, more often they are sites of creative cultural production and investigation (Donnan/Wilson 1999). While state borders increasingly become complicated in crossing legally the Sahara and the Sahel, clandestine movements⁴ gained weight.

The state borders of North and West Africa cut through the Central Sahara. Crossing the Sahara goes along with crossing state borders, which makes the passage doubly challenging. It represents transitions which follow Arnold van Gennep’s classical “rites de passage” (Van Gennep 1981). Similar to the classical transitions in life such as birth, initiation, wedding, or death, border-and-Sahara-crossers pass through three stages. The phase of separation detaches a person for several reasons from his or her home; the liminal phase of transition is embodied in the border (or Sahara) crossing; and the final phase of incorporation integrates the person into a new environment (Chavez 1991). For the present consideration the liminal phase is crucial. It is the most dangerous one, since the person is situated in a transitional state, in a transit space. For many, this passage never ends, if they cross the border without documents, for example, have a breakdown of their transporting vehicle, or run out of money and cannot continue their journey, then they remain caught in the liminal phase.

⁴ Clandestine movements elude registration and statistical coverage, which means that somebody enters a country without an entry visa and identification. Illegal, on the contrary, defines “overstayers”, people whose entry visa or residence permit has expired, but who nevertheless stay in the respective country (See OECD Annual Report 1999).

Before I describe examples of different people stuck in different places, let me introduce two different means of transport in and through the Sahara: *afrod* and *transa*.



Graphic 1: Map of the research area with reference to the Tuareg and Tebu (Tubu) inhabited region, the most important settlements, and the different itineraries of transport through the Sahara (*afrod* and *transa*).

Two different means of transport through the Sahara

Official border crossings in the Sahara are locally referred to as “going *national*”. The Tuareg refer to all illegal border crossings as *afrod*, but distinguish further by itineraries and means of transport. The detailed

development of *afrod*, a unique border business of the Tuareg, I have elaborated elsewhere (Kohl 2013b). For the present purpose, I will recapitulate its most important dimensions in Niger.



A typical afrod car driving with up to 32 passengers from Arlit in Niger to Djanet in Algeria. (Ines Kohl, 2011)

The term *afrod* derived from the French “la fraude” (English: fraud), was borrowed into Tamasheq and has developed in the 1960s when young Tuareg started to leave their nomadic surroundings in Niger and in Mali in order to search for work and a more prosperous life in the neighboring countries. With dromedaries they started a trading business which resembled smuggling and fraud and initiated to cross the borders most of all to Algeria, and later on to Libya, but also other North- and West African countries. Camels, life stock, fuel and staple food (such as semolina, sugar, tea, macaroni, vegetable oil, and most importantly milk powder, called *lahda*) are still among the most smuggled goods between Libya, Algeria and Niger.

Since its emergence, the term *afrod* has undergone certain modifications. *Afrod* does not mean to work exclusively as a smuggler. It rather designates a specific form of the Tuareg's mobility: moving freely between the Saharan states. Beginning in the 1980s recurring droughts forced also women and children to flee from their homeland. Since then families kept together by using *afrod* in order to visit transnational kin. *Afrod* always means crossing the Sahara with 4-wheel-drives. The so-called *Toyota Station*, a Toyota pickup, has become the synonym for it. *Afrod* has been developed in order to organize transport among the Tuareg themselves, but meanwhile it is also a means of transport for Sub-Saharan migrants on their way to Algeria and Libya, and further on to Europe. Up to 32 passengers are transported in one car. While on the Northern and Southern hubs Arabs and Hausa are involved in finding passengers, and organizing the transport, Tuareg only operate as protagonists in crossing the Sahara. Finally, *afrod* describes a respective route through the Sahara. The main hub is Arlit, the Uranium mining⁵ town in Northern Niger. From here three itineraries have developed (cf. Brachet 2009: 161ff.; Gregoire 2004: 179f.):

1. From Arlit to Tamanrasset/Algeria
2. From Arlit to Djanet/Algeria
3. From Arlit to Ghat/Libya or partly even to Ubari/Libya

The second transportation system in Niger is called *transa*, most likely derived from the word "trans" or "transit". It designates the route from Agadez via Dirkou to Libya with huge trucks packed with 100 to 120 passengers and loaded with all goods imaginable. The development of this route also refers to the 1980s when droughts agitated large parts of the population of Niger and forced people to reconsider their economic strategies. In the beginning of the 1990s various economic and political

⁵ The French world-leading company for nuclear power AREVA explores uranium in Arlit since the 1970s in two mines (Somaïr, Cominak). CRIIRAD (Commission de Recherche et d'Information Indépendante sur la Radioactivité) and Greenpeace accuse AREVA of environmental pollution, unsafe conditions and a health risk for the local population (See Greenpeace report: 2010).

factors led to an increase in migratory flows toward and across the Sahara on this specific route (Brachet 2012a).



100 to 120 people find place on a transa-truck, heading from Agadez via Dirkou to Sebha. (Ines Kohl, 2013)

The transportation system of *transa* is well-researched since it has become a major route for Sub-Saharan migrants crossing the Sahara into the North (Brachet 2005, 2009, 2012a,b,c; Gazzi 2008; Gregoire 2004). *Transa* is a controlled, half-official route, crossing several military checkpoints. In addition to the transport fee⁶ the passengers have to pay sort of transit duty in all villages with military posts on the road. After having paid, militaries let them pass even if somebody has no identification or valid visa. What is

⁶ The price for transport on a truck from Agadez to Sebha was up to 80.000 CFA (137 Euros) in early 2013. As additional taxes informants told me, that locals pay 500 CFA, whereas migrants are charged 3.000 to 5.000 CFA. One can bargain and reduce the fee to 1.000 CFA, but in case one has no money left, the military officials react with brutal methods and beat up passengers (Cf. Brachet 2009: 181 ff. ; 2012a: 101ff.).

important and distinguishes *afrod* from *transa*, is that the latter is organized by Tebu, Arabs and Hausa, and the Tuareg have hardly crossed their way.



At the barrier legal and illegal transport likewise wait together to be accompanied by militaries. (Ines Kohl, 2012)

Since the Tebu have gained empowerment in Libya in the aftermath of Mu' ammar al-Qaddafi's overthrow (Kohl 2014), they have set up a quick connection on the *transa*-route (from Agadez via Dirkou to Sebha) with brand-new Toyota Hilux and have somehow conquered the former Tuareg's business in transporting goods and migrants through the Sahara. This development has led to armed hostilities between Tebu and Tuareg in 2012 and 2013. Therefore, Niger set up a military convoy, locally called *combat*, in order to prevent assaults. Every Monday all cars and trucks driving to Dirkou and further on to Libya have to wait at the *barrier*, a military check-point outside Agadez, where they are registered and have to

pay a certain amount per person or depending on the cargo⁷. Legal and illegal transports are likewise accompanied by militaries to Dirkou. That is a kind of curiosity in Niger: once a car is registered, illegal transport mutates into a legal one, and even Sub-Saharan migrants without any proof of identity can pass (Kohl 2013b, cf. Brachet 2009).

Both means of transport, *afrod* and *transa*, share common characteristics: State restrictions, transnational political influences, and several policies in order to prevent migration to the EU have not stopped the border business, but originated in sophisticated strategies of either avoiding and undermining authorities, or dealing with them through bribes and corruption. Their main difference – besides the use of different vehicles and the passing over different itineraries – is that *afrod* is a mainly Tuareg business developed for themselves, and *transa* has long time been a semi-official way of trading with Libya and has recently developed into a gate for Sub-Saharan migrants on their way to Europe. Both routes are dangerous and life-threatening. Car break-downs and the subsequent danger of running out of water, food, and money are the most frequent reasons why one is stuck in the Sahara.

In the following section, I shall depict examples of border-crossers and how they have been stuck in three environments: Arlit, the main hub for crossing to Algeria or Libya with 4-wheel-drives; Tibarakaten, a stop-over well on the route; and Assamakka, the artificial Nigerien post on the border to Algeria.

⁷ At the time of this article's publication (July 2015), the combat regulation has already become obsolete and remains an official statement only.



Migrants are stuck in Arlit and wait in such not yet built-up compounds for days or weeks for further transportation to Algeria. (Ines Kohl, 2012)

Arlit, the hub-town to Algeria and Libya

In 2011/2012, I spent a couple of months in Arlit and was almost daily confronted with Sub-Saharan men being stuck in a yet not built-up compound next to our house. Around twenty to thirty young men from all West African countries had gathered there in order to wait for the transport to Djanet in Algeria. The compound was surrounded by a broken mud-brick-wall, had an open gate, and a small mud-brick-room in a corner where the men could deposit their modest baggage. They slept in the open space, most of them even without a mat or a blanket, and had obviously not been prepared for waiting for such a long time. The young men waited there for several weeks before their car left. During this time most of them had already run out of money and could only organize food through begging.

One day I had a conversation with Osman⁸, a young Targi⁹ who was responsible for collecting the passengers:

Ines: Why are your passengers still here?

Osman: A couple of days ago the militaries caught about 30 people in the Sahara; all without papers. They suspected them as being from AQIM¹⁰ and imprisoned them for 10 days. Recently, the route has become too dangerous. Nobody leaves to Djanet. Now the passengers have to wait. I don't know for how long. Maybe they will leave tomorrow, maybe in the next two weeks. And I still have to register them. The government does not want anybody leaving without being registered, although it is afrod.

I: So the government knows about afrod?

O: Ah sure! When a car wants to leave, I am writing the papers for the car and all passengers, then I head to the police for a stamp, then I head to the gendarmerie for another stamp, and I have to pay for every passenger. If militaries catch the car in the Sahara, they have nothing to fear since they are registered. But pay attention in Algeria! They will catch you immediately and imprison all of you. Here in Niger everything is frankly is not like in Djanet where afrod is secret and runs hidden. Here in Arlit the government gets good money from every car.

I: Who cares about the passengers while they are waiting?

O: Who cares? Nobody. The problem is that most of the Ibambaran and Igoritan¹¹ do not know how to cross the Sahara. They have nothing with them. Just eat Darogo¹² and think that will fill them up! But it has no vitamins. They don't understand that crossing the Sahara is dangerous; that you need water, food. Look, they already look tired, although the most exhausting part still lies in front of them.

⁸ December 6, 2011. Name with interlocutor changed. The interview was conducted in Tamasheq and Arabic.

⁹ Sg. masc. for Tuareg. See footnote 2.

¹⁰ Al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb.

¹¹ West Africans are named by the Tuareg either as *Ibambaran* (from Bambara), referring to the French speaking, or *Igoritan*, referring mostly to the English-speaking West Africans.

¹² Cereal from the South, mixed with water.

Two of my passengers decided to stay in Arlit to earn money. They have nothing left.

Providing accommodation for migrants who are forced to stay for an indeterminate length has become well -organized and quite lucrative in parts of Niger. In Dirkou and Agadez migrants find collective accommodation where mostly same nationals reside together in one place for varying costs (usually a few hundred CFA per day). The French-speaking community calls these places *foyers*, and the English-speakers name it *ghetto* (Brachet 2012b: 79f.). In Arlit such places are not easy to find. Here, people mostly stay together in not yet built-up compounds. People such as the above mentioned Osman are informal intermediates specialized in transport and accommodation. Especially the Sub-Saharanans are dependent on social networks and mediators along the route. Often they are of the same origin as the migrants, and form help units of same nationals along the route. Partly they organize the migrants' transport from their home country up to the Mediterranean. These mediators are called *coxeurs* (Brachet 2009: 91f.). Others are just young villagers working for drivers and "travel agencies" in order to get small money. In Niger, they are locally referred to as *kamosho*.

For Sub-Saharan migrants the time of transit and the waiting period which is not foreseen in their initial budget, is one of gradual pauperization (Ibid.: 80). The job market for the local population in Northern Niger is very limited yet; hence Sub-Saharanans do not have many chances to earn money while waiting. For some of them - from my experience mostly South Nigeriens (mostly Hausa) - working as a domestic for Tuareg families has become an option. That differs from cases in Dirkou where the employers are wealthy families (Ibid.: 81). The Tuareg live in similar poor conditions, nevertheless they employ a so-called "boy" for carrying water, laundry, shopping at the market, or sweeping the compound. The employees receive accommodation and board at their serving house but get paid very little,

comparable with small pocket money. Hence, continuing one's journey remains a difficult task.

Tibarakaten, a stop-over well

The journey from Arlit to Djanet goes straight through a vast plain without any vegetation, people, or water. Opinions vary about why in the middle of nowhere a well is found. Julien Brachet (2009: 173) refers to it as originally used by pastoral nomads. My informants told me that some Tuareg (rebels) in the 1990s dug the well, or at least re-animated it (since in this region nomads are not found any longer) in order to minimize the dangers of the Sahara crossing.



The well Tibarakaten. In the background the shabby merchant's huts are apparent (Ines Kohl, 2011, the source of the original photograph is unknown).

The well is found next to a couple of isolated and very poor looking tamarisk trees, called Tibarakaten, from which the well earns its name. The well is about 10 meters in dept, closed with a concrete slab in order to

prevent its silting up. Since a decade, traders have been settling down with straw barracks and simple mud huts, to provide passengers who pass or are stuck with essentials such as: macaroni, rice, dates, biscuits, milk powder, canned fish, tea and sugar, cigarettes, and even clothes that could protect against heat or cold. The prices are high; not only because the well is isolated, but also simply because it is big business.

Often people have to wait for days or weeks for transportation here. The most frequent reason why people get stuck in Tibarakaten is the breakdowns of their cars. If their transporting car breaks down not too far from the well, the passengers have a chance to survive; they mostly master the kilometers by feet to reach the well, while the driver and his apprentice drive back to Arlit to check spare parts. Those who are stuck are dependent on the offered supply.

Moving back or forward becomes a challenge. The well lies almost in the middle between Arlit and Djanet, in both directions about 600 kilometers. Once a car is stuck, the passengers have only two choices: either they wait until their car is repaired, that means they have to wait for spare-parts or even a mechanic arriving from Arlit; or they try to get a lift from another car. But this is difficult since all cars going to Djanet are fully packed; sometimes one to two passengers find a seat, while the majority rests for weeks. It is easier to find a lift back to Arlit. Drivers sometimes carry people back for free, since they know that they hardly have a chance to advance. Not only food is expensive at Tibarakaten, also the water of the well is sold by merchants (cf. Brachet 2009: 173) since it is not enough in case of many passengers arriving at the same time. A young Targi¹³, who crosses this route quite regularly, since he is working in Libya and his family back home in Niger, reported:

“Usually, there are many cars at the well at the same time, and then you need to queue up. A line of people is standing in the blazing sun waiting for water. Even if

¹³ Sg. masc. for Tuareg. See footnote 2.

you calculate that each car carries just 15 or 20 passengers, with five or six cars that's already about a 100 passengers. Every person can only fill one canister, not more, because otherwise there is not enough water for everyone. After you have waited for hours and it's finally your turn, there is often hardly any water in the well left, as it takes some time until it fills again." (quoted in: Kohl 2009: 37)

Julien Brachet (2009: 173) describes a similar case of a migrant whom he had interviewed. His interviewee had to wait for 12 hours before he could get some water. Hadijita, a Nigerien Tuareg woman married in Libya, was trapped together with her teenage daughter for a few days at Tibarakaten in September 2006. During this time Nigerien and Algerien militaries likewise increased border control in order to catch tobacco smugglers, as rumors indicated. All potential border crossing cars made a stop at Tibarakaten and waited until the mission was over for not being misinterpreted as smugglers. Hadijita was on her way from Ghat to Arlit to attend her brother's wedding. She recounted:

"We spent five days at the Tibarakaten. There is no shade anywhere except in the trader's shelters, and they don't let you sit there, even women with children, many only sit there very rarely. You need to sit in the blazing sun, as even the car hardly casts any shadow at noon, and we were 25 people. When you want water, you need to queue for hours, and then you get a brown sludge. The people at the well are no good. I always kept an eye on my luggage, and yet I lost two bags. Stolen. In those bags were the wedding presents for my brother and his wife. Drinking glasses, dish towels, soap, spoons. All these things were from Libya, which they won't get in Niger." (quoted in Kohl 2009: 38)

Hadijita had an advantage in contrast to many Sub-Saharan migrants. She knew the route quite well, since almost every two years she visits her family in Niger, and therefore she was well -equipped with food. Almost all Tuareg starting the trip take much more food than normally necessary for a 3-day-trip, since they know the dangers of the Sahara in case they are stuck. Hadijita and her daughter were not dependent on the expensive stuff sold

by merchants, but had a stock of macaroni, milk powder, rice, and biscuits. They had even taken coal along with them just in case they had to cook. During the five days stop they took care of some of their fellow passengers as Hadijita recounted:

“Some of our co- passengers had nothing. There was one young Hausa from South Niger, who tried to work in Libya but went back since the Libyans did not support him. We gave him food. He had no money to buy the expensive stuff. Some others, I don’t know Igoritan or Ibambaran¹⁴, argued with the merchants in order to receive food at a cheaper price. Finally, they shared some dates, and their driver gave them macaroni at night.”¹⁵

As there is a certain loyalty among border-crossers and merchants, likewise to help each other, people stuck at Tibarakaten will not die because of hunger or thirst. Subsistence is based on a minimum; however the tedious waiting under the mentioned hard conditions leaves its traces. The people are exhausted, tired, and starved.

Assamakka, an artificial border post

The Sahara is divided along geometric lines and provided with strategic points representing national powers. Artificially laid out villages were created as border-markers. One example is the Nigerien border village Assamakka, situated 250 kilometers Northwest of Arlit. It has an artesian spring with sulphurous water, a couple of thorny acacias, dilapidated cement buildings set up to handle border formalities, and a row of mud houses and straw barracks pieced together provisionally, in which foodstuff from Algeria is sold. Tattered car tyres, dented oil barrels, emptied tinned food cans, and motionless dogs lying around completed the image when I had visited the border in 2006. Men and sporadically women from several

¹⁴ See footnote 10.

¹⁵ Conversation with Hadija in Arlit in October 2006. Name changed.

African states sat in front of the shacks, surrounded by their luggage. In some cases this was only a small bag, in some cases nothing at all, and in other cases a conglomerate of TV sets, cassette - radios and electric kitchen devices. They were sitting here until the customs officers bothered to let them go for a smaller or larger remuneration. Others were waiting for an opportunity which would deliver them to the Algerian border post, In Guezzam, which is about 20 kilometers away. The “real” border line runs somewhere in between.



Assamakka in 2011. The border post has developed into a small village with all kinds of semi-legal businesses. (Ines Kohl, 2011)

When I came back to Assamakka in winter 2011, I was stunned. The little dirty border post with its few merchants had developed into an almost lively small village: Not only more people populated the shattered huts around the border post, the mud houses themselves had increased to more than double. Meanwhile, children were roaming on the pathways, women

cowered on the floor selling fried dishes, and even a school had mushroomed up. Assamakka obviously experienced an enormous influx of people. Mostly, Hausa from Niger's south have settled there and started to deal with small bargains like selling coal, fire wood, or fried dishes, got into a small scale smuggling business with Algerian merchandise, or started to work in car parks, where legal and illegal imported cars from Algeria change their destination.

"Artificially created border posts are exalted places. From a territorial point of view they are located on the margins of the state's sphere of influence and continue the outermost periphery of the state. Yet at the same time they present and represent national power and are therefore centers of national control. They are places where those from the margins of society like to settle down. Here, they try their luck in a grey area in which legality and illegality merge." (Kohl 2009: 39)



Assamakka, the Nigerian border village. People are waiting next to the border post for further transport to In Guezzam, the Algerian border post which is about 20 kilometers away. (Ines Kohl, 2006)

Assamakka is not a place where migrants are stuck in the first instance; almost no West Africans are seen longer than a few days. But on a closer look, Assamakka is a barrier where journeys could officially end. People who cross this place - on the *national* (route) as it is locally referred to - occupy papers and often visa. But many of them do not have sufficient documents or run out of money already at this stage of their journey and officials do not let them pass. But instead of staying in Assamakka, they head to In Guezzam, the Algerian border post. The 20 kilometers between the two border posts are mastered often by feet and by night to avoid being recognized by officials, although everybody here knows about avoiding strategies.

In Guezzam is a small and quite a proper village compared to Assamakka, and the border post is situated a couple of kilometers outside the village. Hiding here, finding occasional work in the market, in bakeries, in construction service or loading trucks for daily wages and continuing to the North remain exit strategies, at least for Sub-Saharanans. For the Tuareg, the situation is different, as I shall elaborate in the following part.

A comparison between Tuareg and Sub-Saharan migrants

Tuareg and Sub-Saharan migrants share common characteristics in crossing the Sahara. They rely on the same means of transport, suffer due to arbitrary state restrictions, visa regulations¹⁶, and therefore cross the state borders very often clandestinely. Both groups, however, cross the Sahara for different reasons. While the Tuareg cross the Saharan state borders in order to visit kin or to seek job possibilities in the neighboring Maghrib countries,

¹⁶ Crossing the Saharan states legally is a major problem (cf. Brachet 2009: 166ff.). Visas are difficult to obtain (in al-Qaddafi's Libya, for example, it was almost impossible to enter the country legally, and Nigerians entering Algeria still need a visa), require money, and people are often strung along for weeks or months with the words "come back tomorrow", until the applicant loses his or her patience and travels clandestinely.

such as Algeria and Libya (before the war and the subsequent insecure and chaotic situation there) the majority of the Sub-Saharanans seek to journey on to Europe¹⁷. Sub-Saharanans are migrants in a sense that they pursue a (more or less) linear movement with a changing place of residence (Van Dijk et al. 2001). The Tuareg, on the contrary, move in circles between the Saharan states; irregularly, partly seasonally, often situationally, temporarily, and according to their individual choice. In addition, they have several places of residence (Kohl 2010: 94f.).

Tuareg are not migrants. Their movements in the Sahara take place within a certain framework. I have argued elsewhere (Kohl 2007a: 171f.; Kohl 2007b: 98f.) that their space of agency and their movements are better described as translocal and as transnational¹⁸. The Sahara is a space of agency which corresponds to their former nomadic radius and represents their traditional area of living and pasturing, which was only limited and cut by colonial forces, and fortified through the post-colonial nation building process. Although the Tuareg act beyond national loyalties, they operate in a pre-defined field. The reason why the Tuareg are able to move within the Sahara quite easily is the fact that they have access to different national identities. All Tuareg-inhabited countries have started to count their populations and equip them with identification cards and citizenships. Tuareg use this system and often claim ID-cards in all these countries. One

¹⁷ For Sub-Saharan migration see for example Brachet 2009; Marfaing/Wippel 2004; Bilger/Kraler 2005, *Reseau Exodus*, *Bulletin sur le flux migratoires* 2013-2014.

¹⁸ Transnational migration/mobility refers to a process by which migrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. The notion of transnationalism emphasizes the fact that migrants build social fields and networks that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders. (Basch/Glick Schiller/Szanton Blanc 1994). Translocal migration/mobility, on the other hand, stresses more the diversity of spatial orders and the different spatial perceptions of the actors. They are not marked (alone) by national borders and territories, but from the ways and locations, on or between which they move. In addition, there are many borders and boundaries within or beyond nation states, which may be more important in contexts such as the crossing of state borders. (Freitag 2005, Boesen/Klute 2004).

may have citizenship from Niger, but additionally an ID-card from Algeria and another one from Libya but often with different names and birth dates (cf. Scheele 2012: 97). Many Tuareg operate with multiple citizenships, have multiple places of residence, and corresponding where they go, they pull out the respective document (Kohl 2013a: 81f.). Crossing the Sahara and its state borders, therefore, is not a break for the Tuareg, since the contemporary mobility of the Tuareg is backed to a large extent by kin and friends on all sides of the Saharan borders.

The second main difference between Tuareg and Sub-Saharanans applies to social networks. While Sub-Saharanans are dependent on a special infrastructure on the route, the Tuareg easily find transport and free accommodation within their own community. Kinship is a major element for defining belonging, and is a basis for help, assistance and support. Tuareg can count on even distant kin and friends living on all sides of the borders. They provide lodging and food, and give any assistance required in the new environment. When Tuareg cross the Saharan borders clandestinely they benefit from information from kin working in military, as policemen or border guards. They might tell them when to go, which route to take, or often just let them pass, just because they are also Tuareg (Kohl 2010: 101f.).

Sub-Saharanans are dependent on intermediates, such as the so-called *coxeurs* or *kamoshos*. These informal travel-organizers partly exploit their passengers and rip them off (demand higher fees, play along passengers in order to cash them up, etc.), since most of them have no knowledge of the transport system. Others rip Sub-Saharanans off or assault them on the route, since they cannot lean on protection through kin or fellows. The assaults can be interpreted as a matter of racism. Sub-Saharanans or West Africans are foreigners. The difference in their language, cultural codes and behaviour in public contribute to their local exclusion. The Tuareg, who have developed a unique system of morals, norms and values dealing with respect, reserve, and decency object to the directness and openness of many West Africans.

In the eyes of the Tuareg, they lack modesty and decency, and therefore the former (Tuareg) adopt an attitude of exclusion and rejection towards the Sub-Saharanans.

A third difference between Sub-Saharanans and Tuareg applies to the knowledge of how to operate and behave in the Sahara. While the Tuareg grow up in the desert, and from early childhood onwards know how to protect themselves against heat, sun and cold, Sub-Saharanans lack this knowledge and therefore suffer much more from the Sahara-crossings. Fatal casualties in the Sahara are much higher among migrants than among Tuareg. In general, Tuareg are equipped with enough water, food, and dressed with adequate clothing. The traditional man's face veil, called *tagelmust* or *echech*, is a sign of adulthood, a symbol of belonging to a cultural unit, a representation towards outside, and an expression of social norms. But next to its "conception of social distance and degree of respect" (Keenan 1977:131) it is a very practical tool in order to cross the Sahara. It protects one's face against the sun, wind, dust, and cold. Many Sub-Saharanans who undertake the trip through the Sahara for the first time in their life, lack enough water and sufficient food, and also miss adequate clothing. Therefore, at the well Tibarakaten some merchants sell veils to migrants.

Epilogue: Disquieting times for the Sahara

Crossing the Sahara embodies a dangerous undertaking. Running out of money, water, and food, experiencing a break-down of the transporting car, assaults by bandits or changing political circumstances are the numerous reasons why people are stuck in the Sahara.

During the last years, the increasing political insecurity in the Sahara and the Sahel has added to an aggravation, and moving in and through the Sahara has become much more difficult than in the past. The Libyan war (see f.e., *Politique Africaine* 125/2012, Kohl 2013b), the political crisis in Mali

(see f.e., Galy 2013, Morgan 2012), and the rise of extremist Islamists involved in drug and weapon contraband smuggling (see f.e., Burbank 2012, Larcher 2012, Mohamedou 2011) has resulted not only in a fragile socio-political environment in the whole region, but also in a disorder of the Tuareg's unique mobile strategies. For Sub-Saharan migrants likewise crossing the desert has become exacerbated since they rely to a large extent on the Tuareg's transportation system. Many of the potential Sahara-crossers are afraid of moving as they have been so used to doing. The nation states increased the control and fortification of their territorial borders, and everybody moving in the borderlands is strongly suspected of being a weapon or drug trafficker or an ally of Islamist terrorists (such as Aqmi/Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or Mujao/ Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa).

Nevertheless, the Sahara crossings will continue, since neither the inner- nor the trans-Saharan transport are organized officially by the states. They will remain a survival strategy for the Tuareg and a transportation service for Sub-Saharan migrants underlying adaptation, modification and change. A Targi who once worked in the trans-border business describes it as follows:

"Afrod has not changed. The people and the circumstances have changed. I have started with the afrod in the 1980s, now I am retired. Initially, we have been working with camels, then with Landrover, afterwards with Toyota (...). Today the route to Djanet is given up, tomorrow it will be used again. Afrod will never stop, afrod is our work!"

The examples around the Nigerien hub-town Arlit, the stop-over well Tibarakaten, and the artificial border village Assamakka, should clarify exemplarily the challenges and strategies the border-crossers have to master in order to escape the terminal Sahara.

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