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Academy

New World  
Summit

with the National  
Liberation Movement  
of Azawad (MNLA)

—Reader #4

# The Art of Creating a State

bak

basis voor  
actuele kunst



## Colophon

New World Academy Reader #4:  
The Art of Creating a State

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# The Art of Creating a State

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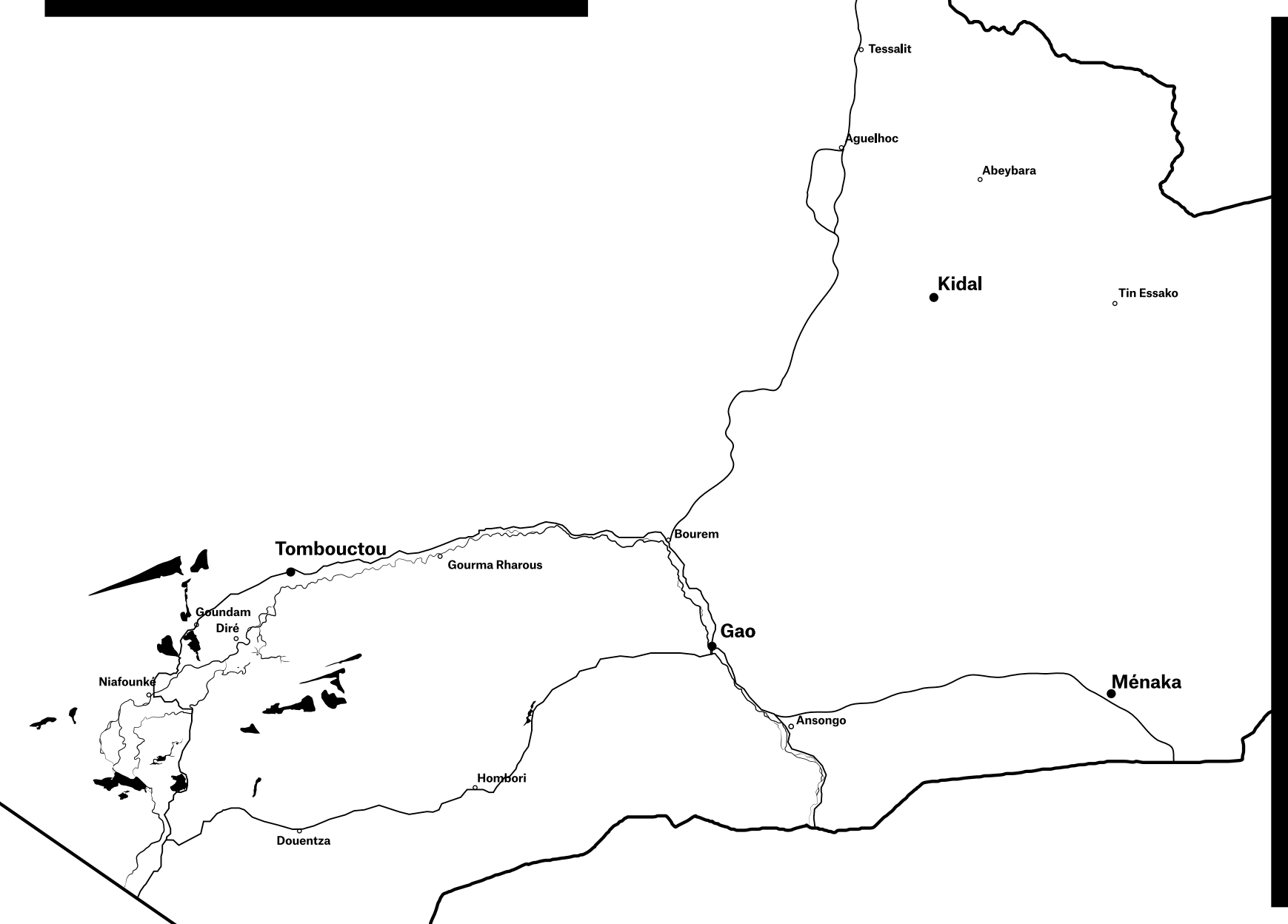
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# Map of Azawad

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Tesselit

Aguelhoc

Abeybara

Kidal

Tin Essako

**Tombouctou**

Gourma Rharous

Bourem

**Gao**

Ansongo

**Ménaka**

Goundam

Diré

Niafouké

Hombori

Douentza

# Foreword

Maria Hlavajova



Azawadian checkpoint under control of the MNLA

It is with both a sense of humbleness and excitement that we invite you to read through the fourth publication in the *New World Academy Reader* series, which accompanies the 2014 edition of the *New World Academy (NWA)*, titled *The Art of Creating a State*.

NWA is a project by artist Jonas Staal, who, in collaboration with BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, established it in 2013 as an itinerant, ongoing platform of learning and exchange between representatives of various political organizations, artists, and students. Its goal is not only to examine the role and potential of art within a variety of political struggles across the world today, but more crucially, to foster critical alliances and collaborations between the fields of art and progressive politics so as to explore the possibility of a mutualizing of their respective spaces, functions, and competences. The project of NWA is born out of a concern that is shared by, and remains central to, a number of BAK's research projects—namely, the concern about the present-day ills within dominant forms of political and aesthetic *representation* at a time when the old line between aesthetics and politics becomes blurred under the pressures of manifold collective resistance to hegemonic articulations of the world.

The first three sessions of NWA—*Towards a People's Culture; Collective Struggle of Refugees: Lost. In Between. Together.*; and *Leaderless Politics*—were brought to life with the cultural workers of the National Democratic Movement of the Philippines, the collective of refugees We Are Here, and the open-source advocates of international Pirate Parties. *NWA #4: The Art of Creating a State* is organized in collaboration with political and military organization *Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad* [National Liberation Movement of Azawad] (MNLA),<sup>1</sup> and in particular, in dialogue with Moussa Ag Assarid, writer and the movement's representative. Following an uprising in 2012,



the MNLA has declared the independent, multiethnic state of Azawad in what is the northern part of present-day Mali. A result of complicated, lengthy, conflict-ridden struggle with and against the legacy of Western colonialism in Africa, Azawad remains an unrecognized entity embedded in a complex, unending politically volatile situation. A “stateless state,” as it were, it is upheld not through its administrative or military apparatus, but, in Staal’s words, “through language, poetry, music, and literature, as well as through visual signs and imagery. It is art that carries the history of a people, and with it, the promise of a *new world*.” It is around these ideas that intensive workshops evolve, facilitating exchange between Azawadian thinkers, artists, political representatives, and students from, among other educational partners, ArtEZ Institute of the Arts, Arnhem; Dutch Art Institute, Arnhem; Minerva Academy, Groningen; the Sandberg Institute, Amsterdam; and Utrecht University, Utrecht. These assemblies are further embedded in a number of public programs, including lectures, discussions, presentations, and an exhibition, all of which aim at renegotiating with the public not so much the concrete *example* of the art and politics of the state of Azawad as our own capacity to envision—and enact—the world *otherwise*.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all contributors to this project: the participating artists, students, writers, representatives of Azawad, my colleagues at BAK, and our financial partners for their enormous efforts to make the realization of this project possible. Last but not

least, I would like to thank the artist Jonas Staal, whose proposition of *NWA #4* as well as the project that precedes it, *New World Embassy: Azawad* (temporarily instituting an embassy at BAK to negotiate cultural and diplomatic exchange and seek acknowledgement), are his contributions in his capacity as BAK Research Fellow in the context of BAK’s long-term research trajectory *Future Vocabularies* and its inaugural entry on the notion of “survival.” Shifting art’s logic away from spectatorship and paternalist artistic offer to audience participation, as well as from mere critique to *proposition*, neither of these undertakings are like “typical” art projects that so often hide in the symbolic safety of an art institution and thus away from the world they take as their subject. They are complex and challenging, and they do not shy away from political and artistic controversy, presenting something of a challenge even to an institution like BAK, which envisions itself as a place of *interlocution*. This vision is underlined by the need to find ways of offering a space for negotiating conflicting worldviews, even if this involves a confrontation with the stories that we, in the West, prefer to tuck away into the seemingly faraway, unsightly folds of global developments, which all too often are filled with armed conflicts and multifaceted insurgencies. Despite the acute intricacies that surround attempts like these, it nevertheless seems incredibly important to me to undertake such projects in the space of what we call art, if only to recognize that we, too, are part of the conflict zone that is the world today.

Maria Hlavajova is artistic director of BAK, basis voor actuele kunst.

1. At the time of their declaration of independence in 2012, the name of the organization was still *Mouvement National pour la Libération de l’Azawad*, which translates into English as “National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad.” Following the declaration of independence, however, the organization

changed its name to *Mouvement National de Libération de l’Azawad*, which is best translated into English as “National Liberation Movement of Azawad,” and which we maintain throughout the reader when referring to the MNLA. Eds.

# Introduction



MSLA soldiers at a checkpoint

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Jonas Staal

The National Liberation Movement of Azawad (MNLA) consists of an alliance of different peoples inhabiting the Sahel and Sahara regions—namely, the Tuareg, Songhai, Fula, and Arabs—who collectively demand two-thirds of the northern part of Mali as their own independent, multi-ethnic, and multireligious state of Azawad. The historic base of the Azawadian revolutionary movement can be traced to the colonization and partitioning of the Sahel and Sahara under French-Sudanese rule, when many of the nomadic Berber tribes living in a fragile system of confederations were divided throughout a territory that until then had existed without borders. Following the disruption of their nomadic way of life by the imposition of the colonial state and its boundaries, the Tuareg (known amongst themselves as *Kel Tamasheq*, “those who speak the language of Tamasheq”) took up arms. But the swords of the Tuareg were easily defeated by the French army, who fought with more sophisticated weaponry in the form of firearms.

During the process of decolonization in the years between 1950–1960, the Tuareg demanded an independent state of their own. With the French denying them their autonomy and the creation of the Malian state in 1960, the Tuareg of Azawad took up arms again in 1963, and later in 1990 and 2006. In 2011, the MNLA was founded as the first multiethnic coalition for independence in the region, and when the Muammar Gaddafi regime crumbled during that same year, highly trained Tuareg fighters joined the ranks of the MNLA with military supplies brought over from Libya. This time, the MNLA successfully defeated the Malian army. However, it still continues to struggle to maintain control over the territory in the face of jihadist groups, the return of the French army, as well as the presence of an international United Nations mission on their territory.

The role of art and culture has been ever-present in the movement of Tuareg revolutionaries and today, it is most evident in the multiethnic coalition of the MNLA. While the scriptures of the Tuareg are one of the oldest in the world, the Tuareg themselves are paradoxically bearers of an oral tradition. This renders the elements of storytelling, poetry, and music of great important cultural heritage, one that is archived within the knowledge and collective memory of a living people, and is perhaps a reason why writer and MNLA representative Moussa Ag Assarid often cites the famous saying that “when an old man dies, a library burns to the ground.” Throughout the new state of Azawad, one also sees the emergence of visual arts in the form of murals covering the territory in control of the MNLA. Arts and crafts are used to develop the new imagery of Azawadian independence in the form of insignias, bracelets, flags, and carpets. The flag of Azawad is far from sacred: it is appropriated in endless variations by revolutionaries and their supporters amongst the population, functioning thus as a collective canvas of insurgency.

The stateless state of Azawad exists as a cultural expression — one that precedes any official, administrative, political, and military structure. It is in this context that the concept of the *artist-soldier* has emerged, a notion of cultural representation that stands alongside the peasants and shepherds who form the voluntary and unpaid people’s army of the MNLA. To visually represent the new state or fight for it with arms are both considered creative gestures that act in defense of a state that, in the current moment, exists first of all as a cultural construct.

Azawadian history is carried through culture and art. Songs of insurgency first travelled from mouth-to-mouth, and later from hand-to-hand through cassette tapes, and today they travel through the mobile phones of soldiers — a mode of circulation that my colleague, Younes Bouadi,

instantly referred to as the “Bluetooth revolution.” Indeed, there is not a single soldier who does not know the band Tinariwen [Deserts], the militant Tuareg musicians who travel throughout the world, and whose enormous success forms the main diplomatic entity of the Azawadian state. Azawad exists first as art, and then as politics, hence this reader’s title, *The Art of Creating a New State*.

This fourth reader of the *New World Academy (NWA)* explores the meaning of the artist-soldier in this art of creating a new state. The interview I conducted with Moussa Ag Assarid, “We Inhabit the Horizon,” introduces the reader to the history of the Azawadian revolution from the period of French colonization to Malian independence, as well as the results of the ongoing revolution that began in 2012, all the while engaging in an exploration of the role of art, music, and literature in revolutionary practice. The MNLA’s own “Declaration of the Independence of Azawad” forms the foundational document of the new state, articulating its principles and claim to existence. Banning Eyre’s interview with Abdallah Ag Alhousseini, one of the leading members of Tinariwen, speaks of the entanglement between Tinariwen’s music and history of Tuareg uprisings, one narrating the other, and is followed by a selection of lyrics from Tinariwen’s album *Tassili*. The selection of poetry from Sennhauser Keltoum Maïga’s *Blue Women* accounts for the importance of women in the revolutionary movement, within the Tuareg in particular (who are often referred to as the “blue *men* of the desert”), bringing to memory its matriarchal tradition. The interview I conducted with visual artist Mazou Ibrahim Touré, “I Was Needed, so I Became an Artist,” discusses Touré’s formation as an artist-soldier through the Azawadian revolutionary movement and the importance of art at the center of political struggle. The selection of texts from Moussa Ag Assarid’s publication *Chronicles of a Tuareg in France* discusses the historical pact between the

territories of the Sahel and Sahara and the Tuareg people, as well as the historical roots of the subsequent revolutions since colonial times. Berny Sèbe, a historian who grew up in the Sahara and is now based in the United Kingdom, discusses in his essay “A Fragmented and Forgotten Decolonization: The End of European Empires in the Sahara and Their Legacy” the consequences of the partitioning of the territory of the Sahara and Sahel and its relation to the different revolutionary movements that have defined the history of the region ever since. Last but not least, the photo essay “The Revolution is without Frontiers” consists of a selection of images that Ag Assarid made in Kidal between 17–21 May 2014, during the last armed fights between the Malian army and the MNLA that resulted in the MNLA regaining control over the city. These images further illustrate how art and political struggle are deeply intertwined in the daily life of the state of Azawad.

On behalf of *NWA*, I would like to thank all of the contributors to this reader and for the generosity and patience with which they have introduced my team and I to the complex history of their movement and region—without their combined enthusiasm and support, this reader would not have taken shape. I would like to thank Moussa Ag Assarid in particular, a fellow artist who has taken great risks by becoming a central figure in the MNLA, for which I respect and admire him deeply. Ag Assarid was also responsible for the travel I made to Azawad, right up to the city of Kidal, together with producer Younes Bouadi and documentary filmmakers Gabriëlle Provaas and Rob Schröder. This time in the region enabled me to gather further insights into the Azawadian movement and conduct several interviews, such as the interview with Touré included in this reader. I further wish to thank the military command of the MNLA for securing our travel with as many as 18 soldiers, all of whom helped us to conduct our research and displayed

outstanding behavior, discipline, and an overall sense of humor. My special thanks goes out to Commander Ali, who was responsible for our security from beginning to end, and whose village of birth we had the honor of visiting. We have come to know him as a humble man who carries great pride and relentless dedication to the cause of his people.

Last but certainly not least, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Maria Hlavajova and her team at BAK—Niek van der Meer and Arjan van Meeuwen—for their incredible commitment in co-establishing *NWA*. Today, more than ever, we lack progressive art institutions that dare to question the rigidity of Western art history and its depoliticized presence in the form of the so-called “creative industry,” which presents art as propaganda, as brainless design, for capitalist democracy. BAK has, now for the fourth time in a row, opened its doors to stateless political movements, each of whom have proposed a fundamentally new understanding of the place of art and culture at the heart of political struggle. Further, my special gratitude goes out to BAK’s editor, Şeyma Bayram, for her tireless and precise work.

It’s an honor for *NWA* to host the political and cultural representatives of the Azawadian revolution, who provide us insights into the very origins of the concept of the state. The state is conceived not as a structure forcibly imposed onto the social body, as many so-called Western democracies have attempted to do in the past decades in order to secure their own military and economic interest, but as the result of a people’s movement, a people’s revolution, and a people’s army—which includes the artist-soldier—that are collectively redefining the art of creating a state.

Jonas Staal is a Rotterdam-based artist whose works include interventions in public space, exhibitions, lectures, and publications that interrogate the relationship between art, democracy, ideology, politics, and propaganda.



Speech by writer and MNLA representative Moussa Ag Assarid at a pro-independence protest in Tédjererte, near Ménaka, Azawad

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# We Inhabit the Horizon

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Moussa Ag Assarid  
Interviewed by Jonas Staal

**Jonas Staal:** Since when have you been a spokesperson for the organization National Liberation Movement of Azawad (MNLA)?

**Moussa Ag Assarid:** I have been acting as the European diplomatic spokesperson for the political and military organization MNLA since January 2013. Prior to my current involvement and role, I was in charge of communication and humanitarian relations within the organization. I myself am from the region of Gao in Azawad, but I left my country to study management in France, whereupon I received a master's degree in development and management. During this period, I wrote and published several books and developed my work as an actor before becoming politically engaged with the MNLA.

**JS:** You are part of the Tuareg people: what is your history and in which territory are you active?

**MAA:** The Tuareg are a nomadic people, but have been more and more confronted with the realities of the modern, globalized world. We are known under several names: to outsiders we are known as the Tuareg, but we refer to ourselves as the *Kel Tamasheq*, which simply means "those who speak Tamasheq," our language. We are also known as the *Kel Tagelmust*, which refers to the headscarves—the *tagelmust*—that the men of our people wear. And there is yet another definition, the *Imuhagh*, which means "free men." The Tuareg belong to the oldest peoples of this world; the Tifinagh alphabet that you will find in caves in our region gives proof of this.

We are a people who live in the Sahara and the Sahel, covering parts of Niger, Azawad, Mali, Algeria, Burkina Faso, and Libya. Not so long ago, I would only have mentioned five countries that contain Tuareg territory, but

today I can speak of a sixth country, as our independent state of Azawad is becoming a fact.

**JS:** As I understand it, the very first confrontation of the nomadic Tuareg with the concept of the nation-state came as a result of the French-Sudanese colony at the end of the nineteenth century. Could you elaborate on this encounter, its context and aftermath?

**MAA:** Before the invasion of the French, the Tuareg organized themselves with other peoples of the region in the form of confederations. This was a social and political structure that made cohabitation possible, to be able to live together despite the various conflicts and hardships, which of course had always existed between and within our respective communities. Moreover, these confederations always accommodated solutions in the form of new accords and pacts, thus allowing progress as a people in time and space. With the invasion of the French, however, the Tuareg and their fellow people of the desert entered into a very, very difficult period of time. The French colony erased our tracks and what we had built, and with that, our common path ahead. We were confronted with a new form of administration that we were unfamiliar with. Consequently, our people resisted, but our swords—the *takuba*—were no match for the military arsenal of the colonizer.

The process of decolonization started between the years of 1950–1960. It was a moment that the Tuareg and our other brothers and sisters, such as the Songhai, the Fula, and the Arabs, realized we had to seize, instrumentalizing these new terms imposed through the state for the benefit of our people, to demand autonomy for ourselves. The Tuareg and their fellow peoples gathered around the

cities of Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal—all cities in present-day Azawad—to write a manifesto, which we proposed to General Charles de Gaulle, President of the French Republic at the time, asking that the terrain of our peoples not become integrated into what would become the state of Mali. That was the very first time that our demands for some form of autonomy clashed with those imposed by the states in which we were living. As our demands were discarded, this led to the first Tuareg rebellion in 1963, three years after the independence of Mali. It was a revolt that ended in blood. There was an ongoing inequality of arms between the Malian government and the Tuareg revolutionaries. Our swords were no match for the Kalashnikovs of the Malian army. It was not only our fighters, but also civil populations, who were massacred by the army. These events laid the groundwork for the subsequent Azawadian uprisings, the next one being in 1970, which we lost, but which was nonetheless fought on more equal grounds, as the Arabs joined the Tuareg and we were also able to obtain automatic weapons.

In 2006, the third uprising started, and just as in the previous cases, it ended in broken accords. Actually, accords have been met with the Malian government after all uprisings, apart from the very first in 1963, which would have secured equal rights for the Tuareg and Arabs *within* the state of Mali, but the government broke its promises time after time, marginalizing and abandoning our peoples. Most recently, after our fourth successful uprising in early 2012, we created an accord with the Malian government in Ouagadougou in 2013. But this government cannot be trusted, which is why the MNLA, with its *multiethnic* and *multireligious* populations, has decided to struggle for full independence of Azawad and the dignity of its peoples.



**JS:** The uprisings that we are now discussing took place within the current territories of Mali and Azawad, first against the French colonizer, and subsequently against the Malian government. What about the other Tuareg territories that you have mentioned, have there been similar revolts there?

**MAA:** The Tuareg people are not the same in Mali, Niger, Algeria, Libya, or Burkina Faso. The Malian state has been by far the most violent against the Tuareg population; it has massacred most of its civil population, and I'm only being polite in not simply referring to their actions as genocide. Of course, in Niger there was the revolt of 1990, which was solidified by an accord that has more or less stood the test from the side of the government. They devised some form of peace that we have wanted as well, for which we were willing to accept becoming part of the Malian government. But this, too, was broken. I would thus rather focus on the context of Azawad now, as we have been forced into self-defense. We prefer peace, but we will defend ourselves against the Malian army—which we do not regard the same as the Malian people—against its massacres and policies that force our people into disappearance.

**JS:** The history of the Tuareg before colonization has been one of great power: a highly developed civilization in the form of scripture, which, at the same time, was sustained through class divisions and slavery of other peoples of the African continent. Could this partially explain the ongoing hostility of the Malian government toward the Tuareg people?

**MAA:** When we speak of slavery, we have to speak the truth. Most of the peoples of the world have known

slavery—certainly the African continent, which was not only colonized and enslaved, but has also actively maintained the system of slavery to sell its peoples to the Europeans and Americans. It is true that, during a particular moment, the Tuareg people held slaves, but this practice was already abolished by the early twentieth century. As the Tuareg, we are similar to the Arab peoples. While we have slightly fairer skin than other peoples from our region, there is no conflict based on color; rather, peoples of all colors are part of our movement. It is the Malian government that exploits a history that we have left behind, to force divisions amongst us, using differences in skin color in an attempt to destroy our unity against their oppression. The Malian government wants to come across as a mediator, the intermediary who will solve conflicts within our communities, when in reality it is they who have created these very conflicts. The MNLA represents the people of Azawad no matter their color, ethnicity, religion, or mode of life. No matter the outcome of our struggle—whether an autonomous region within the Malian state or full-blown independence—this principle of dignified and diversified coexistence is proof of the fact that the MNLA does not simply represent a Tuareg rebellion, despite some people's attempts to frame it as such, but a multiethnic revolution!

**JS:** Yet an ongoing critique of the MNLA is that it indeed consists of, and presumably represents, an overwhelming Tuareg majority.

**MAA:** We are indeed a majority in the movement, and we are a people who have paid for our historical struggle for independence in blood. But we have shed that blood for the dignities of *all peoples* of Azawad, and our current alliance with the Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad

[Arab Movement of Azawad] (MAA) and the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA), as well as the fact that Songhai, Fula, and Arabs occupy high positions within the MNLA, are further proof of this.

**JS:** What do you believe is the main interest of the Malian government in its resistance to both a possible autonomous zone or an independent state of Azawad?

**MAA:** That is a very good question. They do not want to know the truth of the peoples of the MNLA. They are in denial of our existence. They have used terms such as “bandits” and “terrorists” against us, in order to suggest that we are an outside, stateless force that never belonged to the Malian territory. But we fight with more than just arms. Our men and women fight for the right to live, the right to decide our own destinies: to choose our destiny, rather than having one imposed on us. This is why the Malian army will never be able to resist the demands of our peoples.

**JS:** Since the French occupation of the Sahara and Sahel regions, there have been many crises in the area: famines, drought, desertification, and corporations mining and exhausting the land for uranium.

**MAA:** It was in 1973–1974 that the first great drought occurred in the Sahara, and Azawad in particular suffered heavy blows. This was followed by a second drought in 1984–1985, and then a third in 2010. The drought of 2010 was exploited by the Malian government to further disempower our peoples by refusing to provide us with any form of aid. This has been a recurring tactic of the government, and it has effectively starved our populations,

poisoned our water reserves, and blocked passageways to areas holding water after each rebellion. Today, the French and the United Nations are present on our territory, and slowly they are beginning to see with their own eyes the dishonesty and cruelty behind these policies.

**JS:** In April 2012, the MNLA declared the new independent state of Azawad, which consists of two-thirds of the northern part of the Mali—approximately one and a half times the size of present-day France—and many conflicts have followed suit. How do you perceive the status of Azawadian independence at this very moment?

**MAA:** We fought the Malian army from 17 January to 1 April 2012, before chasing them from our territory for the first time. On 5 April, we declared the end of any more hostilities, and indeed, on 6 April we declared the unilateral independence of the state of Azawad—even though this was later followed by armed struggle against armed jihadist groups as well as the returning Malian army. We are not recognized by any other country in the world, but we are making progress. We have shown our continuous willingness to negotiate both with the state of Mali and the international community. We have thus come to several accords after violence that erupted in the period following our declaration of independence. We know the terrain best, and we can do what the state of Mali fails to do: protect the population from armed groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), find solutions for droughts, and prevent drug trafficking, etc. The Malian government has not even been able to guarantee the people the basic means of survival. Azawadians needed to take their destiny into their own hands, as all national liberation movements before them have done. I’m certain

that, one day, we will have our equal seat in the concert of nations.

**JS:** You touched on the role of other armed groups in the region. The MNLA is accused of having collaborated with armed jihadist groups widely regarded as “terrorist organizations,” such as AQIM, Ansar Dine, and the Mouvement pour l’Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest [Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa] (MUJAO). A further criticism is that, despite the many internal conflicts and combats, some of these alliances have continued.

**MAA:** Once we managed to chase the Malian army and its administration out of Azawad, we needed to control the territory, and that meant that we had to confront international terrorism. We even called upon the international community to help fight these different groups. We have never engaged in any alliance with AQIM, MUJAO, or Ansar Dine. The only thing that has happened is that we engaged in conversation with Ansar Dine to see if we could come to some basic agreements, as they themselves, unlike AQIM and MUJAO, originate from Azawadian territory. But at that time, Ansar Dine was not considered a terrorist organization, and even Burkina Faso’s minister of foreign affairs came to the region to engage in direct talks with them. It was from 11 January 2013 onward, when Ansar Dine together with AQIM and MUJAO had taken over much of the territory of Azawad and launched an offensive in the south, near Bamako, that the French military started Mission Serval and engaged in armed combat against these three organizations. As I have said, only Ansar Dine is actually from the region: the rest comprise international organizations to which the Malian government opened its doors! Already in 2003, the Ma-

lian government engaged with AQIM in the hope that it would undermine the Azawadian uprisings.

**JS:** As you have said, the French army intervened in Azawad with support of the African Union one year after the MNLA declared independence. What is the MNLA’s perspective on the French army, which—as a previous colonizer—is largely responsible for much of the crises in the territory of present-day Azawad?

**MAA:** What we do not understand most of all is why the French army has allowed the Malian army to reenter the territory of Azawad—an army that, let us not forget, fled from the MNLA between January and April 2012 when we fought for our independence! No treaties have been signed concerning this matter, so what are they doing back in Azawad? We decided to accept the temporary presence of the army, which was argued as a necessity for the organization of the Malian elections in the period between November and December 2013, but only on the condition that we would reopen negotiations afterwards. But this never happened. In the meantime, we have welcomed the French army on their arrival in Kidal, and even French President François Hollande has acknowledged that we have served as a “supplementary army” in the War on Terror, as the Malian army proved incapable of doing so. But this is not enough, for we are no “supplementary army” as the French army saw us in the nineteenth century. They have to realize that, this time, they are on *our grounds*. They have returned, but they will also leave one day! The masquerade of Bamako that tried to regain control over our territory through the French will not stand, as we have proven that we are capable of building alliances with international forces, while chasing the Malian army out just the same.

**JS:** Do you not believe it is risky to use the concept of the War on Terror, which has been used systemically to criminalize national liberation movements worldwide, not least the MNLA itself?

**MAA:** The concept of terrorism has been used far too often against national liberation movements and this is unacceptable. We need to find terms that can describe the situation as it really is, in a way that acknowledges a people's right to self-defense and self-determination. When I speak of international terrorism, I refer to groups that have no ties to Azawadian territory and engage against the interests of our population, such as Al-Qaeda.

**JS:** In April 2013, the United Nations passed Resolution 2100, also known as the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Mali, or MINUSMA. This forms, next to the French army, a second military entity that is active in the territory of Azawad. What is the perception of the MNLA on the role of the UN in the conflict?

**MAA:** We have been very surprised that the UN Security Council has not acknowledged the role of our people's political-military organizations in Azawad. They are focused on groups they regard as terrorist. We have, in time, shown that not only are we not a terrorist group, but that we are *Azawadians* who fight for the aspirations of multiethnic peoples. We have had good contacts with MINUSMA—"the blue helmets"—on the terrain, despite some minor conflicts. We even regularly meet with Bert Koenders, the current head and representative of MINUSMA, who is from the Netherlands. The problem is that, as their mission did not acknowledge our struggle for independence, they themselves had to see in time the limits of their influence in the region. Last month,

in May, the MNLA fought against the Malian army and chased them out of Azawad once again. So now, the time has come for the UN to acknowledge the necessity of our independence as part of the mission's objectives when they reevaluate their resolution later this month.<sup>1</sup>

**JS:** You have just mentioned the month of May 2014, which was crucial, as it was the moment when the MNLA cleared the area from the Malian army after it had reentered with the French mission and MINUSMA. This means that, with AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar Dine currently marginalized, the MNLA has—for the first time since the declaration of independence in April 2012—once more secured control over the territory of Azawad.

**MAA:** On 16 May, there was a grand demonstration by Azawadians against the arrival of the Prime Minister of Mali at Kidal. At that very moment, our three movements—the MNLA, the MAA, and HCUA—were organizing a large-scale congress. The women's movement of Azawad blocked the airport and organized several protests directed against the prime minister, but also against the blue helmets, for allowing the Malian government to reenter our territory. Women even laid down on the landing site, to obstruct any planes from landing, and as a result, they—and several children who had joined them—were violently removed with tear gas. They responded by throwing stones, and as a result, blinded vehicles of the UN, which drove into them, leaving several wounded. Then, at the end of the afternoon, the Malian army began shooting at the protestors, wounding even more. And the very

1. The interview was conducted on 1 June 2014.

next day, in the early morning, the Malian army started to shoot directly at the camps of the MNLA for eight hours. The Prime Minister of Mali, instead of cancelling his trip, let himself be transported by a UN helicopter (escorted by two French military helicopters), right up to the camps set up by MINUSMA and the French army. He was even forced to stay the night as the battle continued. It was that very day that the MNLA started to regain control over the city of Kidal once more. Despite an agreement of a ceasefire, fights continued from 17–21 May. In that time, we also gained control over several smaller cities. And the Malian army fled home, that is to say, away from Azawad and back to Mali.

**JS:** This would mean that the project of Azawad is yet again a possibility.

**MAA:** Yes.

**JS:** So far, we have talked mainly about the different dimensions of the conflict, politically, historically, and militarily, but what I find very interesting is that amidst all of this, you make clear that the state of Azawad is also a *condition*; that is, a *cultural expression* that precedes the formal, administrative reality of a state. You are an artist, a writer, and actor, and also the cofounder of a school, l'École du Sable [The School of the Sand]. How does the idea of culture—of art, music, literature—play a role in your definition of a state?

**MAA:** Culture, education, and art are crucial elements within the framework of our struggle. We have students who participate in the struggle for Azawad, even though we prefer education to war. Since 2002, I've been serving

as a representative for the School of the Sand, which allows those excluded from the path to education, who are voiceless and who live in the dark, to step into the light and choose their own destiny. At Kidal I have met many men and women who fight for education and art, who make beautiful works in the form of the calligraphy that now covers our city and declares itself part of Azawad, and great poets who roam the streets and speak to the children. In the MNLA we have women and men who make history. And our history is now; it is constructed day-by-day. Every element, every person, each fighter is an actor in our common Azawad. The images I take on the terrain are monuments that help shape the process of cultivating peace and liberty.

**JS:** In the text “L'ame du Desert” [The Soul of the Desert] you refer to a legend of the Tuareg, which describes the historical pact between your people and the desert. But the idea of a state tends to imply appropriation and possession: we tend to say that the state is “ours,” and so forth. But in your text, you describe the relation between the desert and the Tuareg as a dialogue. Could you speak more about this relationship?

**MAA:** You know, we are no longer only nomads, the Tuareg. We see that the nomads of this world are being pulled more and more into the whirlwind of globalization. But exactly because of this, it is important for us to dig even deeper for our roots. When today you find a sign in our desert, and it says “Azawad Libre” [Free Azawad], this is already a great achievement. And today, you find a sedentary lifestyle as well, as the Songhai have built homes. In a sense, the peoples organized in the MNLA are still hesitant about the idea of independence—the idea of a

state—for it is a form that we have never known to be ours. We never knew it as something that could represent us. Before 2012, we spoke of Azawad as a space with a particular status, as an autonomous zone, but never in terms of *independence*. But today, there are more and more women and men who, like me, scream: “Long live the independence of the state of Azawad!” In mutual respect, we are determined to obtain our full independence, whether it will come today, tomorrow, or the day after. The way ahead is full of ambushes, but we have no fear of walking down this path. We are a people of travel; we are, as we say amongst each other, those who inhabit the horizon.

**JS:** The history of your people is an oral one, a history that is passed over to future generations through storytelling, music, and poetry. Might we even say that it is art that carries your history?

**MAA:** We are indeed bearers of an oral history, even though we are also the inventors of our own scripture: a paradoxical condition, no? My point is that we have nothing to write on. You only find text in caves, as it provides a stable surface, but the rest is sand. So indeed, we have found other forms through which to carry our history. In our music, there is a message in each song that carries the spirit of Azawadian independence. That is most evident in the music of the Tuareg band Tinariwen [Deserts]. They understand that in order to address the present, one has to tell the past. Tinariwen is also unique in that their music is passed on through cassette tapes. The cassettes are the weapons that make our message travel: a message of revolt, but also a message of peace. In times of revolt, the music reminds us of our goal of peace. In times of peace, we are reminded of the revolt that laid its foundation.

Moussa Ag Assarid is a writer, actor, and European diplomatic spokesperson for the MNLA. This interview was conducted on 1 June 2014 in Heilles, France, after a conference of leaders and supporters of the Tuareg diaspora in Europe. The interview was conducted in French and translated into English by the interviewer.



Bilal Ag Acherif, Secretary-General of the MNLA, in his office in Kidal, Azawad

# Declaration of the Independence of Azawad

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WE, THE PEOPLE OF AZAWAD,

On behalf of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, after consultation with:

- The Executive Committee,
- The Revolutionary Council,
- The Advisory Council,
- The General Staff of the Liberation Army,
- The regional offices

Recalling the principles of international law and the main international legal instruments governing the right of peoples to self-determination, in particular Articles 1 and 55 of the Charter of the United Nations, the relevant provisions of the International Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples;

Considering the wish, explicitly formulated in the **letter dated 30 May 1958**, addressed to the French President René Coty by the notables, spiritual leaders of all segments of AZAWAD;

Considering that in 1960, on the occasion of the Granting of Independence to the Peoples of West Africa, France attached the region of AZAWAD without its consent to the State of Mali, which it had newly created;

Recalling the massacres, the acts of violence, the humiliations, the spoliations and genocides of 1963, 1990, 2006, 2010, and 2012, that concerned exclusively the people of AZAWAD until 1 April 2012,

Recalling the inhuman behavior of Mali, which used the several droughts (1967, 1973, 1984, 2010...) to make our people disappear by annihilating them, even though Mali has requested and obtained generous humanitarian aid;

Considering the effects of more than 50 years of poor governance, of corruption and of collusion between military, political, and financial powers, endangering the



existence of the People of AZAWAD and jeopardizing the stability of the sub-region and international peace;

Considering the complete liberation of the territory of AZAWAD;

**We irrevocably proclaim the INDEPENDENT STATE OF AZAWAD, counting from today, Friday, 6 April 2012.**

**WE DECLARE:**

- The recognition of the existing borders with neighboring states, and of their inviolability;
- The full adherence to the Charter of the United Nations;
- The firm commitment of the MNLA to establish the conditions for lasting peace and to initiate the institutional foundations of the State, based on a democratic Constitution of the independent Azawad.

The Executive Committee of the MNLA invites the international community as a whole to recognize without further delay, and in a surge of justice and peace, the Independent State of Azawad.

**The Executive Committee of the MNLA will continue to ensure the management of the territory as a whole, until the implementation of the Territorial Authority of AZAWAD.**

Gao, 6 April 2012

Billal Ag Acherif  
Secretary-General, MNLA





Murals by artist Mazou Ibrahim Touré in Ménaka, Azawad

# Tinariwen's Abdallah Ag Alhousseini Talks about Mali

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Abdallah Ag Alhousseini  
Interviewed by Banning Eyre

*Tinariwen played five United States shows in June 2012, their first gigs here since forces in the north of Mali—the musicians' home—declared an independent state of Azawad. Initially, Azawad was presented as a Tuareg homeland, the realization of a vision that has consumed the members of Tinariwen since the band's beginnings in the refugee camps of Algeria and Libya, dating back to the 1970s. However, it seems now that the extreme Islamist forces of Ansar Dine are in fact in the driver's seat—banning music, demanding women to be veiled and mostly homebound, and destroying centuries-old shrines and manuscripts in Timbuktu. Further complicating the picture is a robust drug trafficking industry in which players sometimes disguise themselves as Islamists or Tuareg rebels, when their true interest is to protect their turf.*

*This was heavy stuff to get into with my old friend Abdallah Ag Alhousseini of Tinariwen in between the band's soundcheck and performance at the Warsaw in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. We started on the lighter side. I showed him a clip from a video I had shot on the streets of Bamako in 1996. Recently, while reviewing this old footage, I realized that I had chatted with Abdallah and filmed him years before I met him officially and first heard Tinariwen. The young kid in a straw hat in this video seems a far cry from the robed, turbaned gentleman we see today, but the telltale smile is unmistakable.*

**Banning Eyre:** Abdallah, the video clip we just watched together was filmed in 1996. I think you had just recently come to Bamako then. You were not long out of the camps in Libya where you met and joined the older members of Tinariwen. Tell me what your life, and the life of Tinariwen, was like back then.

**Abdallah Ag Alhousseini:** In 1996, there weren't enough contacts yet, or even much communication, between Tinariwen and Bamako. But I had been trying since 1995, since the accord, the peace—the integration, in fact. So my intention was to approach a big city like Bamako, Niamey, or Ouagadougou. The goal was to have what we have now, the ability to leave and come back, to tour in America or Europe. It was possible to think about those things now that peace had returned. I wanted to stay in a city like Bamako or Niamey or Ouaga, so as to stay in contact with the rest of the world. We first arrived in Bamako in 1993. We played our first concert there that year. There was a great guitar player of Tinariwen, Inteyedin, who died in 1995.

**BE:** He was one of the founders.

**AAA:** Yes, he was one of the founders of Tinariwen, along with Hassan and our first bass player, Mohamed About Hadid. So we organized a concert for the northern community in Bamako in 1993. It was good. It went well. Even we were surprised, frankly, that Bamako was interesting for artists like us. In 1993, it was not that developed, but it was still a lot more developed than the northern area in general for a musician. You could find instruments. You could find artists. So, since 1993, I have been interested in the Bamako scene. I wanted to live there, look for connections to Europe and other opportunities. And after that, Ibrahim came in 1995. He came to live in Bamako. He was coming and going from Kidal all the time in those years.

**BE:** I remember this time well. I was living in Bamako with the guitarist Djelimady Tounkara. And we watched them announce the peace in the north, and burn this huge pile of weapons on national television. And this was the moment that made it possible to

begin thinking about having a Festival in the Desert,<sup>1</sup> and all the great things that happened in the north after that. Now, of course, it's another story with the dramatic events of this year. What was your experience of this year in the north of Mali?

**AAA:** Listen, the events that are happening today in the north—this should not have surprised the world. For me, this was not a surprise. Because you have to know that ever since the arrival of the French occupation in the north of Mali in, I don't know, the 1900s—1908 or 1910, something like that—we have not accepted French command of this territory. So this conflict existed right until the departure of the French. If you look carefully at history, there were terrible massacres during the time that the French were in the north, in Mali and Niger. This was not a struggle against Islam, or for Christianity. No, no, no. It was a fight for territory. The people who are fighting were not saying, "These are Europeans. They are not Muslims." No, no, no. They were fighting for their territory. There was no question of Islam implied in the struggle. It was simply a question of land.

Then when Mali came, it was the same thing. It was the same war. There were more massacres in the Kidal region in 1963. People rebelled. They rebelled and rebelled. Right up to the end, as much as they could, they rebelled. Because the leaders of the fight were all arrested. There was Zeid Ag Attaher, who was arrested by the Algerians and brought to Bamako. There was Mohammed Ali Ag Attaher, who was arrested in Morocco and sent to Bamako. There was also Alladi Ag Alla, who was the main military

1. Founded in 2001, Festival au désert [Festival in the Desert] is an annual concert that presents traditional Tuareg music as well

as music from other parts of the world. The concerts take place in Mali.

leader. He was also arrested, because he didn't have enough forces to fight the army. So he was arrested near the Algerian border. In fact, it was not even Malian territory where he was arrested, it was Algerian. So there was a lot of fighting in 1963, but the leaders were all arrested and brought to Bamako.

BE: In 1963, the early years of Mali.

AAA: Yes, and that's what you hear in this song, the Tinariwen song, "1963."

BE: Oh, yes. That was one of Ibrahim Ag Alhabib's first songs, the one he wrote after his father was executed for aiding the rebellion.

AAA: That's right. The conflict has continued from that day right up until today. Every generation arrives with other means, with other technologies, more sophisticated than the generation before. Now there is a new generation that has more means and experience than we had in 1990.

BE: And this has to do with the fall of Muammar Qaddafi in Libya in 2011?

AAA: Yes, that's true. For example, today there is Mohamed Ag Najem, chief of the Army of Azawad. He came from Libya. He brought all of his equipment from there. After the fall of Qaddafi, he left with all of his weapons and men and returned to his own territory.

BE: So that changed the balance in the region. And this was happening just as the Festival in the Desert was ending this year, right?

AAA: Yes, the same day as the festival.

BE: And Tinariwen had played. Were you still there?

AAA: We were on the road. We had just left Timbuktu on 17 January, the same day that the first revolt happened. We finished the festival, and we were on our way to another festival in Borem.

BE: And you say that this was not a surprise for you.

AAA: No, this was not a surprise for me. For Westerners, it may have been a surprise to see what happened.

BE: I think it was a surprise for some citizens of Timbuktu as well.

AAA: Oh, I don't know. The people in Timbuktu, some of them were involved in the rebellions of 1963 and 1990. They were not surprised.

BE: But Abdallah, this means that the peace that existed between 1996 and today was not a real peace.

AAA: There has never been a real peace in northern Mali from 1963 up until today. What could a real peace be? It would be to resolve things definitively. Ever since 1963, accords have calmed things down. These were agreements, but there was never something definitive. Still, there is a problem. We will have to go back and fix things, because we know very well that the problem is not solved.

If you want to know the truth, it's very complicated. Why is it so complicated? Because when you talk about

us, in the north of Mali, you have to take into account our history with France, which colonized Mali to begin with and found us there in our territory. After France left, she gave the territory to Mali. But she couldn't give the north to Mali. That was for the people who live there. France had nothing to do with it. If it wasn't for France, we would have had nothing to do with the rest of Mali. The people who came from Bamako to command Kidal, they would never have come if it weren't for the French. And we would never have gone to Bamako at that time. There was no interest, no need, no obligation to go from Kidal to Bamako. And for those who came from Bamako to Kidal, it was the same thing. They had no interests in Kidal, no knowledge of the territory, no relationships, no business, no friendship. Nothing. It was the French who put Kidal and Bamako into communication, two lands that previously had nothing to do with each other. They had nothing in common, except that the French had taken both territories and felt obliged to put the two together. If you want to rule territory, you need to keep it together.

So it was them who put us together, if you want the truth. It wasn't us. It did not come from us. If they had not put us together, you would find us today in Azawad, and the rest of the Mali would be separate. But this problem exists now. To solve it, we need real experts, people with real means, people who can really sit at the table and talk the way we are talking now, you and I, without a lot of attention, just talking, and looking at the history as it is. And from that, we can find solutions.

We are ready for that. Even if you call Azawad a country within the country of Mali, you must do so in a well-respected manner. What do I mean by a well-respected

manner? I mean to know that the needs of the people in the north are completely different from the needs of the people in the south. So how do you recognize that? You must adapt materials and situations according to the environment. Me, I'm an artist living in the desert. I don't have the same needs as someone living in Bamako or Segou or Sikasso. The guitar that I need to use there will be different, the car, the house, the rugs, the plates and forks—all materials will be different. That's not the fault of anyone. That's nature.

In order to arrive at a solution, we just need to understand that this territory is going to be different from the rest, and manage things accordingly. And right away you will have a solution.

BE: Abdallah, if this were simply a question of the needs of the people in the north—not just the Tuarég, but the Songhai and Fula, etc.—and the people of the south, that would be one thing. But added to all of that, we have the problem of the Islamist agenda, and also, I've read that a lot of the money that is funding this struggle comes from drug trafficking. There's a lot of money and a lot of arms connected with that. I've even read that some of the people who are talking about religion are actually just protecting their turf, so that they can continue to make money off this drug trafficking. So how does that factor into all of this?

AAA: Okay, that is a question that is complicated even for me. Those who talk about religion up there, or the problem of drugs up there... These are questions I have never verified, as I have the question of Azawad and the Tuareg people. This is an area where I have never really

done the work to know or profoundly understand it. There are things that I've seen, or that I've heard. It's true that there is a trafficking of drugs. I can't say it's not. Everyone knows this. But where did these drugs come from?

BE: South America, I think, heading for Europe.

AAA: *Voilà*. And we are in the road. Today, I'm in New York, but I come from Kidal. I pass through New York because it is in my route, but I'm not from here. I'm just passing through. It's the same thing with the drugs. They leave South America and they go to Europe. Now, if you want to block all these drug routes, you should start in South America, not in northern Mali. If you stop them in South America, they will never reach the north. We don't even have access to the sea; no boats arrive in the desert. We don't have any international airports. You have to know what airport or ports these drugs arrived at. It's the port of Nouakchott. It's the port of Dakar. It's the ports of the Ivory Coast. You need to look there if you really want to stop this. If you wait until the drugs are crossing the desert, you will never stop them.

BE: Understood. But I know that there are people who live in the desert, local people, who make a lot of money off of this trade, and they are interested in defending that business. And I've read that some of those people take up the cause of the Tuareg, or of the Islamists, when their real interest is money and controlling their turf. So this makes it even harder to understand the situation, because you don't really know if people who talk about religion are actually concerned about that or something else. But you say you have the same problem in trying to understand this.

AAA: I have the same problem knowing exactly what is happening. But it appears to me that these are different things. I can't tell you that there's no link somewhere between people who preach Islam and people who traffic drugs. I can't tell you that; it's possible, because the whole world is linked. The drugs that leave Colombia come to my home in the desert and proceed on to Europe. We are all linked. Even yourself, if you look hard enough, you might find that you are also linked to all of that. So I don't know whether the drug traffickers and the Islamists are working together in some way. As I say, this is something that I have never done the work on to really verify or know its true routes. That's why I don't want to state an opinion on this theory. What I do know is that the question of Islam is very complicated. And the problem of drugs is even more complicated.

BE: Even more?

AAA: Yes. These are things I have never studied enough to know where they come from, where they are going, or who is really behind them.

BE: Okay, enough about the drugs. But let's talk about the Islamists. Right now you have a situation in Timbuktu where they've banned music from the radio, and they are looting and carrying out violence. That is very difficult.

AAA: There is a group today that's called Ansar Dine, that is true. But you must know that this group existed before these recent troubles in northern Mali. It's not just this year that this group came along.

**BE:** Yes, the Malian singer Salif Keita talked to me about this group years ago.

**AAA:** The Americans know this very, very well. America has financed Mali for over 10 years to control these people. America has also financed Algeria for more than 12 or 13 years to survey these people, to know exactly what they're doing. So these people existed before the events of this year, and before the creation of Azawad. But this year, they found an opportunity to make themselves known, to present themselves out in the open.

**BE:** And to seize power.

**AAA:** Yes, because this year, there was a war, a conflict, and with that, they could take advantage of the situation. But they are there today in the territory. And you must also know, without forgetting that they are there, that for more than 15 years they have been in the area of Kidal and Timbuktu.

**BE:** But now they are in power.

**AAA:** They are not in power.

**BE:** Well, I hope you are right. It's hard to tell, isn't it? But let me ask you a question about music. What can you do to ensure that in an Azawad of the future, there will be a place for artists and musicians?

**AAA:** Yes... Everything is new for people. The ones we are calling Islamists who are there, they are new. It's new for the people to see them like that. Before they were more hidden. Now they are out in the open, so to deal with that, to find a solution, is going to take some time.

But what is sure is that 80 percent of the population of the north are going to rebel against that. Now, in this revolt, I cannot say what the results will be. If the population is stronger than these people, they can chase them out of their country. That would work. If these people are stronger than the people of the territory, however, my opinion is that it will be something like Afghanistan. They will stay in the mountains and keep fighting. I don't know. That's my personal opinion. I don't know what's going to happen or what's not going to happen. But that is what I think.

**BE:** The songs of Tinariwen tell the story of this struggle, beginning all the way back in 1963. And by the way, congratulations on your Grammy Award this year for the album *Tassili*.

**AAA:** Thank you.

**BE:** Looking ahead, how will you as artists response to this new reality? Are you writing songs about this situation now?

**AAA:** Well, now, the question of artists responding to events — that's not exactly something you can talk about. Tinariwen is made up of guitarists, singers, and composers, and everyone sees things in his own way. The way I view things, or the way Ibrahim sees things, they are not necessarily the same things, the same visions.

**BE:** So you have a diversity of views in the group.

**AAA:** *Voilà*. And, as I told you, this is a new situation for us, everything that's happened this year. Now, how we will come to view this as artists may take some time.



Maybe it will take a year, maybe more, because a true artist is never tied to events. Sometimes he or she sees things 3, 4, 10 years in advance. He or she sings about an event before the event even happens. Sometimes the events come, but you hear nothing, because the artist spoke about these events years ago. So we don't just look at what's happening today and sing about that.

BE: So there are no new Tinariwen songs about the situation.

AAA: No, not yet.

BE: And let me ask about some of the others who are not here with us today. First off, Ibrahim... Is he okay?

AAA: Ibrahim is doing very well. He's at home in Afara, a place near Tessalit.

BE: I'd read that at one point he was stuck in a refugee camp. Is this true?

AAA: Well, listen, around him: that's where the refugee camps are. Everything is right there around him. He is where the refugees are.

BE: And Hassan?

AAA: Hassan is in Paris. We will be with him in a few days.

BE: When was the last time you were in the north?

AAA: I have not been to Kidal since February.

BE: Do you plan to go?

AAA: I hope so. I hope to return soon, if God wills it. The month of Ramadan is coming. Normally I would go to Kidal during this time, but it depends. It's God who knows that.

BE: Well, I wish you good luck. You're in a situation with a lot of promise and a lot of danger.

AAA: *[laughs]* That's how life is. When you are in a situation that pleases you, that's when you find out that there is a lot of danger afterwards. The day you feel really at ease in life, you have to know that this is also the most dangerous day for you. Because when you are at ease, that's when you really fall into problems.

BE: Finally, the Festival in the Desert. When do you think it might happen again? In five years? In 10 years? What do you think?

AAA: I think it is Many Ansar who organizes the Festival in the Desert. It's a complicated situation. He could do something this year in the refugee camps, he could create something small, something simple, an homage to the festival. We can't do it this year. We would have to do it in a refugee camp.

BE: Tessalit.

AAA: Tessalit or somewhere else. I don't know. That really depends on the festival organizers. But they would bring trucks of medicine and vitamins, and things like that. Artists would come and perform, make the festival for the refugees. It wouldn't be the same, not the same as before.

Banning Eyre is a world music journalist and guitarist. This interview first appeared in *Afropop Worldwide* on 3 July 2012. It appears here in lightly edited form with permission of the authors and *Afropop Worldwide*.

# Tassili

(selected lyrics)



Watertower painted in the national colors of Azawad

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Tinariwen

**Imidiwan Ma Tenam**

*Imidiwan ma tenam dagh awa dagh enha semmen  
 Tenere den tas-tenam enta dagh wam toyyam teglam  
 Aqqalanagh aljihalat tamattem dagh illa assahat  
 Tenere den tossamat lat madden eha sahat  
 Aksan kalla s tandallat taqqal enta tisharat  
 Aggalanagh aljihalat tamattem dagh illa assahat*

**What have you got to say my friends?**

What have you got to say my friends  
 about this painful time we're living through?  
 You've left this desert where you say you were born,  
 you've gone and abandoned it  
 We live in ignorance and it holds all the power  
 The desert is jealous and its men are strong  
 While it's drying up, green lands exist elsewhere  
 We live in ignorance  
 and it holds all of the power

**Ya Messinagh**

*Ya messinagh hikfan lasbarr  
 Tad adunya tarha lefkar  
 Imidiwan  
 A tat djanegh kud hi tennam  
 Ahi tangham megh hi toyjem*

*Tidet tididagh har kuk tekfar  
 Ere s tat adjad attas tekfar*

**Oh, Lord**

Oh, Lord, give me patience!  
 This life demands experience  
 Friends, fellow travelers,  
 you can kill me or you can let me live,  
 but I will tell you something true  
 and this truth is precious to me

It has nestled in my lungs  
 like a poison,  
 My friends truth itself is always hard,  
 He who hears it can turn  
 into a rebel

## ***Imidiwan Win Sahara***

*Imidiwan n Sahara  
Ibas negraw elhuria  
Ad nenmenak ghred nemda  
Megh annemat ibas nella  
Bas radjech tett dagh assahara*

## **My friends from the Sahara**

My friends from the Sahara,  
our freedom is gone  
Let's unite  
or else we shall all vanish  
Not a single soul will be left alive  
in the desert

**These lyrics are from Tinariwen's fifth album, *Tassili*, released in August 2011.**



Protester in Tédjererte, near Ménaka, Azawad

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# Blue Women

(selections)

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Sennhauser Keltoum Maïga

## Mitteked

In the desert, where the gaze  
Can never overtake the horizon,  
A figure, graceful and anonymous,  
A fugitive shade of harmonious outline,  
Takes hesitant steps towards the unknown  
Knowing what she leaves behind,  
But not that which awaits.  
Her anguish, her bitterness  
And her sense of being torn are intense.  
Fearful and wary, it is your resolve  
To go all the way.  
The rigor of the unknown does not relent.  
I know you, beauty, feminine, fragile,  
But like all those of your kin  
Capable of the strongest starts.  
Your fearfulness is justified,  
I understand your plight  
But take heed and remember.  
Recall the epoch  
Of our tender youth;  
The moonlit evenings, as on the day  
When in silence we counted the myriad stars,  
While voluptuously letting the fine sand run  
Creamy white between our fingers  
Sitting in lotus position on the dunes of AZAWAD.  
Here you were revered, adored and respected,  
Mirror of your people, do not defile its image.  
You are dignity, source of joy and emulation  
Come forth from the innards of a chaste people,  
You will never be an object of pleasure.  
Your people's code of honor does not let you.  
For you, they all knew to undo the snares  
Of a kind at once lovely and hostile.



Facing destiny alone, jumping towards the unknown,  
Money, power, force  
Will not provide you with any relief.  
Your only salvation will be to remember  
Constantly who you are:  
Tamasheq woman, blue woman.

## **Cry of Youth**

Youth from here, a youth I am,  
I'm lazy is what they say,  
I tell you, no, I simply am,  
Know-nothing is what they say,  
I feel I am misunderstood  
And tell you that indifference  
Gives birth to violence.  
Rebel is what they say  
I feel I have been overwhelmed  
And tell you, my distress is tough.  
Rebel is what they say  
I tell you from Kidal I come,  
Its history in full I'll bear,  
And I follow what I am.

**Imidiwenine maigh adjine adjine**

My friends now what!!  
To all these things  
That wear us down but don't wreck us  
And yet or why?

To all those divides that I'd like to understand  
What do they want? Let me go look alone  
My friends now what!!  
To all these things  
That wear us down but don't wreck us  
And yet or why?

Me, I see pacts of those who were scattered and trampled  
before  
Time condemns you to truth, before fusing you once more  
My friends now what!!  
To all these things  
That wear us down but don't wreck us  
And yet or why?

The truth is what we retain, it can only be remembered  
Because we sought it out in all our fights and it was obtained  
Impossible for us to oppose it

Too many destructive quarrels  
That have solutions we need to find  
My friends now what!!  
To all these things  
That wear us down but don't wreck us  
And yet or why?

We are the survivors of our divides,  
And all through our history

The results have always been degrading  
Time has come for us to understand  
And to hear the advice of those who love us

Oh! My men do not prolong the shame and dishonor  
They can be too long and too heavy a cord  
Over which we may well trip  
My friends now what!!  
To all these things  
That wear us down but don't wreck us  
And yet or why?

There are no more mothers who have not fled,  
Only an old one has stayed and I know that he suffers  
My friends now what!!  
To all these things  
That wear us down but don't wreck us  
And yet or why?

Our children suffer and cry, their future uncertain  
Let's cease our carelessness, our being unaware  
And work towards our stability

As to the peoples who have approached us  
Having understood that by our union they will be weak-  
ened  
I ask you that you understand them  
For they have sworn our being divided, they want it to be  
eternal

Our martyrs all lie beneath the ground  
Oh! If they were present they would have explained us  
The why of past errors

Jugurtha and Masinissa have lived it  
Ag Amastane Mossa has kept it,  
They have all understood before their death,  
And clenched very tight, without slackening our values

Koacen has seen it in his days  
Firhoun believed in it in his days  
Alla has gone through it in his days  
Oh! If they were present they would have explained us  
The why of past errors,  
For the lessons of our day,  
For all those evils that wear me down and wreck me.

These poems are selections from Sennhauser Keltoum Maïga, *Femmes Bleues* (Bamako: Éditions La Sahélienne, 2014). They have been translated from the French by Samuel Vriezen and appear in this reader with the permission of the translator and original publisher.





Artist Mazou Ibrahim Touré in his studio in Kidal, Azawad

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# I Was Needed, so I Became an Artist

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Mazou Ibrahim Touré Interviewed by Jonas Staal,  
with remarks by Moussa Ag Assarid

**Jonas Staal:** You are an artist, a calligrapher, and radio personality who assumes a central role in the Azawadian revolution. What does this strong political position and responsibility mean for your artistic practice?

**Mazou Ibrahim Touré:** That question makes me laugh a little, because when I first met the leading figures of the Azawadian independence movement and told them I could really help the movement, they ignored me and pushed me aside. So my political and artistic work did not go hand-in-hand very easily in the beginning. As an artist, I was not considered a part of real politics, but when public manifestations and protests began to take shape in favor of independence, I joined each of them, and observed them carefully. After some time I thought to myself, "these manifestations... I can change them." I realized that I could develop banners and forms of calligraphy that were far more beautiful and effective than the ones the MNLA had been working with. Eventually they said, okay, let us try, and we did. I have made banners and slogans for every public manifestation ever since. These slogans of the day express the poetry of the revolution. I also helped the protestors who were too timid to express themselves with ease. In general, I wanted the rallies to become a space of joy, a moment of festivity. This is how the slogan "Azawad! Mali Non!" [Azawad! Mali No!] came into being. Have you ever heard of that slogan?

**JS:** Of course, we have heard it shouted in every village and city that we've passed until our arrival here in Kidal.

**MIT:** It was I who wrote that slogan. It comes from the fundamental realization that enough is enough. My friend Moussa and I, we were fortunate enough to have been afforded the opportunity to go to school, but many of

our brothers did not. We have parents who were forced into ignorance. The state of Mali is a state for which my parents fought, because they believed they could have an equal place within it. My father, for example, he was even willing to fight the French so that Mali could gain its independence, but none of those efforts were ever recognized. All of those men who fought were never recognized. As a result, I was born into a climate of revolution. Even nature and the landscape—the conditions of the terrain on which we live, with its incredible heat and proneness to drought—made revolutionaries out of us. We oppose a corrupt state, a vagabond state that has forced us into ignorance, into backwardness. This state promised to initiate projects that would develop and stimulate the northern part of the country, but it has failed to carry out its promise, time and again. The people who run that state only think of the little bread they can win when they follow orders. Even I worked for the administration for nine years, and the experience was a deep disappointment: Mali can and will never do anything for the population of our state of Azawad.

**JS:** What is the most accurate description of the artistic work that you are doing?

**MIT:** I don't call myself an artist because I'm not a professional.

**JS:** What do you mean by the term "professional?"

**MIT:** By "professional," I mean someone who has enjoyed a specific formation and training in the domain of art. I would rather call myself an autodidact. I saw the situation of my people, and I realized that they needed an artist.

**JS:** That seems like quite a serious formation to me.

**MIT:** True. Every time a situation needs me, I am there, and I am ready to help.

**JS:** How long have you been working on the creation of images, texts, poetry, and slogans?

**MIT:** I learned thanks to a friend in Bamako. He was also a painter who worked on rolls of canvas. I did not actually make anything myself; I just observed him. Whenever I had nothing to do, I went to him and watched him do his work. And when I finished my studies and returned to Kidal, I met a singer who needed a sign for his performance. The person in the city who would usually do this was too busy to take on the work, so I did it instead. I was needed, so I became an artist.

**JS:** And how old were you exactly when you encountered the practice of art and calligraphy the first time in Bamako?

**MIT:** I was 22 or 23 years old.

**JS:** And for how long have you been engaged in the revolutionary movement?

**MIT:** Very long—certainly for at least 20 years now. I'm 39 years old today, so my political and artistic development took place more or less around the same period.

**JS:** How do you realize your work here in Kidal? Do you also collaborate with other artists or do you organize the work yourself? Furthermore, are you in continuous dialogue with the MNLA?

**MIT:** Most of the time, it's the children who actually help me to make the work. Here, the concept of artistic work is not something the people are familiar with. When I started the work, people were still writing slogans with markers in hand, and so I introduced them to paint and stencils. Concerning the role of the MNLA: we sit together and think on a text, on a slogan, and I become responsible for realizing and perfecting the project. You will see that in each of the manifestations, there are banners that I have made. But it's the children of Kidal who help me when it comes to realizing the banners. The process of conceptualization takes place in dialogue with the MNLA, but the work's execution takes place with the children who help me paint and draw. You have seen all the painted flags on the walls in the city, right? The MNLA realized that the whole world was going to come to see us. So what were we to do, to make clear to the world that we exist? What is the first image journalists and politicians see when they arrive at the airport? One day I had the luck of running into a media team of *France 24*. I passed by them while they were shooting an item, and I heard a reporter say: "We are here today in Kidal, and the very first thing we see upon arrival is the flag of Azawad."

**JS:** [laughs]

**MIT:** [laughs] It was an important recognition of my work! These are the flags, the paintings that I had made, the first visual signs of an insurgent Azawad.

**JS:** So actually it is you who works on the imagery of a new yet unrecognized state.

**MIT:** But there you are wrong: it is certainly recognized, because we recognize it! [laughs] The first thing is not

to wait until others recognize you—other states, in this case. The first thing is to be confident of oneself, to understand that you represent something, because if you have not accepted and internalized that, then others will never recognize you. The recognition of others, *Inshallah* [God willing], will come as result of our belief.

**JS:** How do you see the future of art in the state of Azawad?

**MIT:** Art is of great importance—not only visual art, the written word, or music, but also the art of satire. So far, I have talked to you mainly about painting and calligraphy. But I'm also a comedian at the Azawadian radio. When I engage people in political discourse through satire, this is yet another form of art. Due to the many sufferings here in Kidal, we find ourselves in an environment where people are too serious. Our radio programmers were usually journalists who tried to maintain as serious a tone as possible. So instead, I introduced my own style, which blends journalism, politics, and comedy. It's a form of satire that enables us to see the absurdity in day-to-day politics. I can pass on a text like Moussa, a political text, but when I do this, the people laugh. I had to change the suffering in people's hearts with laughter. There are communities also within the movement that are in conflict, that refuse to speak to each other, but through me, through the radio, they begin to engage in a dialogue. All over the world, Radio Azawad has been called a criminal radio, but that is false: it's a radio through which the people express themselves. The people speak through the artist.

**JS:** You have mentioned several terms that figure prominently in the work that you are doing.



Recognition is one of them, as it concerns the flags that you have painted and which are displayed around the airport. Hope is another one, which is what you attempt to offer through your work at the radio. Both of these terms seem to deal with the art of creating a different future, one that, while it may not be there yet, could be worked towards nonetheless. Could you further elaborate on the image of this future and what it entails?

**MIT:** If you hold one of our children today, you know nothing of her or his future, because he or she has had no right to a good formation. We want a future within which that child's future is also possible. We want the world to stop describing our state as a terrorist state, as a state of misery. We have known misery, and we no longer want it. Furthermore, we have resources; we have minerals that we ourselves could perfectly well exploit. The Malian officials who were supposed to be in charge of development in our territory, they do not even have a place of residence here! What do they know of the country they are supposed to be ruling?

**JS:** This is the reality that informs your slogan "Azawad: Mali No!" What are some other slogans and political poems that you consider to be crucial in articulating this claim to a different future?

**MIT:** The one I will never forget is "Libère Nos Prisonniers!" [Liberate Our Prisoners!]. Of course, liberating prisoners is not an end goal in the way that the demand for an independent Azawad is an end goal. But you have to understand that many of the prisoners are not like me. I accepted the consequence of being part of this revolution: I fight with my hands, with my mind, and if neces-

sary, with my weapons. But if you look at those who are in the prisons of Mali, many of them are civilians. They are peasants, shepherds, and other people who are not fighting on the frontlines or might not even harbor an in-depth knowledge of the political situation, and yet they are arrested and imprisoned. When I'm taken, they take someone who has accepted to fight against Mali at all costs. Thus, I would prefer that I am taken prisoner over the innocent who are currently jailed and who have already suffered from the harsh conditions of this land and been victimized by the corruption of the Malian state. This is why this slogan was so important for me. Another one was "Armée Malienne Est Égal Au Terrorisme" [Malian Army Equals Terrorism]. The slogan was born out of the fact that the jihadist groups in our territory have direct links to the Malian government. They finance each other and their common interest is the destabilization and deligitimation of the MNLA.

**Moussa Ag Assarid:** There is another slogan by Mazou that I highly value and that was appropriated by the children of Azawad. It's a slogan in Tamasheq, and thus a slogan that everyone in Kidal understands. When you say in French "Liberate Our Prisoners!," the children don't understand it, and many others from the local population won't understand either, because they have never been to school. When you say "Azawad! Mali No!," well, then the population understands the first two words, but not the third. They understand Azawad, they understand Mali, but "No" they don't understand, since "No" in Tamasheq is written as *Kala Kala*. But the slogan that made you so well-known in Azawad [Ag Assarid is interrupted mid-sentence by Toure's ringtone, which is a recording of the slogan he was about to mention, chanted by a group of children] Exactly, exactly, listen!

[*Toure's ringtone*]:  
*Matarhan Matarhan*  
*Azawad A Narha*

**JS:** [*laughs*] So that is the slogan, and it's also Mazou's ringtone?

**MAA:** [*laughs*] I did not plan it, really! It's just perfect timing, but now I can explain it even better. *Matarhan* means "What Do You want?," so it's a question to the children: "What Do You Want? What Do You Want?" And then the children respond *Azawad A Narha*, which means "It is Azawad that We Want!" Children, women, men: they all appropriated this slogan. This is the slogan that made Mazou famous above all the others.

**JS:** This is very important, the way that a language connects a people directly to a specific political reality. What seems especially important in the construction of this particular slogan is that it begins with a question: the slogan thus remains unfinished until the people respond to it. We discussed earlier the notion of a people expressing itself through the artist, through art, and with this slogan that seems to be the case in a very concrete way.

**MAA:** Exactly, because they don't simply repeat what you are saying. They don't chant the same slogan back, but rather finish it off.

**MIT:** True, true, I don't tell them what to repeat, I make a proposition to them.

**JS:** Also, it seems logical that a good slogan begins with a question, because we first have to be able to

imagine what we want before we can really want it. That is the paradox of emancipation; that we cannot yet know what it is that we want at the moment of oppression.

**MIT:** But if the right question is asked, we will know. And this was the right question.

**MAA:** What is also interesting about Mazou is that he is not just Tuareg, but also Songhai. His father is Songhai and his mother is Tuareg.

**MIT:** We are not in a tribal or ethnic war; rather, we are engaged in a territorial war. We can no longer rely on the Malian government, which has had more than enough chances to change the living conditions of the people here. Now we are ready for full secession, and we are the only ones with the knowledge and understanding required to give shape to the future of this territory. Even with the Bambara [the majority of the ethnic population of Mali], we have no problems; many of them are my friends, in fact. We oppose the state of Mali, not its people. The state does not understand our lived reality. Someone in Bamako, who needs food or water, only has to walk to the market around the corner. We, on the contrary, sometimes move 30 kilometers just for those basic needs! These are the simplest things that are impossible to understand or solve for the administrators who rule us from afar.

**JS:** In a way, coming from a background of Tuareg and Songhai, you represent the ideal of a multiethnic and multireligious state of Azawad that the MNLA proposes, Mazou. Do you think it's important, in order for you to give a voice to people, that you yourself reflect their diversity?

**MIT:** That is very important. I think it's a chance to embody two different cultures. You learn a lot. The Songhai and the Tamasheq, they share much of their nomadic lifestyles, but each looks at the other as an opponent, which is partly a result of the divisive politics of Mali. Even until colonial times, these people always exchanged services and goods amongst each other, and they should continue to do that. I'm now one of the connecting elements between the two rivers of these cultures.

**JS:** Most artists that I meet do not need a Kalashnikov to do their work. Maybe you can help me to gain some further insight in the conditions and the risk of the work that you are doing.

**MIT:** I have a weapon, but I hate weapons. I would like us to distance ourselves from arms as much as possible. But today we simply run many risks. At this moment, we are in a situation of high alert. At this very moment, only 150 kilometers from where we are sitting, there are armed confrontations between our soldiers and the Malian government, as well as jihadist groups that are supporting the Malian forces. In these conditions, I become a fighter. I'm not different from the young soldier who carries an arm. We share the same cause. The artist is a combatant. I'm now on my way to the battlefield, to interview the soldiers for Radio Azawad and share their points of view with our people. The young, unrecognized people who have chosen to fight so as to gain recognition for themselves and their people—I'm in charge of taking care of those voices, to create representation, to create visibility.

Mazou Ibrahim Touré is an artist, calligrapher, and radio personality. This interview was conducted in French on 20 July 2014 in Kidal. It has been translated into English by the interviewer.

# Chronicles of a Tuareg in France

(selections)

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Moussa Ag Assarid

à l'entrée le 17/07/2014



*[Handwritten signature]*

## The Soul of the Desert

A marvelous legend tells us why the desert is so deeply rooted in the Tuareg soul.

The Sahara has always been a major place of passage. This story takes place in a time when all peoples were nomads, looking for their land of asylum. While moving across the desert, they introduced themselves to him and said:

“We want to live in the Sahara.”

“The desert replied: “I’m hot.”

“No problem.”

“I’m cold — very cold.”

“No problem.”

“I do not have enough water.”

Then the peoples withdrew silently.

Other peoples came by, and it was always the same dialogue that started. When the desert mentioned the wind, the silence or the light, the peoples fled.

One day, the Tuareg questioned the Sahara, who brought up the fears inherent to this land, which is hostile to human life.

“There’s too much light in here.”

“We’ve got the *tagelmas*.”<sup>1</sup>

“It’s cold.”

“We’ve got the *gandouras*.”<sup>2</sup>

“There’s hardly any rain.”

“We’ve got the wells and the canteens.”

“I’m very silent.”

“We’ve got enough space in our hearts.”

“What do you expect from me?”

“We want peace.”

1. This is the plural of *tagelmust*, a cotton garment worn by Tuareg men. Another word that could be used here is *chèches*.

2. *Gandouras* refers to the long shirt-like garment worn by Tuareg.

"You'll have peace."  
"And freedom."  
"You'll have it."  
"Strength against our enemies."  
"You'll have it."

And thus, a pact was made between the Tuareg and the Sahara. This pact is still lasting. If anyone wants to fight the Tuareg, he should not look for them in the desert: he would lose. No one knows the Sahara the way the Tuareg do. The soul of the desert protects them.

## Remaining Dignified

In everything, I try to adjust to France, the country that I love so much. But I still haven't managed to get used to the show of degradation, to the faces that are maimed by piercings, to the slouching and poorly dressed girls and boys, pallid from their lack of living, to the nights where the alcohol is causing heads to spin and eyes to avert, to the way in which the young people talk to their elders, to this great lamentation of despair...

Whatever our suffering or ordeals, we need to remain dignified, face-to-face with pain as equals. I have seen Tuareg mothers lose their children without becoming hysterical; without a word, they silently readjusted their veils, never letting themselves go, ever, so they would not collapse. When I see these people, bending down towards degradation, I feel like lifting up their heads again and telling them to look in front of themselves, around themselves. Everything is there.

It is true that misfortunes shape us. The Tuareg rebellion has strengthened our faith in ourselves. While we were suffering, we managed to assert ourselves in order to support our values.

Until 1990, 30 years after Malian independence, the Tuareg community was practically absent from the country's institutional life, to the extent that the Tuareg were seen by other Malians as foreigners who should go back home, to Algeria or Libya. In 1990, groups of young Tuareg took up arms and put up resistance against the central Malian government. A peace agreement was signed, but it had no effect: the war continued and the massacres directed against Tuareg civilians recurred with greater intensity, leaving more than 10,000 dead. Since 1996, with the coming of the new democratic regimes, there was a period of relative calm in Mali, but the Tuareg problem remained: the

Tuareg were still not regarded as citizens.

When the rebellion broke out, my brother and I understood it very well, because we knew what it meant to be excluded. We, too, wanted to let people know that the Tuareg have a rich and powerful culture. We were denied, by states, the right to cross borders without a passport, and yet we couldn't obtain a passport. To get a passport, we needed an identity card, and to have an identity card, we needed a birth certificate, but we could only obtain one if we were born in a maternity hospital and on a specific date. Tuareg are born in the desert and they never know their date of birth nor their precise age. A Tuareg from Mali who crosses the Nigerian border does not move from one country to another: he comes together with other Tuareg. The borders do not matter to us, the only thing that matters are the tribes. In the sky, there are no borders.

We have always suffered from exclusion. When we went to the market in Gao, the people used to increase their prices because we were Tuareg. At school, the children didn't talk to us. When the rebellion broke out, I was convinced that things would change, and that this would be necessary.

My brother Ibrahim and I wanted to keep going to school because we thought that we would serve our tribe better by being educated than by fighting. In the midst of this revolution, my family had to leave without me to Algeria in order to protect themselves. Along the way, my brother was stopped by some young Tuareg who forced him to join them, because he had reached fighting age. They took him to their boss, who asked my brother what he was doing and why he was fleeing. He explained that he was attending school, but that he had to go to Algeria because life in Mali had become too dangerous. The boss let him go, convinced, too, that he would be of more use in school than at the frontlines, as after the rebellion, the Tuareg had to become fighters with the pen.

At this time, I was living in Bourem. One morning, around 5 a.m., I was woken up by the noise of gunshots. I hurtled down the stairs, went outside, and in the darkness I heard gunshots that seemed to come from all over the city. People went past covered in blood, frantically running. The city was in total chaos. Two days later, my uncle Aghatam arrived in a four-wheel drive. He started loading the car with both of our belongings: he had decided that he would leave to fight in the rebellion and he wanted me to join him. But I didn't want to take up arms. I could not possibly follow him without my father's blessing. I let my uncle leave and went to Ousmane, my father's friend. Later, my uncle became the rebel leader. First, I couldn't even go to school—I had to hide. This friend protected me until I received my Junior Secondary Education Certificate (BEPC). At the end of the year, I left to take refuge in the desert, where I found my freedom with my family. During all of this time, I despaired of only being able to defend my family through the use of arms, which I wouldn't use.

Another rebellion followed, which was equally powerful and threatening to the dictatorial and murderous regime of Moussa Traoré, who had been in power for 22 years. At this time, the students used to work under unacceptable conditions. In order to react to and to change the situation, some university and high school students created the Association des élèves et étudiants du Mali [Association of Pupils and Students of Mali]. There was no university in Mali at the time: high school students who finished their *baccalauréat* could hardly get any schooling without having to leave the country. In the *seconde*,<sup>3</sup> there were 125 students in the same class. We couldn't settle for that, so we published articles, talked on the radio, and organized strikes. We

3. The *seconde* is the equivalent of 10th grade in the United States or fifth form in the United Kingdom.

met together secretly, sometimes even in the bathroom, because we were sought after by the state police. We were always aware of the possibility that we might run into spies. We were a threat to the state, because we openly criticized it. One day, when we all got together, we were surprised by spies. We spent 11 days in a prison with 46 students in one room, sleeping on the floor in a scorching heat close to 50°C. Every morning we received the chief of-ficer of the gendarmerie camp where we were imprisoned. He repeated this phrase: "In life, one must be able to live through hot as well as cold, bad as well as good days." All these struggles taught me to grow, as it is the affirmation of our demands that makes us who we are.

These selections come from Moussa Ag Assarid's book, *Y a pas d'embouteillage dans le désert!: Chroniques d'un Touareg en France* [There's no traffic jam in the desert!: Chronicles of a Tuareg in France] (Paris: Presses de la Renaissance, 2006). They have been translated by the author and appear here in lightly edited form with his permission.





MNLA soldier

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# A Fragmented and Forgotten Decolonization:

The End of European  
Empires in the Sahara  
and Their Legacy

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Berny Sèbe

"You are already dead. How can one dare to speak of independence, you who are not even present in the places where decisions about independence are taken?"

Mohamed Ali Ag Ataher Insar, former chief of the Kel Antassar Tuareg, Mali (1990)

There was never such thing as a "Year of the Sahara" in Africa: although most of the Saharo-Sahelian zone was granted nominal independence in 1960, the process of decolonization of the Sahara proved to be much more protracted and complex than elsewhere in Africa. This fate was perhaps unavoidable for a territory that lay between the Algerian conflict on the one hand, and the peaceful decolonization of French West Africa on the other. Because the postcolonial history of the Sahara has tended to be absorbed more or less artificially within the national narratives to which it came to belong (with or without the consent of its populations), the decolonization processes at work in the Sahara, and their consequences, have remained neglected territory for a long time.

By looking at the fragmented and forgotten decolonization of the Sahara as a whole, and by considering some of its long-term side effects from a Saharo-centric perspective, this article intends to redress this historiographical imbalance and offers an alternative interpretation of the end of Empire in the Sahara, from the perspective of its human and geographical realities rather than through the politics which have absorbed it, willingly or unwillingly. It questions the role and impact of postcolonial African states on ethnic groups that straddle several countries born as a result of the end of empire, a situation not uncommon in many regions of the continent. Against this background it tests out an interpretative model of decolonization which posits decolonization, not as an emancipatory process *a priori*, but as a factor of political fragmentation that was the

product of Western-inspired supposed nation-states suddenly imposed on populations, whose specificity had often been better preserved under colonial rule and who became marginalized as a result of the decolonization process. It posits that the legacy of this process has been one of post-colonial instability. Lastly, this article offers an insight into an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to unify politically and economically large spaces in Africa, and as such complements existing knowledge of other initiatives or projects in the region, such as the Mali Federation or attempts to retain the unity of French West Africa at independence.

Home to four major ethnic groups (Arabs, Tuareg, Moors, and Tubus) and displaying a clear desertic identity in the 3.5 million square miles straddling the Tropic of Cancer and running from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, the Sahara was entirely absorbed by European imperial powers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. New, artificial delimitations between British, Italian, Spanish and French zones of control were drawn, while the French, who had obtained the lion's share, further divided it within their own empire (between Algeria, French West Africa, French Equatorial Africa, and the two protectorates of Morocco and Tunisia where they fixed previously unclear boundaries). When anticolonial movements started to challenge imperial rule north of the Atlas Mountains and south of the Sahel, Saharan populations remained generally so quiet that the French tried to merge all their Saharan territories into a Common Organization of Saharan Regions (OCSR) (1957–1962), an initiative which sought to give reality to a project that had been mooted several times before: the idea of a French Sahara. However, this obvious attempt to retain power over the newly-discovered mineral and oil resources of the region (and access to nuclear testing facilities) failed to erase decades of administrative compartmentalization. Each subdivision of the Sahara subsequently obtained

independence with the non-Saharan territories it used to be attached to: in the south, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad, in the north, Algeria. In the meantime, Libya had become self-governing in 1951, and Anglo-Egyptian Sudan had followed suit in 1956. Later, after an attempt to “departmentalize” the Western Sahara, the Spaniards left it in 1975, only for Morocco (until now) and Mauritania (until 1979) to annex it. Whereas official narratives of decolonization in North Africa have tended to emphasize the concept of the liberation of an oppressed but homogeneous population from the colonial yoke, such an approach seems economical with the truth in the case of the Sahara. In many cases, decolonization seems to have denied Saharan populations a geopolitical existence rather than, as is more often the case, granting it one.

This process of colonial division has led to a long-term reconfiguration of the territorial, ethnic and socio-cultural borders of the Sahara, going against the geographical unity of the region that had been so potent before the advent of European colonialism. The belated French initiative to bring about a hasty and ephemeral reunification through the creation of the OCSR was unable to prevent a definitive post-colonial fragmentation that has hindered nomadic lifestyles and turned Saharan populations into minorities in all the countries in which they live. Although this was not necessarily a problem in itself, it has proved to be a major factor of dissatisfaction among Saharan populations in many countries of the area—especially Mali, Niger, and Chad.

### **The colonial fragmentation of the Sahara**

The European conquest of the Sahara, which unfolded as part of the late nineteenth-century “Scramble for Africa,” did not mean the dismantling of a completely homogene-

ous ensemble: rather, it amounted to the reorganization by external agents, and along much more rigid lines, of a space where competing communities and ethnicities had constantly negotiated their coexistence, trying to make the most of a vast and borderless territory. The very definition of the limits of the Sahara is not unproblematic, as it is mostly defined in opposition to its margins, and does not possess the ethnological unity, or the correspondingly clear-cut divisions, which colonial observers hastily described: for instance, the classic ethnic divisions perceived in colonial times (generally, between Arabs, Tuareg, and Tubus) tended to mask other divisions within each entity, such as the opposition between nomadic and sedentary populations. In other cases, these latter categories could lead to an over-simplification of local social structures. The Sahara was also traditionally perceived as a territory of “white” populations (whiteness being defined in a broad sense, phenotypically and socially) as opposed to “black Africans” south of it. This perception tended to overshadow that, in all likelihood, “black” sedentary populations in the oases generally outnumbered the “white” nomads, who, however, had traditionally retained power until the independence of the various nations which ended up covering the vast space of the Sahara.

The colonial period added a new dimension to the century-old distinctions prevalent among Saharan populations, based on skin color, religion, and way of life: that of state and administrative boundaries decided in faraway places and imposed in a top-down approach (insofar as the colonial administration had the means of enforcing them), reflecting various political traditions with no local roots. The continuum of arid territory to which the Arabs refer as *Sahra* (literally: dry, barren land) ended up divided between four European colonial powers: France, Britain, Italy, and Spain.

While Saharan exploration had long been dominated by German and British explorers in the nineteenth century, French colonial claims on the Sahara forestalled their rivals. France ventured into the Sahara almost absent-mindedly. However, the fact that separate French military corps (the *Coloniaux* from the south and the *Algériens* from the north) conquered the Sahara from their respective bases created internal boundaries which remained almost unnoticeable as long as the French controlled these various areas, but they planted the seeds of future divisions which will be discussed later in this essay.

Beyond the “French Sahara,” Great Britain, Italy, and Spain administered significant shares of the margins, fixing boundaries which have survived decolonization and still divide the Sahara. These colonial divisions, imposed gradually over half a century, disrupted traditional trade routes, while precolonial political ensembles and the logics of territorial relations were shaken. Because colonial penetration had generally proceeded from a coast, the new order seemed to be doubly alien: not only were the colonizers Christians, but the centers of decision-making were situated beyond the Sahara itself, with orders coming from as far as Dakar, Algiers, Tripoli, or Cairo—or even Paris, London, Rome, or Madrid. With this generally came unwelcome administrative frameworks and tax requirements. Local populations resented this new order and tried to escape it whenever possible by crossing boundaries which had no palpable reality, and they rose up against the colonizing power when the prospect of victory was in sight. The most serious rebellion took place during the First World War, when Kaocen ag Kedda, a leader who combined a modern understanding of warfare and a subtle political acumen, led the Tuareg revolt of 1915–1917. The memory of this collective uprising set a precedent to which later advocates of the unity of the Sahara systematically referred. Its ultimate

failure can perhaps be seen as symptomatic of the impossibility of attaining this goal.<sup>1</sup>

Imperial control over Saharan populations was consolidated during the interwar years, with the Tuareg enjoying favorable treatment in the French sphere as a result of their willingness to collaborate with the colonizers, and also probably due to a national collective feeling of passion towards them which I have called elsewhere *Saharomania*.<sup>2</sup> The Second World War demonstrated the strategic importance of the Sahara as a space to be crossed and occupied and led to the departure of the Italians from Libya, with the French replacing them in the Fezzan and the British elsewhere.

In the 1950s, French authorities tried to use the question of access to resources as an opportunity to unify their Saharan possessions. Coal had been found in Algeria as early as 1917 and, during the war, copper had been discovered in Mauritania and Niger, and tin in Niger. By the early 1950s the French government encouraged mining exploration, ultimately leading to the discovery of significant oil reserves in Edjeleh, Algeria in 1956. These new economic prospects, combined with the outbreak of the Algerian War two years earlier and the independence of the two protectorates of Morocco and Tunisia in 1956, led the French to devise plans to unify their Saharan territories and prepare for them a political future distinct from the neighboring regions, all of which seemed to aspire to a form of independence that threatened the metropole's interests. The only colonial attempt to unify the Sahara along geopolitical lines therefore stemmed from self-interest, yet it had

the potential to reshape the future of the region at the very moment when decolonization processes were set in motion most of the French Empire.

### An impossible unification?

Significantly, the project of the unification of the Sahara under French rule was formally presented to the French National Assembly by an African political leader: it was through law no. 57-27 of 10 January 1957 that Félix Houphouët-Boigny, future Ivorian president and leader of the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain [African Democratic Assembly] (RDA) at the time, proposed to establish the OCRS, with the stated purpose to finance the development [*mise en valeur*] of the region and the socioeconomic promotion of local populations with a share of the new oil revenue. Comprising the Saharan territories of Algeria, Mauritania, the French Sudan (modern Mali), Niger, and Chad, it created a *de facto* "French Sahara" that was justified on developmental grounds, a rationale that was customary for Britain and France after 1945 to defend the persistence of their colonial systems.<sup>3</sup> The remit of the OCRS appeared generous in principle, and American observers praised its achievements, yet it bore the features of a last and desperate attempt to cling to oil-rich territories<sup>4</sup> which also presented the added advantage of offering easily accessible nuclear testing sites.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the principle of autonomy enshrined in the June 1956 framework law

1. Philippe Decraene and François Zuccarelli, *Grands Sahariens à la conquête du désert des déserts* (Paris: Denoël, 1994), pp. 100-107.

2. See Berry Sèbe, "Exalting imperial grandeur: the French Empire and its met-

ropolitan public," in *European Empires and the People: Popular Responses to Imperialism in France, Britain, The Netherlands, Belgium, German and Italy*, ed. John M. Mackenzie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), pp. 19-56.

3. Frederick Cooper, *Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 62-65.

4. US State Department, K.S. Cate, "Report from Europe," 10 December 1957. NARA Archives, College Park, MD, RG 59, General Records of the Department of State,

Lot files (Africa), 1944-1963, box 1, country files, entry 3109, folder A6 (Algerian Petroleum).

5. See Roselyne Chenu, *Paul Delouvrier ou la passion d'agir* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1994), pp. 221-233.

[*loi-cadre*] was at odds with the fact that the OCRS was administered directly from Paris, with the duty of OCRS general delegate performed by a Minister of the Sahara also based in the French capital, following the creation of the Ministry of the Sahara in June 1957.

Although the economic, political, and geostrategic interests that the OCRS was able to serve were difficult to conceal and had met with outright rejection from the outset in Algerian nationalist circles, the initiative had been made easier by the generally cooperative attitude of Saharan populations who, by the 1950s, had become accustomed to French administration, and even enjoyed the material benefits that came with it. Remarkably, the Tuareg of the Southern territories of Algeria did not rise against the French authorities during the Algerian war, notably because the conditions imposed by the *pax gallica* since the 1902 Battle of Tit benefited them in general (unlike their former vassals, the sedentary peasants—the *harratin*—who increasingly sided with the Algerian liberation front).

General Charles de Gaulle believed that the stable political situation that prevailed in the Sahara, and the shared desire of nomadic populations to escape the postcolonial domination of Arab or Black African administrators, would allow France to safeguard its own geostrategic, energy-related interests, centered around the three pillars of oil, natural gas, and nuclear testing sites. The OCRS survived the mutation of the French Union into the French Community, and even the independence of Mali, Niger, and Chad (which joined the organization as independent states), but the greatest threat to its survival was the outcome of the Algerian War, inasmuch as the key financial resources for the organization came from Algerian oil.

Several West African countries involved in the OCRS (especially the poorest ones like Niger) had turned a blind eye to the breach of sovereignty the organization brought about.

As observed in 1960 by the American Consul General in Dakar, it offered them the opportunity to benefit from oil revenue proceeding from a territory beyond their borders:

The two other states of the former Federation of French West Africa [beyond Niger] which could benefit from OCRS assistance are Mauritania and Soudan [i.e., today's Mali]. It will be recalled that prior to OCRS' change of status last year, there was in Black Africa a definite suspicion as to the real political aims of the French government in the creation of the original OCRS. This led to a policy of aloofness on the part of the states bordering the desert areas of Algeria.

However, OCRS came later to be considered as hardly more than another convenient source of technical and economic aid. Niger, which really had never shown active resistance against OCRS, was the first, and so far the only state in the former Federation of F.W.A., to sign the appropriate agreements.

The President of the Mauritanian Assembly, Sidi El Moktar, had stated in a radio broadcast on March 15, 1959, that his country was in favor of adhering to OCRS, now that the latter had become a strictly economic organization.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, Modibo Keita's Mali, which expressed its "solidarity towards the Algerian people and its honorable representative the Provisional government of the Algerian Republic"<sup>7</sup> and later used the argument of French sympa-

6. American Consul-General to State Department, dispatch "OCRS Economic and Technical Assistant to Niger," 9 February 1960, NARA Archives, College Park, MD, RG 59, General Records of the Department of State, Central Decimal Files, 1960-1963, box 2571, 851T.00/2-960.

7. Chargé d'Affaires de France for the French Embassy in Bamako to Secrétaire d'Etat aux Affaires Etrangères, *Dépêche hebdomadaire*, 29 August 1961, Archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAE), Direction des Affaires africaines et malgaches, sous-série Mali 1959-1969, 1.

thies towards the Tuareg to explain the 1963–1964 uprising in the north of the country, took a much more critical stance with regard to the OCRS.

Yet, the major obstacle to de Gaulle's plans remained a potentially independent Algeria, the government of which would seek to stop this transfer of resources. Negotiations with the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic stalled on several occasions on the question of the Sahara, as FLN negotiators were adamant that the Territoires du Sud had to be included in the negotiations alongside the coastal Algerian departments, and that there could be no peace agreement without the Sahara. The August 1957 departmentalization of the Algerian Sahara had reinforced FLN suspicions of the ultimate goals of the French in the region and seemed to justify their insistence on considering all Algerian departments together. The French finally gave in and the OCRS disappeared with the independence of Algeria. The only attempt to give Saharan populations a coherent geopolitical entity had been too late to be successful.

### **Postcolonial fragmentation and conflict in Saharan territories**

Decolonization posed a new challenge to the geographically homogeneous but sociologically diverse and commercially and culturally interconnected regions of the Sahara. Instead of being loosely divided between 4 European powers as it had been in the previous decades, by 1975 no fewer than 11 countries controlled some part of Saharan territory. Nomadic life suddenly became threatened by the strict enforcement of boundaries that used to be only nominal.

A few attempts to remedy this situation were made, but they were too blatantly nationalist and aggressive to

be successful. Moroccan attempts to annex Mauritania before it was granted independence were stopped by the new Mauritanian government's unwillingness to submit to Rabat, by the geographical obstacle of the Spanish Sahara, and by the French military operation Ecouvillon (1958–1959).<sup>8</sup> Although it appears today as a clear case of expansionism, some scholars, such as Odette du Puigaudeau, backed Moroccan claims over Mauritania in the late 1950s on the grounds that it would spare Hassaniyya-speaking nomads the hassle of crossing borders that threatened their nomadic way of life. Rabat also claimed vast swathes of the West of Algeria shortly after independence. Partly in response to such attempts, the Organization of African Unity adopted in 1963 the principle of inviolability of borders inherited from the colonial period. Moreover, the Spanish withdrawal from the Rio de Oro and Saguia el-Hamra provinces in 1976 and the ensuing conflict between Morocco, Mauritania, and the Polisario Front exposed the complex problems raised by any attempt at redrawing the political map of a region. As the great Pan-African and Pan-Arab designs withered away, Saharan regions seemed to remain condemned to an even greater degree of fragmentation than during the colonial period.

The post-1969 Libyan regime was the only regional power that demonstrated any willingness to address the problem of the artificial divisions imposed on Saharan populations. Muammar Qaddafi's background as a nomad and his revolutionary geopolitical designs led him to advocate the idea of the "United States of the Sahara." Libyan hegemonic ambitions in the region made the "Guide of the Revolution" present himself alternatively or simultaneously as an Arab, African, or Saharan leader,

8. See Camille Evrard, "Transfer of military power in Mauritania: from Ecouvillon to Lamantin (1958–1978)," in *Francophone Africa at Fifty*, eds. Tony Chafer and Al-

exander Keese (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 90–106.

trying to play on these three geographical dimensions. Libyan territorial claims over Chad (including the ephemeral attempt to merge Chad and Libya in 1981), and continued Libyan logistical support for rebels from a variety of countries of the Saharo-Sahelian region, were often justified on the grounds of Saharan solidarity and the need to foster the installation of regimes friendly to the Libyans in order to prepare for greater political convergence and the opening up of Saharan borders. In spite of repeated failures in the 1980s, Qaddafi still called in 1997 for a grouping of Saharan states bringing together Chad, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Libya, therefore giving a second birth to his project of a "United States of the Sahara." It was followed in 1998 by the launch of a "Community of Sahelo-Saharan States," with a view to creating a space of free circulation for goods and people, similar in principle to the European Union. The project was given a new lease of life in 2006 in the form of the project of the "Great Sahara." Although it was meant to include 28 states, it failed to deliver the zone of free circulation that it had promised to build, and Qaddafi's death in 2011, sealing the end of his regime, has halted all talk of such an initiative. In any case, the presence of underground resources (uranium in Niger, iron in Mauritania, oil and natural gas in Algeria and Libya) makes any unification of the Sahara more difficult to undertake, as each country seeks to retain control over the revenue their resources generate.

In stark contrast with the precolonial situation which presented an extremely porous, almost borderless open space, the postcolonial fragmentation of the Sahara had an impact on its inhabitants at several levels. It led to confrontations between states and within states, and partitioned major ethnic groups.

At the state level, unsolved colonial disputes often led to long-lasting confrontations. This was particularly the case of the dispute between Chad and Libya about the Aouzou

strip, which resulted from an unratified Franco-Italian agreement of 1935 and led to an "African Thirty Years' War" until the International Court of Justice arbitrated in favor of Chad in 1994. The unofficial Sands War between Morocco and Algeria in 1963 also had colonial roots, given that the French had been unwilling to define once and for all a border between their flagship colony and one of their protectorates. Finally, the hasty departure of the Spanish from the Western Sahara led to the longest-lasting conflict the Sahara has witnessed since the independence of the region, with Moroccan and Mauritanian expansionist plans frustrating the establishment of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic by the Polisario Front.

Postcolonial fragmentations within countries with Saharan territory have also been numerous and resulted mainly from colonial boundary-making which, as we have seen above, tended to entrust chunks of the Sahara to the jurisdiction of neighboring regions and therefore placed the future of the region in the hands of decision-makers who were external to it. Policies that had an impact on Saharan populations were discussed either in Arabic-speaking Maghrebi administrations for the northern half of the Sahara, or in French-speaking African capitals for the southern half of the desert. This situation led to constant tensions between the administrative centers of power and their Saharan territories, sometimes turning into full-fledged conflict, as happened in the case of the Tuareg and Tubu populations in Mali, Niger, and Chad on several occasions—in the case of Mali, almost immediately after independence.

The space dominated by the Tuareg, which became divided between five postcolonial states after independence (Algeria, Libya, Mali, Niger, Burkina-Faso), had been traditionally organized around four major federative poles. Independence disrupted the cohesion of this ensemble:



two poles ended up in Arab-dominated Algeria and, to a far lesser extent, Libya (Kel Ahaggar and Kel Ajjer) and one in each of the Black-African-dominated newly-independent Saharo-Sahelian countries (Kel Tademekkat in Mali and Kel Air in Niger).<sup>9</sup> The notion of a *Sahara français*, first voiced by the likes of Robert Capot-Rey or Emile Bélimé and then materialized through the OCRS, had been viewed favorably by Tuareg leaders, who perceived the opportunity to achieve a reunion of confederations enjoying considerable territorial freedom.<sup>10</sup> Although the concept of a Tuareg nation may not be as deeply entrenched as has sometimes been claimed in an attempt to justify Tuareg rebellions, nomadic populations were by definition favorable to any initiative preserving their ability to follow freely the opportunities offered by pasture for their herds. This is one of the reasons why the period preceding decolonization is seen retrospectively as a moment of greater freedom than the present by the Tuareg themselves.<sup>11</sup>

By a twist of fate, decolonization threatened the *modus vivendi* that the Tuareg had found with colonial administrations, which French officers had nurtured out of a combination of inquisitive surveillance and genuine sympathy. The Tuareg also realized that, having resisted for longer the prospect of a European type of schooling for their children, they would be at a disadvantage in the new postcolonial entities, to the benefit of other ethnic groups (some of whom had been their hereditary enemies or vassals). The transfer of power of the early 1960s meant a loss of authority of the Tuareg to the benefit of their former slaves in Niger and Mali, while in Algeria the new postcolonial

authorities tried to gradually neutralize the authority of Tuareg *amenokals* [customary leaders]. Revealingly, when an Algerian journalist asked in 1962 the Hoggar amenokal Bey ag Akhamouk what he thought about the independence of Algeria, this was his response: "Before, it was the French who were in command of us, now it is the Arabs."<sup>12</sup> More recently, Moussa Ag Assarid, a spokesperson for the National Liberation Movement of Azawad (MNL), goes as far as to say that the postcolonial period has been just another form of colonization for ethnic minorities.

Indeed, the first Tuareg rebellion took place in northern Mali, as early as 1963, in the Adrar des Iforas, against Modibo Keita's socialist regime. The area was subsequently placed under military control. It was in northern Mali that a variety of social, economic, and political factors crystallized, leading a Tuareg movement to seek an independent homeland—a request that, according to Ag Assarid, had been put forward to the French authorities by more than 300 chiefs of villages and confederations as early as 1957, but which was not successful. The French ambassador to Mali between 1964 and 1968, Pierre Pelen, offered an insightful summary of the various reasons that led to this uprising:

The Tuareg are... nomadic populations and independent by nature and, as they can be found, geographically speaking, straddling three frontiers, they can easily escape any administrative control. However, the French authorities had established with these tribes a kind of *modus vivendi*, which had led to relative peace in the region.

With the independence of Mali, the problem was again posed, as the Malian government decided to enforce at any price the existing national regulations, and

9. Hélène Claudot-Hawad, "Honneur et politique: les choix stratégiques des Touaregs pendant la colonisation française," in "Touaregs, exil et résistance," ed. Hélène Claudot-Hawad, special issue, *Revue du Monde musulmans et de la Méditerranée*

57, no. 3 (1990), p. 12.

10. Mohammed Ali Ag Ataher Insar, "La scolarisation modern comme stratégie de résistance," *Revue du Monde musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 57, no. 3 (1990), p. 97.

11. Moussa Ag Assarid, in discussion with Berny Sébe, 18 July 2012.

12. Marceau Gast, *Tikatoûtin: Un instituteur*

*chez les Touaregs, itinéraire d'un apprenti ethnologue* (Seyssinet: La Boussole, 2004), p. 87.

to levy tariffs and taxes from these nomadic populations, without taking into account the particular conditions of the “Tuareg economy.” If this had been a simple reluctance of the Tuareg to fulfil their obligations vis-à-vis the state, the whole question would have been less grave; however, it became poisoned by a racial conflict. The white Tuareg have, effectively, always been hesitant to accept the authority of the Blacks, whom they distrust and whom they regard as an inferior race, from which they once took slaves to carry out non-aristocratic tasks. The Malian officials, who are all of the Black race, have attempted not only to control the resources deriving from taxation for their own benefit, but also to strengthen their authority over these nomads. The results of this policy were no surprise as the Malian Tuareg fled to Algeria and Niger to avoid this persecution, until the Malian government signed agreements with the governments in Algiers, and then in Niamey, that allowed the Malian armed forces—with the collaboration of the frontier posts of friendly states—to pursue rebels who sought refuge on their territory.<sup>13</sup>

The exodus brought about by the repression of the Malian army against both the rebels and civilian populations sympathetic to them, the disruption to trade generated by the creation of the Malian franc, as well as a clear drive towards sedentarization, further disrupted customary practices and embittered inter-ethnic relations. The memory of the opportunities that seemed to open up as a result of this armed uprising have since fuelled Tuareg secessionist dreams in the Sahel, up to the present day. Thus, the MNLA proclaimed unilaterally in early 2012 the independ-

ence of Azawad. (This name stands for a loosely defined region including northern Mali, where MNLA leaders believe that they could establish a majority rule government defending Tuareg interests). These secessionist aspirations tend to indicate that, in some cases, the artificial association between Saharan and non-Saharan territories and cultures may have reached its breaking point.

This situation described results in part from a large-scale disruption in inter-ethnic and caste relationships, which has seen the Tuareg losing the privileges and prestige that had been traditionally bestowed upon them as the economics of the region dramatically shifted. As the exploitation of the rich underground resources only marginally called upon local manpower, unemployment forced young workers to migrate away from the traditional Tuareg areas to find work: northern Nigeria or the Ivory Coast for those from the south, and Libya for those of the north. Those who stayed at home faced bleak prospects and felt all the more helpless as they had to face the combined assaults of unsympathetic governments and severe droughts. By the mid-1970s, the Tuareg of the Ahaggar had lost most of their social standing and class superiority, their slaves and even some of their land.<sup>14</sup> Efforts to co-opt the Tuareg through political decentralization failed after a relatively short period, while recurring economic problems, the complete failure of policies of sedentarization, due to the fact that former nomads were not offered alternative means of earning a living, and interregional collaboration, which closed possible escape routes, all contributed to making the Tuareg feel that they were being cornered by hostile forces, often leading to violent rebellions.<sup>15</sup>

13. Pierre Pelen, French Ambassador in Bamako to Couve de Murville, Minister of Foreign Affairs (no. 36), 24 February 1965,

MAE, Direction des Affaires et malgaches, sous-série Mali 1959-1969, 17.

14. Michel Vallet, “Les Touaregs du Hoggar entre décolonisation et indépendances (1954-1974),” *Revue du Monde musulman et de la Méditerranée* 57, no. 3 (1990), p. 88.

Bamako, to Couve de Murville (no. 2141), 28 September 1963, MAE, Direction des Affaires africaines et malgaches, sous-série Mali 1959-1969, 17.

15. Fernand Wibaux, French Ambassador in

It was against this backdrop that a passive form of collective resistance of the younger generations developed, encapsulated in the concept of *teshumara* (possibly from the French *chômeur*, though this etymology is often challenged). Starting from a contestation of traditional Tuareg values (combined with a situation of socioeconomic failure), it gradually evolved towards a full-fledged armed resistance in the 1990s, thanks in large part to Libyan encouragement. When an uprising took place in Tchintabaraden, Niger in May 1990, it reflected the frustration of essentially nomadic populations who had been denied the right to decide their postcolonial future and felt marginalized in all the countries that covered their traditional living space. Understandably, all states that had the potential to become embroiled with the problem reacted swiftly to nip the revolt in the bud. However, regional coordination against the rebellion failed to stop the vicious circle of state repression and further uprising, and the rebellion subsequently spread to Mali, lasting until 1995 and then periodically resuming until the present day. Perceived French sympathies towards nomadic Saharan populations (and especially the Tuareg) have repeatedly led to the former colonial power being accused in Bamako and Niamey of interference in national conflicts,<sup>16</sup> whereas in reality uncontrolled socio-economic and cultural disruptions, stemming from inadequate political systems, were the main source of discontent.

In recent years, the combined effects of the almost complete disappearance of tourism in the region as a result of Islamist terrorism and banditry, as well as the increased awareness of the commercial value of underground resources (especially oil and uranium), have fuelled continuing dissatisfaction with the central governments, leading to regular outbursts of violence, or at least a state of almost permanent instability, in northern Niger and Mali. Thus,

the case of the Tuareg populations, who represent around 1.5 million people<sup>17</sup> divided between five countries (in each of which they represent a minority) is emblematic of the frustrations (and associated political challenges) caused by a fragmented postcolonial destiny.

## Conclusion

Stemming from the belief that interpretations of decolonization have all too often been fashioned around the geopolitical realities produced at independence, regardless of their limited ability to reflect local allegiances and dynamics, this article has attempted to offer an alternative interpretation of decolonization processes in Africa, revolving around the postcolonial fate of the various ethnic entities that populated the Sahara at the end of empires. Interpreting the consequences of the “Year of Africa” through the lens of fragmentation rather than that of emancipation offers a salutary revision of the impact on minority (especially nomadic) communities of decolonization.

Though this article focuses on the case study of the Saharan region, it raises questions that could be usefully extended to other regions of Africa where decolonization did not prove to be a factor of stability or emancipation of minorities. In addition, it invites us to reflect upon the possible benefits of initiatives tending to develop larger regional entities, which would have overcome the legacy of colonial borders. As the secession of northern Mali makes the headlines at the time of writing, it is more pressing than ever to reflect upon the causes of the con-

16. Telegram from Guidi, French Foreign Ministry, to French Embassy in Bamako (no. 107/108), 5 March 1964, MAE, Direction des Affaires africaines et malgaches,

sous-série Mali 1959–1969, 17. Paul Pandolfi, *Les Touaregs des l’Ahaggar* (Paris: Karthala, 1998), p. 29.

tinued dissatisfaction of most Saharan populations with their central governments.

However, any appraisal of the impact of decolonization on the Sahara and its inhabitants should avoid constructing an idealized retrospective precolonial homogeneity, as this vast region has always been a very complex sociopolitical space. Yet, it is beyond doubt that the colonial period added another long-lasting layer of divisions, leading to a durable postcolonial fragmentation of its various groups and making it often more difficult for local populations to negotiate their survival and adapt to changing environmental conditions after independence. Artificial divisions allocated Saharan territories to various political entities governed from *outside* the Sahara—geographically and culturally—leading, ironically, to accusations of the imposition of colonial-style overrule 50 years on from decolonization.

Because few Saharans had been trained enough to play leading political roles in their own countries, they remained absent from the corridors of power and the majority of postcolonial policies have appeared unsympathetic to displaced, disorganized, and sometimes forcibly sedentarized Saharan populations. Although long-established traditions of trans-Saharan trade have remained significant in spite of the enforcement of previously theoretical borders, and migration across the Sahara has become substantial over the last few decades, the disruption caused to the social and economic dynamics of Saharan societies by the postcolonial fragmentation of their once vast territory is undisputable.

The failure of the OCRS project meant that the fate of the Sahara was to remain irremediably fragmented as a result of the decolonization process. Deprived of any significant political weight in any of the postcolonial countries to which they belonged, facing the abrupt end of the “gentlemen’s agreement” that allowed nomadic populations to coexist in peace with colonial authorities, Saharan popu-

lations only marginally benefited from the considerable resources that their territories concealed.

Paradoxically, the French project of unification of the Sahara was given a new lease of life (but from a different political standpoint) when Muammar Qaddafi attempted to implement his idea of “United States of the Sahara.” Ultimately, his project failed, not only because his neighbors feared the overwhelming weight of a Libyan-led ensemble, but also because Western interests (and French in particular) preferred to retain their power of influence over a large number of weaker and often rival entities. It is only due to the extreme mobility across the Sahara of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) that Western preferences shifted recently: regional cooperation is now openly encouraged, as reflected in the American Pan-Sahel Initiative and Western support to the Tamanrasset-based regional command for joint counter-terrorism operations. Thus, an extremely mobile terrorist group has finally recreated a sense of borderless space that so many generations had craved for. This conception of the Sahara as a vast open space, combined with the potential for cross-border illegal activities, may well account for the relative appeal of AQIM among some Saharan populations (such as in northern Mali), in spite of its strict interpretation of Islam, which is at odds with local traditions.

For Saharan populations the legacy of decolonization is thus a mixed one, as they frequently feel that they have been denied the right to self-determination that had justified so many struggles for independence. Speaking for the Tuareg, Amuzzar ag Eshim perspicaciously encapsulated the problem: “[T]he French destroyed the tissue of our nation and when they departed, they not only did not weave it again, but they left it to the claws of others, who destroyed it further and plucked it so much that it does not have the slightest possibility to be restored.”

The fragmentation of the Sahara, and the frustrations that it has brought about, are still a major factor of instability and underdevelopment in the region today. Writing in 1965 about northern Mali, French Ambassador Pierre Pelen somewhat prophetically concluded his report by observing that “[t]his sector is calm for the moment, but it does not seem that the problems confronting the region have been resolved.” Fifty years on, the issues that led to the 1963–1964 rebellion are more acute than ever and demands for self-determination have never been louder. In a striking irony, the fragmentation of the Sahara has led to the formulation of demands that, if successful, would lead to a further partition of the region, given that a unification of all Saharan regions has become a clearly unattainable goal. The legacy of the geopolitical partition of the Sahara is far-reaching, and it explains many of the problems that have engulfed the Saharo-Sahelian region over the last half-century.

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# The Revolution Is without Frontiers

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Photographic Essay  
by Moussa Ag Assarid



Gateway to the city of Ménaka, Azawad



*During the month of May 2014, Moussa Ag Assarid, writer and European diplomatic representative of the MNLA, travelled to the city of Kidal in the state of Azawad. While there, he documented the renewed military conflict between the Malian army and the MNLA after the Prime Minister of Mali, Moussa Mara, declared war on the MNLA on 18 May. The conflict ended in a victory for the MNLA on 21 May. Accompanying the images are descriptions by Moussa Ag Assarid, transcribed by Jonas Staal.*



**Indication of the borders of Azawad  
in the middle of the desert.**



**The Women's Association of the MNLA created a large tent made of goat and sheep skin, decorated with Azawadian flags, which made it possible for dozens of women and men to come together between 29 April-2 May 2014 to listen to proposals and discussions concerning the future of the Azawadian project.**

**Headquarters and administrative center of the MNLA in Kidal.**





Fighters of the MNLA in the courtyard of their headquarters at Kidal. Their clothing is standard military arsenal, while their traditional headscarves—the *tagelmust*—remains on, protecting them from wind, sand, and thirst.



Here stands a fighter of the MNLA. Behind him is a car taken from the combatted Malian army.

This is what we call the "Toyota station," with several fighters of the MNLA controlling the area.



In the morning, at sunrise, fighters of the MNLA wake up next to their trucks. Everyone has water and a weapon nearby, as well as two blankets, one to sleep on and one to cover oneself with, always ready to leave.





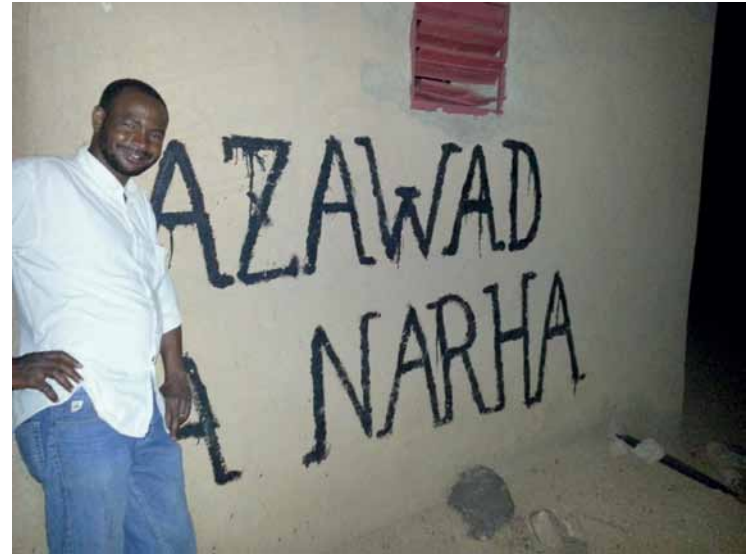


**Fighters of the Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA) pose next to a series of plants placed in such a way that they form the letters of Azawad.**

**A checkpoint of the MNLA in the middle of the desert, in between Kidal and the road to Ménaka.**



A previously unnamed sculpture painted in the colors of the Azawadian flag by calligrapher Mazou Ibrahim Touré. Today, it is regarded as a monument of independence.



The calligrapher Mazou Ibrahim Touré in front of his house, which is painted in the colors of the Azawadian flag. The writing on the wall reads: "AZAWAD IS WHAT WE WANT." Touré is also a local organizer, engaged with involving women and children in the independence movement.

**The Malian Solidarity Bank, which was destroyed by a suicide bomber at the end of 2013. The bombing held terrible consequences for the surrounding infrastructure.**



**Demonstrators, mainly women and youth, opposing the presence of the Malian army in Kidal on 2 May 2014.**



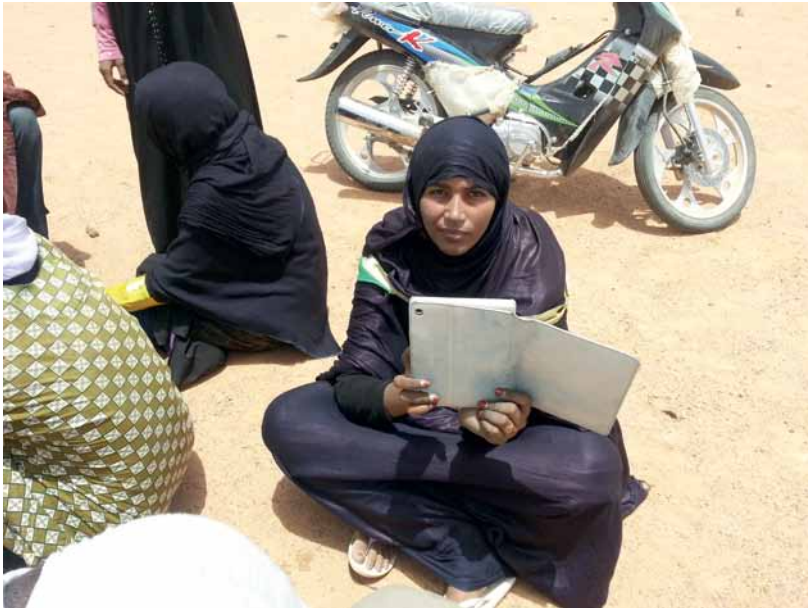


**Demonstrators opposing the presence of the Malian army in Azawad while crying out the slogan "Azawad! Mali Non!" [Azawad! Mali No!] on 16 May 2014.**

**A child is wounded after exposure to burning tires and tear gas while participating in a protest on 16 May 2014 at the airport of Kidal against the arrival of the Prime Minister of Mali. Interference by soldiers of the United Nations, and later the Malian army, left several wounded on that day.**



**Walet Azawad, a young photographer dressed in traditional clothes, carrying an Azawadian flag on her back and using an iPad to do her work.**



**This is Captain Intahalamt Ag Akli. We think of him as a man of humor, but also someone who was shaped by the hard struggles that have shaped our region, which made him fundamentally determined to fight for an independent Azawad. He was of crucial strategic importance in taking back control over the region after the Malian army re-entered the territory with help of the UN. He was killed on 21 May 2014 in front of the Malian camp at Kidal, which is why we want to change the name of the camp in his honor. He was the one who kept me safe during my visit.**

**Mayor H., a specialist of radio communication and transmission, standing in front of his house next to his Toyota, around which his materials are assembled. He uses the car batteries as his materials, with which he intercepts enemy communication and transfers messages to the fighters of the MNLA. He played a key role during many combats as the one who could decrypt messages from beyond enemy lines.**



**Mayor H. in his home, with a stock of arms that he protects. The mayor never moves; he has been stationed in the same house now for two years, taking care of communication and protecting arms. He has not seen his family since the Azawadian independence movement began its insurgency in 2012.**

**On 17 May 2014, at the height of battle between the Malian army and the MNLA, and nearing the moment of our victory, a young woman climbs on the roof of a house and waves the flag of Azawad.**



**An armed vehicle of the Malian army was destroyed 17 May 2014 in Kidal by the forces of the MNLA.**



Here, I'm discussing with UN representatives from France and Senegal the removal of a destroyed vehicle of the Malian army. This photograph was taken on 20 May 2014.



**Slogans and graffiti in the streets of Kidal.**

**My bodyguard, after his leg was broken by a blinded vehicle of the UN during protests on 16 May 2014.**



**Several fighters of the MNLA and I make a declaration in front of the destroyed armed vehicle before it is towed away by UN forces.**





A very important place, the Square of the Freedom of the Azawadian People, where children, youth, and women gather to place flags and plants, the latter commemorating martyrs, with each plant bearing the name of a lost one. The surviving families take care of the plants in order to keep in memory the sacrifice of martyrs and their contribution to the ongoing struggle of the Azawadian people.

A decorative flag on clothes. There are now even people who tattoo the flag of Azawad on their skin.



The "Shampoo Brigade," led by the poet Zeide. These are children who are not yet 18 years of age, and thus are not allowed to fight. They are picked up at the Square of the Freedom of the Azawadian People by Zeide, who tells them stories and directs them during protests. In Kidal there is not much water, so the children just use a little shampoo to wash their heads, hence their name.



Young students are taught by older students in the École des Sables [School of the Sand]. The school is currently operating from refuge in Burkina Faso, as the original school in Azawad was partially destroyed by the Malian army and is further threatened by jihadist groups. As a result, all professors have fled the territory.





**On a wall in Kidal, we read the slogan "The revolution is without frontiers, the revolution continues." The flag of Azawad can be seen waving in the background.**



New World Academy Reader #4:

## The Art of Creating a State

*New World Academy (NWA)* invites stateless political organizations to share with artists and students their views on the role of art and culture in political struggles. Together, they engage in critical thinking through concrete examples of transformative politics and develop collaborative projects that question and challenge the various frameworks of justice and existing models of representation. *NWA* proposes new critical alliances between art and progressive politics, as a way to confront the democratic deficit in our current politics economy, and culture.

The National Liberation Movement of Azawad (MNLA) consists of an alliance of peoples from the Sahel and Sahara regions—Tuareg, Songhai, Fula, and Arabs—who collectively demand two-thirds of the northern part of Mali to become their independent, multiethnic and multireligious state of Azawad. The history of the Azawadian revolutionary movement lies in the resistance against the French-Sudanese colony and the foundation of the French-backed state of Mali in 1960. To date, four armed rebellions have taken place since the establishment of the Malian state, the last one being in 2012. For the Azawadian movement, the creation of art and laying the foundations of a new state are part of the same project.

Texts by: Abdallah Ag Alhousseini (musician, Tinariwen, Azawad); Moussa Ag Assarid (artist and diplomat, MNLA, Azawad and France); Banning Eyre (musician and writer, United States); Sennhauser Keltoum Maïga (artist and poet, Azawad and France); Berny Sèbe (historian, United Kingdom); Tinariwen (musicians, Azawad); and Mazou Ibrahim Touré (artist, Azawad).

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