

“We must all go to the Hangar”:

Performing Bellah group membership in the refugee camp in Abala, Niger¹

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Abstract

This article examines how black male Tuareg, known as Bellah, assert their social identity by attending everyday informal social gatherings under a hangar in the refugee camp of Abala in southern Niger. What makes the hangar important to them is the discussion of themes labelling the free-born, ‘white’ Tuareg as evil people and as non-Muslims. Through labelling these others, the men who meet under the hangar seek to construct themselves as one homogenous community even though they are not. By drawing on the particular meanings that these men give to their everyday social gatherings, this article reflects on the hangar as a ‘setting of performance’ of Bellah group membership. The use of the notion of ‘setting of performance’ allows for

1 Both terms ‘Bellah’ and ‘Iklan’ are used to describe former Tuareg slaves known as the black unfree Tuareg in contrast to the former masters known as free-born and ‘white’ (or ‘red’) Tuareg. While the former slaves are mostly known as the Bellah in the Niger Bend (Timbuktu and Ménaka in Gao region), they are referred to as Iklan in Kidal. In the literature, they are referred to as Bellah or Iklan, or just as the Bellah-Iklan (see for example, Bruce S. Hall, “Bellah histories of decolonization, Iklan paths to freedom: The meanings of race and slavery in the late-colonial Niger Bend (Mali), 1944-1960,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 44, 1, 2011, pp. 61-87.

an examination of the social context under the hangar as a moment that sets this group of Bellah men apart from other social groups.

Introduction

In January 2012, the northern regions of Mali turned into a battlefield. This development started with violent confrontations between the Tuareg² secessionist movement (MNLA)³ and the Malian army. It subsequently became a highly complex conflict between opposing ethnic groups and sub-segments of ethnic groups that had been sharing the same territorial space in northern Mali.⁴ The complexity of the situation was exacerbated further by the emergence of several Salafi-Jihadi factions intent on implementing an Islamic political order symbolised by what they referred to as ‘sharia law.’⁵ The sharia rule that these groups attempted to impose consisted of a set of behavioural codes, such as the obligatory wearing of a head scarf by women and severe punishment for smoking cigarettes and consuming alcohol. Altogether, these conflicts have produced more than four hundred thousand refugees across the West African diaspora.⁶

2 By using the term ‘Tuareg’ for the former masters in this essay, I follow the categorisation of the former slaves in Abala.

3 MNLA is an abbreviation for Mouvement de Libération de l’Azawad.

4 There has been ongoing tension between nomads and the sedentary population over the past decades. See Baz Lecocq, “‘That desert is our country’: Tuareg rebellions and competing nationalisms in contemporary Mali (1946-1996)” (PhD Dissertation, Amsterdam University, 2002). It could be true that this ongoing tension informed the ethnic confrontations in 2012 as suggested by Baz Lecocq, Gregory Mann, Bruce Whitehouse, Dida Badi, Lotte Pelckmans, Nadia Belalimat, Bruce Hall and Wolfram Lacher, “One hippopotamus and eight blind analysts: A multivocal analysis of the 2012 political crisis in the divided Republic of Mali,” *Review of African Political Economy*, 40, 137, 2013, pp. 343-357.

5 The Islamist factions were MUJAO (Mouvement pour l’unicité et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest); Ansar Eddine, AQMI (Qaïda au Maghreb islamique). For an overview of the social composition of these structures, see Olivier de Sardan, Jean-Pierre. “Evitons un Munich Sahélien!” in Lucy Koechlin and Till Förster (eds.), *Basel: Papers on Political Transformations No. 5: Mali - Impressions of the current crisis / Mali - impressions de la crise actuelle*, 15-22 (Basel: Institute of Social Anthropology, 2013).

6 Lecocq et al. “One hippopotamus and eight blind analysts,” pp. 343-357.

According to records, over sixty-five thousand of those refugees fled to Niger.⁷ They live in the refugee settlements of Ayorou, Ouallam, Mangaize, Abala, and Niamey town. A survey by UNHCR reports that an estimated number of 11,795 of these people have lived in the refugee camp of Abala in southern Niger since 2012.⁸

This article focusses on people known as ‘black Tuareg’ or ‘Bellah’ who have lived in the refugee camp of Abala since 2012. It examines specific social dynamics taking place while sitting under a hangar erected in the middle of the refugee camp, just opposite offices occupied by humanitarian staff. Many Bellah men would meet at this hangar for conversations, on a daily basis. I look at the hangar as a setting of performance of men’s membership of the group. Goffman defines a setting of performance as a setting that stays in place, geographically speaking, so that people who would use a particular setting as part of their performance cannot begin their act until they have brought themselves to the appropriate place.⁹ Expressing one’s membership of the Bellah group being studied here went beyond the hangar setting. Nevertheless, my informants consider being there as crucial to the assertion and validation of their social identity as Bellah, and to defining the difference between them and other refugees from Mali. This article argues that attending hangar meetings while labelling ‘others’ not only created differences between the Bellah and the free-born Tuareg in Abala but also introduced new cleavages among the Bellah. The results of my discussion will shed light on some restructuring dynamics of inter-Bellah relations shaped by long-standing conflicting relationships between the free-born, ‘white’ Tuareg and the unfree Tuareg of northern Mali.

The social setting of hangar gatherings in Abala

I associated with many male Bellah refugees while doing research in Abala

7 This number was given in several official speeches such as the one given by Malian transitional president Dioncounda in Niamey in December 2012.

8 Conversations with UNHCR local representatives in Abala on 19th December 2012.

9 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

during 2012/13 and 2014.¹⁰ I would join the informal conversations under the hangar which played a particular role that set them apart from the other groups as 'black people.'¹¹ Their everyday routines were structured as follows. As the sun rose early, typically about 5:00 a.m., my male informants woke up about 4:30 a.m. They started their days with morning prayers in the mosques in their respective quarters. Before returning from the prayers, their wives cleaned up the teakettles and prepared the fire for the morning tea. Once back from the mosques, the husbands sat next to the tea kettles and fire, and started preparing the morning tea. Shortly before the first glass of tea was ready, their wives brought them their breakfast. Eating breakfast, followed by the first and second glass of tea, was accompanied by listening to the news on the radio in preparation for the social gatherings under the hangar.¹² At about 8:30 a.m., they left their tents in small groups of between two and five neighbours or friends to meet up with the others under the hangar, where they stayed until 1:00 p.m., and then came back again after lunch from 3:00 p.m. until 6:00 p.m. Once there, their conversations began with greetings that included exchanging news about the condition of their children's health in the camp.¹³ After exchanging news about their family members living in the camp, they continued to update each other on new developments regarding the conflicts they fled in Mali. These exchanges of news always led on to stories that articulated differences between the unfree and the free-born Tuareg, who were accused by this group of men in Abala of having singled them out of the collective, destroying their houses and other properties, and raping their daughters and wives in 2012 in northern Mali, and ultimately forcing them into exile in Niger.

- 10 My stays in the refugee camp were part of my doctoral research on the Tuareg refugees from Mali in Niger. I focused on two groups: the Bellah-Iklan in Abala and the free-born Tuareg in Niamey, the capital town of Niger Republic. The gatherings under the hangar still continue to structure everyday life in the refugee camp.
- 11 My informants used the expression '*peuple noir*' in French. I come back later to the political context in which this expression gained significance among the Bellah.
- 12 They listened mainly to the Radio France Internationale (RFI).
- 13 My research took place at a time when children between one and five years old were in a critical situation in the refugee camp of Abala due to undernourishment, resulting in the impairment of their health.

An important motivation for their social gatherings under the hangar was to talk about topics that could support their common awareness of being part of a group that has been a victim of the Malian state and of free-born Tuareg politics in northern Mali.¹⁴ Many of my informants referred to these discussions under the hangar as a continuum of *Tessayt n-azawagh* (in this context, “*Assessing the history of the desert*”), an earlier Bellah political propaganda programme broadcast on Radio Adrar in Ménaka, where some of them originated. Established in the context of media liberalisation in Mali in the nineteen-nineties,¹⁵ Radio Adrar introduced this programme in order to create a homogenous political community known as *tumast ta kawalet n azawagh* (literately, the black people of Azawagh: the desert). More specifically, it aimed at generating awareness that there is only the one homogenous social group; this comprises the bush Bellah who still lived with their masters (free-born Tuareg) and those settled in towns and villages who have been freed under colonial and postcolonial rules.¹⁶ The central claim concerning Bellah categories and how they are organised was that they are one separate group, which should not be taken as a part of the Tuareg society. It is important to note that in the nineteen-nineties, the Bellah from towns and villages started to restrict the term Tuareg, which they translated as Tamasheq, to apply only to free-born Tuareg even though they speak the Tamasheq language. In many respects, the themes discussed under the hangar expanded this viewpoint through labelling the free-born Tuareg as evil and non-Muslims in contrast to the Bellah, regarded as good people and Muslims. However, while the themes discussed under the hangar in Abala made the social space of that hangar into an extension of the radio programme in Ménaka, crucial differences in the social composition of the audience should be noted. For example,

14 My male informants under the hangar argued constantly that Malian State politics in the north privileged the free-born Tuareg to the detriment of the Bellah-Iklan.

15 For an overview of media policy in Mali, see Dorothea E. Schulz, “In pursuit of publicity: Talk Radio and the imagination of a moral public in urban Mali,” *Africa Spectrum*, 34, 2, 1999, pp. 161-185. See also Dorothea E. Schulz, “Dis/embodying authority: Female radio ‘preachers’ and the ambivalences of mass-mediated speech in Mali,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 44, 2012, pp. 23-43.

16 I will discuss Bellah heterogeneity again later.

Radio Adrar reached only the Bellah settled in Ménaka town and its close surroundings. Thus, it did not reach many other Bellah living in the areas around Anderboukane and Tidermène as well as in the bush with their free-born Tuareg; and now, these formed the majority of those joining the hangar discussions in Abala.¹⁷ If we are to understand the full implications of the Bellah men's contemporary discourses under the hangar, then we need to situate them within the longer history of conflicting relations between the free-born and the black Bellah Tuareg in northern Mali.

Tracing the historical antecedents of the unfree and free Tuareg's conflicting relations in northern Mali

Before beginning with the history of existing tensions between the free-born Tuareg and the Bellah, it is necessary to recall some scholarly accounts of these groups' differences and relationships in Tuareg society. In many respects, this will help to shed light on the changing dynamics of the relationships between free-born Tuareg and the Bellah as articulated in Abala. The Tuareg are known as formerly pastoral nomadic people in the central part of the Sahara desert and live within hierarchically ordered societies. At the top of the society are the noble warriors, perceived racially as 'white' or 'red.' They distinguish themselves from others by their strict adherence to a culture of honour and shame.¹⁸ This culture is

17 This change in the social composition of the audience made the hangar the reversal dynamic of most discourses on the media platform's creation of communities that replaced traditional face-to-face community. The face-to-face community formation at work in Abala seems to have replaced the Radio Adrar media platform's creation of communities in Ménaka.

18 As widely documented in the context of Mediterranean societies, see John G. Peristiany, *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1966). Lecocq spoke about the Tuareg in northern Mali and established a close connection between the riposte egha, and honour eshik. He defines egha as a debt one contracts against people who have stained one's honour and who therefore have caused shame, see Jean Sebastian Lecocq, "That Desert is Our Country: Tuareg Rebellions and Competing Nationalisms in Contemporary Mali (1946-1996)," 2002. Also, Lecocq, "The Bellah question: Slave emancipation, race and social categories in late twentieth-century Northern Mali," *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 39, 1, 2005, pp. 42-68. See also Robert F. Murphy, "The social distance and the veil," *American Anthropologist* 66, 6, 1974, pp. 1257-1274 and Susan Rasmussen, "Reflections on witchcraft, danger and modernity among Tuareg," *The Journal of the International African*

known as *temushagha* (in Tamasheq language) meaning the noble way of life. It consists of knowledge of honour and shame and also one's lineage (*temet*) and ancestry, which form the basis of political organisation.¹⁹ Some members of these free noble groups, by using their knowledge of the Quran, would deal with religious affairs as well as conflicts, settlements, and marriage including wedding rituals. In the Tuareg social structure, the vassal groups known as *imghad* followed these nobles. They are depicted in the literature as weak, free-born, but not nobles. It has been argued that in the past, these vassal groups paid tribute known as *tiwse* to more powerful noble warriors, who, in turn, provided them with protection in the event of invasions.²⁰ Another important group consists of craftsmen and political mediators referred to as the *Inaden*.²¹ Schmidt compares the role of *Inaden* in Tuareg society to *griots* in southern Mali who praise singers and political mediators. According to him, the profession of the *griots* is normally hereditary and has similar social roles and *stati*,²² one of these being to praise their patrons' past deeds and to recite heroic tales.²³ He reports the following explanation that one *tahardent*²⁴ performer gave when referring to the meanings of praises sung by craftsmen in the Tuareg society: "*N-geru, tahardent rhythm gives strength to warriors. It is*

Institute, 74, 3, 2004, pp. 315-340. Note that these authors focus on the free-white Tuareg's culture of honour and shame, arguing that the unfree Tuareg do not know the concepts of honour and shame.

19 Lecocq, *Disputed Desert: Decolonisation, Competing Nationalisms and Tuareg Rebellions in Northern Mali* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

20 See Pierre Boilley, *Les Touaregs Kel Adagh. Dépendances et révoltes: du Soudan français au Mali Contemporain* (Paris: Karthala, 1999). See also Charles Grémont, *Les Touaregs Iwelmedan (1647-1896). Un ensemble politique de la Boucle du Niger* (Paris: Karthala, 2010).

21 Eric J. Schmidt, "Ishumar: The Guitar and the Revolution of Tuareg Culture" (Honours Project, American University, 2009). For further discussions on Tuareg social classification, see also Baz Lecocq, *Disputed desert: Decolonisation, competing nationalisms and Tuareg rebellions in Northern Mali* (Brill, Leiden [etc.], 2010).

22 The griots are not one ethnic group. Instead, they are a socio-professional category found in many ethnic groups of southern Mali. For further discussions of the roles of griots known as *Jeliw* in southern Malian societies, see also Dorothea E. Schulz, *Perpetuating the Politics of Praise: Jeli Praise Singers, Radios and Political Mediation in Mali* (Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2001).

23 Schmidt, "Ishumar," pp. 32-33.

24 A musical genre performed by *Inaden*.

music for heroes of any battle. *Yalli* also gives force to warriors, but it is used only for battles between Tuareg tribes, not for those with the French or other outsiders.”²⁵

At the bottom of the social structure are the *Iklan*, the born unfree or slaves. According to Hall, the *Iklan* are not one homogenous group.²⁶

In the literature, the differences between free and unfree Tuareg have mainly been drawn around racial features, labour division and genealogical lines. In order to analyse the differences between the existing social groups in Tuareg society, Lecocq suggests the following oppositions: free versus unfree, strong versus weak and lineage versus non-lineage. According to Lecocq, the opposition between free and unfree expresses itself in expected social behaviour and labour ethics. However, the strong versus weak opposition highlights the relations between noble warriors who are free and socially independent, as opposed to the weak *imghad* who are economically poor and need to be protected. The last opposition of lineage versus non-lineage points to relations between those who can or cannot claim to genealogy. A lineage in Tuareg society, argues Lecocq, is perceived to be the most fitting characteristic of noble origin and blood.²⁷

25 Schmidt, “*Ishumar*,” p. 37.

26 Hall distinguishes four social types in the colonial period. The first of these were the Bellah who practiced agriculture for part of the year and who owed their free-born masters a share of the harvest. They were known as the *Iklan n egef* and, until 1949, were officially taxed and administered by their masters unless otherwise stipulated by the colonial administration. However, Hall mentions that in 1949, the French government introduced a policy of taxing Bellah-Iklan directly, rather than indirectly through their masters. The second social type were Bellah-Iklan who were autonomous groups of herders (*iklan n tenere*), usually under the control of a larger confederation led by non-slaves. The third type of Bellah-Iklan were those who lived with masters in domestic settings (*iklan daw ehan*). These domestic slaves were most likely to remain the longest with their masters. A fourth type of Bellah-Iklan were those who had left their masters to settle in towns such as Timbuktu. Hall reports that the colonial administration feared that these latter people acted as advocates for other Bellah-Iklan to leave their masters. In a report on the Tuareg Kel Sidi Ali published in 1950, the French administrator Henri Leroux indicated that “the emancipated and settled elements [of the Bellah-Iklan] in Timbuktu rapidly become the champions of Bellah emancipation and the counselors for their brothers still in the tribe. It is they who give the first asylum and assured the subsistence of the new fugitives.” Hall, “Bellah histories of decolonization,” p. 68.

27 Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, pp. 6-8.

In addition to racial differences, many authors have noted other differences such as restrictions in social behaviour applying to nobles. When exploring this opposition between slaves and nobles, Lecocq wrote:

Both free persons and slaves have intelligence, but of a different nature (...). Furthermore, a free or noble person knows shame and honour, which restrains his or her conduct. Slaves, by contrast, do not know shame or honour and behave, by nature, in an unrestrained way. This becomes apparent in a person's bearing, for example, in the way in which one dances or sits. Free persons dance rather stiffly and slowly, while slaves dance unrestrainedly with more movements. Slaves, male and female, sit on their heels (a shameless posture as it is associated with defecation), whereas free men proudly sit upright and cross-legged, and free women lie elegantly on their sides. But free persons also believe that slaves are unable to understand religious duties, (being by nature thievish and deceitful), lack endurance, and cannot fend for themselves. Hence, slaves need to be cared for and protected.²⁸

With regard to work, Lecocq argued that “many free Tuareg believe still that hard manual labour is unbecoming for a free person.”²⁹ Instead:

a free man should occupy himself only with pastoral affairs, trade, religion, or warfare. Depending on region and caste, free women should not work at all or engage only in pastoral activities, religion, or the household.³⁰

28 Lecocq, “The Bellah question,” pp. 42-68 and pp. 55-56. Lecocq is following Gunvor Berge, “In defence of Pastoralism: Form and Flux among Tuaregs in Northern Mali,” PhD Thesis, Oslo University, 2000, pp. 204-205.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

Exploring contemporary labour divisions in post-drought and post-rebellion societies of Tuareg in northern Mali,³¹ Lecocq submits that:

being a car driver or mechanic is seen as a modern equivalent to being involved in pastoral affairs. Commerce, especially transnational smuggling, is seen as a logical follow-up to the caravan trade, and the 1990-1996 rebellion gave young men ample chances to prove their warrior skills.³²

When accounting for the historicity of political antagonism between the free and the unfree Tuareg, Lecocq argued that colonial rule had greatly shaped the relations between these groups. For example, one vigorous colonial measure consisted of freeing systematically the slaves of Tuareg polities resistant to the colonial rule. The best-known examples are the revolts of the *Ouillimeden Kel-Ataram* and the *Kel-Téguériguif* in the Gao and Timbuktu regions in Mali respectively, and the *Ouillimeden Kel Dennerg* in what is now Niger Republic. In response to the episodic Tuareg opposition to the French colonial rule,³³ the colonial administrators launched an emancipation process of the slaves belonging to these confederations. The outcome was that many slaves settled in the so-called liberty villages.³⁴ The emancipation process of the born unfree was reinforced in the era after the Second World War when the US-RDA's (*Union Soudanaise-Rassemblement Democratique Africaine*) leaders came to gain political significance in local politics. According to Lecocq, the slaves could vote during this period since they were officially free. Thus, while the free Tuareg supported the PSP (*Parti Soudanais Progressiste*), the born unfree supported the US-RDA in the area around Ménaka. For Lecocq:

31 Here, references are specifically made to droughts of the 1970s and 1980s. The rebellions of the 1960s and 1990s.

32 Ibid.

33 Characteristically, these resistances were not coordinated as a Tuareg collective struggle. In fact, each group struggled on its own. See Boilley, *Les Touaregs Kel Adagh*. See also Grémont, *Les Touaregs Iwellemmedan*; Jacques Hureiki, *Essai sur les origines des Touaregs Herméneutique culturelle des Touaregs de la Région de Tombouctou* (Paris: Karthala, 2003).

34 See Lecocq, "The Bellah question," pp. 42-68. Also, Hall, "Bellah histories of decolonization," pp. 61-87.

voting for RDA equalled a vote against the master, it meant filing a freedom paper. On 17 June 1951, 712 Bellahs in Gangaber, 59 at In Tillit, 26 at Chunkaye, and 203 at Indeliman have voted against their master. The results at the ballot box at In Tillit are especially interesting: a particularly isolated post, people isolated untouched by propaganda, and yet 59 freedom papers.³⁵

As a result, Lecocq argues, many slaves left their masters, even taking some of their animals with them. Additionally, the colonial administration and the US-RDA began to give greater consideration to the social and economic emancipation of the unfree Tuareg. For instance, Bruce Hall states:

while the colonial administration debated the appropriate reforms that should be implemented in the Niger Bend after World War II, a number of Bellah-Iklan groups began to take matters into their hands.³⁶

Martin Klein suggests that a revolt of some Bellah-Iklan in the area of Ménaka in 1946 was decisive for the breakdown of the control of free-born Tuareg over slaves there. “It appears to have hastened Bellah-Iklan migration to the south in order to find better pasture lands and to avoid their masters.”³⁷As for the US-RDA leaders, their determination to emancipate the Bellah was already evident in the postcolonial US-RDA politicians’ obsession to change the Tuareg society, which they viewed as a feudal structure to be modernised. According to Lecocq:

believing in modern technique, rational production, socialism, and, above all, the malleability of the human condition, the new regime was determined to put the

35 Lecocq, “The Bellah question,” pp. 42-68 especially, p. 49.

36 Hall, “Bellah histories of decolonization,” pp. 61-87, especially, pp. 73-74.

37 Ibid.

Sahara to use and civilise its population. The regime was convinced that agriculture was possible in the Sahara; that the Kel Tamasheq could and should be sedentarised and educated; and that they should take up farming and ranching, instead of wandering around and counting their heads of cattle. In order to rationalise the pastoral economy and to socialise the nomads the Keita Regime made the sedentarisation of nomadic populations one of its main goals in Northern Mali.³⁸

As a part of these measures, the State established gardens where slaves and their masters were obliged to perform manual agriculture next to each other. This resulted in frustrations among the free Tuareg as is evident in the following passage from an observation by Mamadou Traoré, chef of the prefecture in Tin-Ensako, Kidal region, in 1972. The report depicted:

men are revolted by manual labour. Their efforts are restricted to watering the animals and fetching water. In certain classes and by weakness of character, they voluntarily consent to perform household tasks instead of their spouses. (...) Previously isolated from the outside world, the nomad woman is now involved in certain activities: Fetching water and tending the animals. She evolves more rapidly than the men do.³⁹

Elsewhere Lecocq discusses further developments in the relations between the unfree and free Tuareg during the rebellions in the 1990s. He argues that during that time, many Bellah joined the Songhay vigilant groups in their military campaigns against the free Tuareg.⁴⁰

These existing tensions have been exacerbated in the context of the ongoing conflicts since 2012. As mentioned earlier when referring to

38 Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, p.131.

39 *Ibid.* p. 134.

40 Lecocq, "The Bellah question," pp. 42-68, see pp. 59-63.

reasons for their violent and abrupt departure to Niger, the Bellah men under the hangar in Abala argued that the free-born Tuareg singled them out for collective violence.⁴¹ However, they also indicated that in order to understand the root of the current conflict between them and the free Tuareg in the area of Ménaka, we need to look back into political processes that occurred in the early 1990s and the subsequent developments. During that time, those Bellah-Iklan, who had settled in villages and towns in the area around Ménaka, created a political party UMADD (*Union Malienne pour la Démocratie et le Développement*). They also created a local radio station (known as *Radio Adrar* and introduced earlier in this article) that broadcast propaganda perceived as pro-black people. According to my refugee informants in Abala, they used these structures to begin to challenge and present themselves as potential threats to the domination of free-white Tuareg. For example, as early as 1992, the Bellah succeeded in electing ‘one of them’: Aghamad Ag Azamzim as deputy of Ménaka for a term of office between 1992 and 1997.⁴² Another major event at that time was the creation of the association *temedt* (in French *la parenté*) that fights against slavery in northern Mali. Taken together, these actions increased the tensions between the Bellah and the free-born Tuareg culminating in the expulsion of the former from the area of Ménaka in 2012. In Abala, these historical antecedents in Mali partly informed the Bellah men’s labels when making discourses under the hangar.

Framing the difference between the free Tuareg and unfree Tuareg under the hangar in Abala

The following analysis examines Bellah men’s debates about the differences between themselves and the free-white Tuareg in Abala; it explores the Tuareg’s social differences from the former’s perspective. By focussing on the Bellah’s perspective, the analysis departs from scholarly

41 A survey by ACTED shows that 68% are former slaves, followed by 19% Hausa, 10% Songhay, 2% Fulani, and 1% former Tuareg (ACTED 2012).

42 The same argument has been used to support Mossis Bocoum, former Mayor of Ménaka. However, unexpectedly (from the unfree side) the former politically dominant clans have won the other parliamentary elections since 1997.

accounts presented earlier in this article that study the Bellah not from their perspective but rather from that of the free-white Tuareg.⁴³ The analysis will be articulated around two labels selected from male Bellah conversations under the hangar. These two labels will enable me to highlight how my informants under the hangar interpret the differences between the Bellah and free-white Tuareg within the idiom of 'Islamic morality.'

The first label presents aspects of the differences between Bellah and free-white Tuareg through the opposition of being strong or weak which, in my informants' view, is constitutive of Muslim and non-Muslim subjects. The second label depicts the free-white Tuareg as people without a Muslim's heart. My interpretation of the refugees' labelling discourses is informed by Louis Brenner's discussion of how Muslim identities are constructed in southern Mali⁴⁴. Brenner's study takes identity formation as a process of naming: thus, naming of self, naming of others, naming by others. He argues:

in its most restricted sense, such naming is associated with the attaching of labels such as Muslim/non-Muslim, Wahhabi/traditional, Qadiri/Tijani/Hamallist.⁴⁵

Brenner concludes that both Muslim and non-Muslim identities are formulated through appropriation and re-assortment of various elements or building blocks, which may be religiously significant, but which are also socially or politically motivated. With regard to the social context of Abala, I argue that labelling the free-white Tuareg goes hand-in-hand with seeking to construct the Bellah group as one homogenous community, to which my informants referred as 'black people of the desert.'

43 See Lecocq, "The Bellah question," pp. 42-68 and also, Bruce Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

44 Louis Brenner, "Constructing Muslim identity in Mali," in Louis Brenner (ed.), *Muslim Identity and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 59-78 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

45 *Ibid*, p.59.

“The people without Muslim hearts versus people with Muslim hearts”⁴⁶

During my stays in Abala, I attended the hangar conversations with the following two men. One is named Inawélène Aklinine and was born in 1956 in Anderboukane, circle of Ménaka. Originally, his father was a slave in the Kel Agayok fraction of the *Dawsahak*.⁴⁷ Inawélène went to school in his early years and this allowed him to escape from being kept by the *Dawsahak* for domestic work. He left school just after finishing the elementary stage, and since then he has been moving from one temporary job to another. At times, he worked at the community health centre of Anderboukane and continued to do this for several years. On other occasions, he worked as a translator for NGOs in the area around Anderboukane and Ménaka. He is married to two wives and has nine children with whom he relocated to Abala. In Anderboukane, he has been one of the leading figures of the Bellah’s pro-political party (UMADD) since its creation in 1992.

The second man is named Assalim Ehattand was born in the late 1950s somewhere in the area around Ménaka where he lived until his exile from Niger in 2012. He originates from the Kel Tabonnant, Bellah’s village in Essaila,⁴⁸ created by the former slaves freed in the colonial era from the

46 My interlocutors used the French expression ‘coeur de musulmans’ in the plural and ‘d’un musulman’ in the singular.

47 There is some controversy about whether the *Dawsahak* belong to the Tuareg or not, as well as about their position in the Tuareg social structure. For example, in the literature, there seems to be no consensus about their genealogy. According to French historian Charles Grémont, some of the *Dawsahak* draw their genealogy back to the ancestors of the Ifoghas, Aiitta, the ruling clans of the Kel Adagh in the region of Kidal, see Charles Grémont, *Les Touaregs Iwellemmedan, 1647-1896: un ensemble politique de la boucle du Niger* (Paris: Karthala, 2010), pp. 117-19. Other references to them, based on linguistic characteristics, feature a possible connection between them and the Songhay as their language *tadagsahak* has vocabulary and syntax similar to the Songhay spoken in the region of Timbuktu. See Edmond and Suzanne Bernus, “L’évolution de la condition servile chez les Touaregs sahéliens,” *L’Esclavage en Afrique pré-coloniale, Paris, Maspéro* (1975): 27-47. During some of my earlier stays in northern Mali between 2007 and 2011, I heard some oral accounts saying that the *Dawsahak* have Israelite origin. However, Grémont presents them as an important social group in the Tuareg social and political constellation known as Ouillimiden Kel –Attaram in Ménaka.

48 The Kel Tabonnant Bellah adopted the name of their master clan Kel Tabonnant Imagjorène.

Kel-Tabonnant Imagjorène.⁴⁹ As in the case of Inawélène, Assalim fled to Abala in 2012 and since then he has been living in the refugee camp of Abala. He was living with his two wives, six children, and two sisters when I conducted my research. Before exile, Assalim worked both as an independent artist and a musician; he also animated the broadcast programme *tessayt n-Azawagh*⁵⁰ at the Radio Adrar in Ménaka. He has been a leading figure of the UMADD political party since 1992.

On Tuesday, 18th December 2012, I left the guesthouse used by NGO workers in Abala and travelled to the refugee settlement approximately one kilometer away. This journey took place at about 7:00 a.m. in the morning, after a night when the temperature fell to 3°C at about 3:00 a.m. I first went to Inawélène's house for a glass of tea. Upon my arrival, he was sitting alone in front of his tent next to his teakettle, wearing several items of clothing because of the cold. During the night, the wind had blown several tents away. As part of the greeting exchanges, I asked him about how the night had been for him and his family. He replied by saying: "as you can see none of them are around. They are all sleeping since they did not get sleep overnight." He ended his comment by emphasising that they (the refugees) are really suffering in Abala. After the glass of tea, I moved to the hangar with Inawélène where we found Assalim and three other men at about 8:15 a.m. We greeted each other and everybody was keen to ask about the cold of the previous night. After relating their respective experiences, Inawélène again argued that all of this misfortune was happening to them in Abala because of the fault of free-white Tuareg who expelled them from northern Mali. Responding to Inawélène, Assalim stated that the Tuareg would never believe that they had done anything bad by exposing the Bellah to such conditions in Abala. From Assalim's point of view, this was because, to use his own terms, they do not have Muslim hearts and so they are unable to have any

49 In the literature, the Tabonnant Imagjorène have been depicted as one important social group that was allied with the Kel Talatayt by, for example, giving them women for marriage.

50 In the literal sense, *tessayt n-Azawagh* means assessing the desert. But it is a metaphor that by implication means assessing (or filtering) the history of the desert.

compassion for other people. Substantiating his claim that the free-white Tuareg are people without Muslim hearts, Assalim drew on the following story that he was told in his childhood: the story of a Bellah boy being eaten by a dog in Tidermène in the circle of Ménaka. According to him, the story unfolds as follows:

... an enslaved woman who had two children in Tidermène (...). Her husband, another enslaved black man, lived far away from his wife and children since he was working for another master's family. Since their children were small, they stayed with their mother. The oldest son was about five years old while the smallest had less than two years. This latter could not even walk properly. (...) The head of the family where their mother worked had a big dog. This dog had only been eating meat. Every day, he used to bring the dog with him in the desert far away from the tent in search of some wild animals. But at times, when he did not find any animal, he alternatively looked for isolated black people, especially women and children (...). One day, he was sick and stayed home inside the tent. He could not go anywhere to find something for his dog. In the afternoon, the children were playing in front of the tent while their mother was busy preparing the evening meal. Meanwhile, her master called her to say that the dog had not eaten anything since morning (...). As she knew the habits of the master, she stopped pounding (...) to look down to the ground. She knew what he wanted to do. She did not say anything. He insistently repeated once again that the dog had not yet eaten. Still, she kept silent. The third time, he just stood up to catch one foot of the smallest child and threw him to the dog. The boy did not reach the earth before the dog took him away from the people (...). The dog ate the son in front of his helpless mother (...).⁵¹

51 Assalim's narration at the forum on 18th December 2012.

My informants claimed that this story of the boy eaten in Tidermène is only one example out of a thousand others relating to what the free-white Tuareg did to the Bellah in the area around Ménaka. In this sense, they commented that the story of the eaten boy in Tidermène was a typical act of a free-white Tuareg; supposedly they have “bigger heads”⁵² that make them very selfish and cruel people. This story was particularly important to other participants in the social gatherings under the hangar at Abala because of Assalim’s tonal emphasis when recounting the event. He used to dramatise it by lowering his voice while acting out with body gestures; for example, he would stand up and move around miming parts of the story that he was telling.

The other participants who were at the settlement on the day of my visit reacted to this story with emotional reactions such as *Allahu Akbar* (literally, God is great), which highlighted the story’s dramatic effects. Comments were made from all sides saying that the Tuareg have no heart, and do not deserve to be considered as human beings. They asked: how can a human being give another human being to a dog? In response to this question, my informants argued that white Tuareg could not be regarded as human beings because a human being could never feed a dog with another human being. The differences between the Bellah and the free-white Tuareg were in their hearts. They distinguished two kinds of hearts: one with the capacity to feel compassion (*Taggazt*)⁵³ and the other lacking such feelings. They depicted the former type of heart as theirs, but they considered the latter type as the one found in the free-white Tuareg. They felt that the difference between the two types of hearts is fundamental. The heart with the capacity to feel compassion is one found in Muslims who fear God, but the other without such feelings is characteristic of non-Muslim people who do not fear God. Substantiating their claims, Inawélène referred to the hangar men’s emotional reactions to the story told by Assalim. According to Inawélène, these emotional reactions such

52 Assalim and Inawélène, and several others under the hangar, labelled the free-white Tuareg as people with bigger heads which explained why, in my informants’ view, they are good at politics. This has something to do with “manipulating the reality.”

53 My informants used the French term ‘la pitié.’

as *Allahu Akbar* illustrate how they as ‘black people’ have the capacity to feel compassion for the woman who lost her boy; this is in contrast to the free-born Tuareg who are believed to lack these feelings. He explained to me that their compassion for the woman as a victim of her master indeed illustrates instances and gestures that reveal them as being Muslims who have a heart for other people. I understood these arguments to point to the construction of two particular moral identities. One of these deals with the portrayal of Bellah as people who have a heart for compassion (*la pitié*) and therefore, are Muslims. The second portrays free-white Tuareg as a category of people who have no heart for compassion, making them potential non-Muslims. I will return, below, to the differences between the Bellah and the free-white Tuareg as articulated through the example of the boy eaten by a dog in Tidermène.

“The free-white Tuareg are weak and immoral people”

About ten days after the conversation centered around the story of the boy eaten by a dog in Tidermène, my informants’ discussions under the hangar came to focus on certain issues: these were the labour force of the black people, the lack of such a force among the free-white Tuareg and, the constitution of Muslim and non-Muslim subjects. This debate is not novel in conventional Tuareg scholarship, which has been preoccupied with the issue of how the division of labour shapes the hierarchical order of the society. However, these scholarly accounts focused on the free-white Tuareg perspective, while this article refers to the Bellah’s voice concerning the labour division. Thus, in contrast to the classical argument given in the literature, Inawélène reinterpreted the talent of raiding cattle and their warrior skills: he argued that these activities should be seen as being based on the weak body constitutions of their former masters. To illustrate this claim, he pointed to a fundamental difference by showing that the body constitution of the black people predisposes them to be morally right while the weakness of the free-white Tuareg predisposes them to be immoral. He explicitly stated that the black people are what they are because they labour on the earth. To him, labouring the earth is good, physically and mentally. Physically, they are as strong as if they

were taking part in sport every day. However, God knows very well that they do not play sport. Mentally, labouring is good for them because they do not steal and raid as the free-white Tuareg do.⁵⁴

In Inawélène's view, physical work is the key constitutive element for the physical and moral rightness of the Bellah. According to his claim, the black people are physically stronger than free-white Tuareg and this physical strength allows the Bellah to be morally different from their former masters, whose immorality is emphasised in the following account by Assalim:

as they [read: former masters] are lazy and physically weak people ... always rely on the black people for everything such as herding, milking ... everything. They cannot do anything [other] than stealing, raiding cattle, and drug trafficking. Whenever it was heard that there have been acts of banditry in the desert, it was always them. They don't work (...).⁵⁵

Assalim's quotation introduces a direct link between physiology, character and a certain moral disposition. In the first place, it suggests that the 'laziness' of free-white Tuareg is just a direct consequence of their weak body constitution which, in turn, makes them rely on others such as their former slaves for herding, milking and other physical tasks. If we are to understand such an argument, we must look again at the refugees' statements, notably the moral meaning that the informants in the camp of Abala give to the term 'work.' Here, work is equated with manual effort such as farming and making bricks. This becomes evident in the following formulation of Assalim:

We labour the land ... and have gardens ... don't steal someone's belongings ... are not involved in drug trafficking ... they do.⁵⁶

54 This passage is selected from conversations under the hangar on 29th December 2012 in Abala, Niger.

55 This passage is selected from conversations under the hangar on 29th December 2012 in Abala, Niger.

56 This passage is selected from conversations under the hangar on 27th December 2012 in Abala, Niger.

My informants understood that a greater physical capacity for manual work helped them to avoid immoral activities such as stealing, raiding, drug trafficking as well as banditry. In this sense, ‘work’ was an important distinction that the former slaves made repeatedly in Abala to underline the fundamental differences between them and their former masters. Thus, references to the capacity to do physical labour were used as another marker of difference, and as a way to claim that strong physical dispositions go hand-in-hand with moral rightness in Islam.

The hangar men also argued that as a result of the Islamic ethic of their labour force, the northern territory of the current Mali Republic did not witness raiding, pillaging and adultery before the arrival of the free-white Tuareg. They referred to this era as an epoch of no fear or danger, when people led a life of tranquility and noble conduct, in line with Islamic prescripts and law. However, my informants explained that this tranquility was disturbed when the free-white Tuareg arrived in the desert to hide themselves from the Arabs. According to Assalim, it was particularly disturbing that the free-white Tuareg had brought raiding, pillaging and adultery with them, all of which were contrary to Islam⁵⁷. He added that another reason why the free-white Tuareg disturbed the tranquilly and security of the desert was that they were unable to work. He argued that this explained why they brought many reprehensible practices, such as stealing, raiding and kidnapping. My impression is that the way in which the Bellah framed their differences between themselves and their former masters reflects their conviction that they have better moral dispositions than the free-white Tuareg. This labelling, evident in discourses under the hangar, could be seen as a kind of classification.⁵⁸

Stanley Tambiah has introduced the notion of classification to point out how people establish categories according to principles, most of them verbalised. These categories are used for classifying things, beings, events or actions.⁵⁹ He argues:

57 This passage is selected from conversations under the hangar on 15th November 2012 in Abala, Niger.

58 Stanley J. Tambiah, *Culture, Thought, and Social Action. An Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

59 Tambiah, *Culture, thought, and social action*, p 3.

... a classification as a system of categories in the first place describes the world, and... this description usually also implies and entails evaluations and moral premises and emotional attitudes, translated into taboos, preferences, prescriptions, and proscriptions. Imperatives are related to indicatives, and actors who subscribe to particular classifications and cosmologies ordinarily ... accept them as given in 'nature', and as the 'natural' way the world is ordered.⁶⁰

When taken together, the two examples of the hangar men's conversations show the ways in which my informants sought to construct the free-white Tuareg through labelling in the refugee camp in Abala. These examples also illustrate how the Bellah men under the hangar attempted to reconstruct their relationships with their former masters in light of events that brought them into exile. Partly because of the classificatory themes that set the Bellah apart from the free-white Tuareg, the hangar was considered to be a site that is specific to the unfree Tuareg men. For instance, I observed on several occasions that many Hausa, Songhay and Fulani left the hangar which they referred to, ironically, as the 'Bellah hangar' because they found the topics to be monotonous; always focussing on the relationships between the unfree and the free Tuareg. Although the hangar is a social space specific to Bellah men, setting them apart from the other ethnic groups in the refugee camp, it also introduces some cleavages in the Bellah group in Abala.

The hangar Bellah versus Bellah Tuareg: the inter-Bellah politics of identification in Abala

The Bellah men under the hangar sought to create a homogenous community for all unfree Tuareg through labelling the free-white Tuareg. However, the ways in which they interpreted actions of those Bellah who did not attend the hangar discussions caused re-fragmentation along new lines. Thus, their interpretations split the Bellah into those

60 Ibid, p. 4.

who were committed to their collectivity and to being Bellah versus the others who were seen as being just the opposite. On several occasions, Inawélène and Assalim addressed fierce critiques of those Bellah who, instead of joining the discussions, performed small jobs available in the refugee camp. The latter were regarded as traitors, which by implication meant that they were not really committed to the community of the black people. Both my informants assumed that a 'committed member' of the 'black people' should regularly join the discussions under the hangar. They used the term *Imawilas* (meaning, in the context of Abala, those who only care about their own interests) to refer to those whom they viewed as traitors. They felt that the greediness of the *Imawilas* in Abala arose because they only thought of themselves. Thus, they wanted to benefit from the few jobs made available to the refugees. For the sake of solidarity (*an marha*), Inawélène, Assalim and several other hangar men attempted to reconstruct the black people's past. Consequently, they expected all Bellah to behave in a way that allowed everybody wanting to work to get a chance to do so, instead of only a few people benefiting every day.⁶¹ Also, both informants felt that the *Imawilas* are people who are afraid of being identified as against the free Tuareg when they return to Mali. For this reason, they did not dare to partake in the discussions criticising the free Tuareg. Nevertheless, Assalim and Inawélène feel that it does not matter to the free Tuareg whether a black person partakes in the discussions in Abala or not, because they do not make any distinctions between black people.

However, when I asked some of those people referred to as traitors, they gave different reasons for not participating in the discussions. One of these reasons was that many of them were pressed by limited food rations and the great expectations of their family members. Therefore, they wanted to work in order to feed their family members. Furthermore, some of those so-called traitors had stronger political ties to some free-white Tuareg back in Mali and so they did not want to take part in criticisms targeting those white Tuareg.

61 Most critics targeted Billal, the chief of the third quarter who, according to them, wants everything for himself or his family.

Interestingly enough, two men in their early forties, Hamza and Amadou, were good examples of people who did not actively take part in discussions denigrating the free Tuareg. Even though they were both in exile, politically, these men supported the late Aroudeni Ag Hamatou, the free Tuareg mayor of Anderboukane, who was killed by still unknown people between Anderboukane and Ménaka in early January 2015. The late mayor had appointed Amadou, the holder of a diploma *maitrise* in philosophy, as general secretary of the municipality of Anderboukane. Hamza's family is originally from the *Ikarakabasan* group, which has a longer history of alliance with the politically dominant groups in the area around Ménaka. He considered himself to be historically closer to the mayor than to many former Bellah. Hamza felt that supporting Aroudeni was not a political issue and was rather about "*la famille*." By making this claim, Hamza placed his support for the mayor in historical perspective. He felt that his political position illustrated a historical alliance between the *Ikarakabasan* and the ruling clans in the area around Ménaka. The ways in which Amadou and Hamza framed their relationships to the late mayor indicate some cleavages among the Bellah.

Furthermore, some other people whom Inawélène and Assalim considered to be traitors, were born unfree and lived with their masters in the refugee camp. Those born unfree did not want to take part in criticism targeting their masters. It was assumed that the reason was that they considered themselves to be closer to their masters than to other black people in Abala. Inawélène and Assalim referred ironically to Amadou and Hamza as 'the Tuareg' and they also used this term for those Bellah who stayed with their masters. In this context, the term 'Tuareg' was used to associate these people with the free Tuareg even if they had a black skin colour. Their criticisms revealed the social significance that the hangar had acquired in Abala. They showed that attendance at the hangar meeting was a criterion for being considered as a member of the Bellah community. Their critiques also shed light on how the social identity of Bellah is not primarily concerned with black skin colour in Abala. Rather, it involves specific social practices such as attending the hangar and taking part in discussions in the refugee camp in Abala.

Ultimately, this debate demonstrates that a proper Bellah should attend the hangar discussions.

Conclusion

In this article, I have reflected on the hangar as a setting of performance for Bellah group membership in the refugee camp in Abala. Drawing on Goffman's insight, I have demonstrated that the hangar is a particular social setting that stays in one place, geographically speaking, for the performance of male Bellah membership in their group. My informants look upon the social gatherings as a significant moment and space that set them apart from other social groups in the refugee camp in Abala. The hangar is particularly important because of the topics discussed there. These topics mainly construct labels for the free-white Tuareg and through these, I have argued, my male informants sought to constitute themselves as one homogenous social group.

Inspired by Brenner's study of the construction of Muslim identities through labelling in southern Mali, I have examined two themes as instances of social formations: the first is the free-white Tuareg as weak and immoral people versus the strong and morally right Bellah while the second is the people without Muslim hearts versus the people with Muslim hearts. On the one hand, the Bellah depict the free-white Tuareg as non-Muslim, and through this depiction they posit themselves as Muslims since they have hearts that feel compassion for others. The men of the hangar make reference to Islamic ethics that do not primarily seek to construct a specific Muslim identity through ritual practices such as prayer patterns and sartorial practice⁶². Their statements are concerned with reconstructing practices, relationships, and historical events through interpreting them within a moral scheme. In this process, the formation of Muslim identity intersects with the articulation of the Bellahs' social identity as the 'black people.'

The two examples of my informants' discourses of labelling, through which they seek to construct themselves as one homogenous group move

62 Dorothea E. Schulz, "Competing sartorial assertions of femininity and Muslim identity in Mali," *Fashion Theory*, 11, 2/3, 2007, pp. 253-280.

far beyond the articulation of Muslim and non-Muslim identity. They also appear to relate to differences between human beings and non-human beings. My informants constructed themselves as human beings through their emotional reactions to the story of the boy eaten by the dog in Tidermène; however, their comments question and deny any 'humanity' (being human) to the free-white Tuareg. This is evident in the questions they asked, such as how can human beings give another human being to a dog? As described in this article, the men of the hangar respond to this question by concluding that the free-white Tuareg cannot be regarded as human beings.

The second example of the refugees' discourses of labelling that address the physiological constitution of the free-white Tuareg takes this view one step further. It establishes a direct link between physiology, character, and a certain moral disposition; it then argues that the free-white Tuareg are selfish, non-human beings and non-Muslims, who cannot avoid acting in immoral ways.

Altogether, these narratives constructing the Tuareg social differences from the Bellah's perspective provide some insights into scholarly debates focussing on the nomad societies of northern Mali. First, the accounts examined in this article redefine the racial classification of the free-white Tuareg and Bellah known as black Tuareg in a more complex manner. For instance, by establishing a direct link between physiology, character features, and a certain moral disposition, the two examples of labelling conversations discussed here construct two moral identities: one is characteristic of Muslims who fear God and the other is of non-Muslim people. In my view, these discussions about the moral differences reify the existing racial divide articulated in the literature in terms of free-white Tuareg and the Bellah known as the black Tuareg⁶³. Secondly,

63 In many respects, this debate is not new. For example, Lecocq, "The Bellah question," pp.42-68 and Hall, "Bellah histories of decolonization," pp. 61-87, show that the free-white Tuareg think they are able to understand religious duties while the unfree-black Bellah are unable to understand those duties. However the Bellah's perspective discussed in this article suggests the opposite argument. It regards the Bellah as being able to understand religious matters, and being able to be religious, while the free-white Tuareg are unable to do so.

the results of my analysis call into question the racial classifications of white-free Tuareg versus black Bellah.⁶⁴ Inawélène and Assalim denied Bellah memberships to former slaves who did not join the conversations under the hangar. They referred to them as the ‘Tuareg,’ which implied labelling the latter as white Tuareg and therefore less Bellah in character. Thus, it is the hangar as a distinctive Bellah social space to create Bellah identity in Abala, and not slave origin as such. Taken together, these insights into the social processes taking place at and around the hangar in Abala give new insights into the long-standing conflicting relationship between former slaves and former masters in northern Mali.

64 Hall, “Bellah histories of decolonization,” pp. 61-87; Lecocq, “The Bellah question,” pp. 42-68.