

# Tuareg Nationalism and Cyclical Pattern of Rebellions:

How the past and present explain each other

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March 2014

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## Abstract:

This article stresses the importance of history in understanding the cyclical pattern of Tuareg rebellions in Mali. I argue that history and narratives of bravery, resistance, and struggle are important in the discursive practice of Tuareg nationalism. This discourse materializes in the episodic rebellions against the Malian state. The cyclical pattern of the Tuareg rebellions is caused by institutional shortcomings such as the failure of the Malian state to follow through with the clauses that ended the previous rebellions. But, more importantly, the previous rebellions serve as historical and cultural markers for subsequent rebellions, which creates a cycle of mutually retrospective reinforcement mechanisms.

## About the Author:

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*'63 has gone, but will return  
Those days have left their traces  
They murdered the old folk and a child just born  
They swooped down to the pastures and wiped out the cattle...  
'63 has gone, but will return*  
**Tinariwen, "Soixante Trois"**

## Introduction

The epigraph above is from a song by the Malian Tuareg band Tinariwen. The song evokes the 1963 Tuareg rebellion, usually referred to as the First Tuareg Rebellion, which was brutally repressed by the nascent Malian state. The 1963 rebellion lasted only one year, and was crushed by the Malian forces. However, the uprising and its aftermath constitute *historic markers* in the Tuareg collective memory. There have been four episodes of Tuareg secessionist rebellions since Mali's independence. This article argues that each of these rebellion episodes constitutes a pivotal element in the discourse, the justification and the operationalization of the subsequent rebellions. The Tuareg rebellions in Mali are peculiar in their cyclical pattern, made of the episodes of 1963-64, 1990-96, 2006-09, and 2012-13<sup>1</sup>. As Andy Morgan (2012) writes, the 2012 Tuareg rebellion "represents a fourth roll of the Kel Tamasheq dice."<sup>2</sup>

On January 17 2012, a newly formed Tuareg armed group called National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad<sup>3</sup> (its French acronym, MNLA) attacked the town of Menaka, signaling the latest in the series of Tuareg secessionist rebellions. This attack built momentum quickly and embroiled the Malian state in a series of events that led to a military coup that deposed the Malian president Amadou Toumani Toure (ATT). As a result, the "African model democracy" collapsed abruptly.<sup>4</sup> Within two weeks of the start of the rebellion, the MNLA was able to conquer the three northern Malian regions of Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal, and declare the independence of the "Republic of Azawad", which they view as their "homeland". The Malian press "unleashed a torrent of invective against the Tuareg rebels, calling them "armed bandits", "drug traffickers", "AQIM collaborators" and "Gaddafi mercenaries" (Morgan 2012). But, as Morgan (2012, emphasis

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1 The 2012 Tuareg rebellion is still somewhat unfolding. But, I chose the signing of the Ouagadougou peace accords on June 18 2013 between the government of Mali and MNLA as a cut-off date to my analysis.

2 The Tuareg call themselves and they prefer to be called Kel Tamasheq, which means the speakers of Tamasheq, their language.

3 Azawad is the name by which the Tuareg refer to the territory that they view as their "homeland", which includes Northern Mali

4 Thurston and Lebovich (2013) argue that the reasons for this collapse ought to be understood as part of "the longue durée of Mali's colonial and postcolonial history," the "weakness of the post-transition Malian state, and the ramifications this weakness had for governance in the north". A final set of causes can be found in the domestic and regional environment in which Mali found itself during the past decade, which precipitated the events of this new Tuareg rebellion but also saw the rise of Islamist Salafist armed groups in the North. This last development was unprecedented in the long history of rebellions in northern Mali

added) argues, “In truth, neither Gaddafi’s fall nor AQIM nor drugs and insecurity are the prime movers behind this latest revolt. They are just *fresh opportunities and circumstances in a very old struggle*.” That old struggle dates from the French colonization era where the Tuaregs not only resisted the French, but also sought to have their own state when France granted independence to the Soudan Français.<sup>5</sup> Feeling betrayed by the French, and ‘colonized’ by the Malian state, the Tuareg have ever since sought to secede in a series of rebellions, which were compounded by a series of reprisals, oppression, drought, exile, and marginalization (Morgan 2012, Boilley 1999). In northern Mali, Tuareg and other groups’ grievances date back from the colonial period wherein armed resistance opposed French occupation in the late nineteenth century.

In this paper, I stress the importance of history (Smith 2013; Smith n.d.) in understanding the recurrence of Tuareg rebellions. I also argue that the cyclical pattern of the Tuareg secessionism is caused by institutional shortcomings (the failure of the Malian state to implement the clauses of the previous peace treaties that ended the previous rebellions). Furthermore, I contend that the previous rebellions serve as historical and cultural markers for the subsequent rebellions. Moreover, the cyclical pattern of the Tuareg rebellions is also partially due to the lack of natural resources in northern Mali, which impedes the Tuareg elite’s possibility of sustaining a long and continuous rebellion, thus leading them to negotiated settlements. However, the incapacity or unwillingness of the Malian state to follow through with the clauses of the peace settlements leads to renewed hostilities, while the past rebellions are incorporated in a narrative of bravery, struggle, and resistance to oppression.

### **Mali: a vast territory, poor country, and weak state**

Mali is a poor country, ranking 182 out of 186 countries in UNDP 2013 Human Development Report (UNDP 2013). Life expectancy for males and females is respectively 50 and 53 years (WHO 2013). Mali’s population is 14.5 million, and lives in an area of 1,225 million sq. km, which makes a very low population density of 12.5 persons/sq.km (Thurston and Lebovich 2013, 7). Its ethnic breakdown is 50% Mande, 17% Peul, 12% Voltaic, 6% Songhai, 10% Tuareg and Moor, and 5% other (Thurston and Lebovich 2013, 7). The Tuaregs are related to the Berber population in North Africa and the Sahara-Sahel region. Relatively large Tuareg populations live in Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Algeria, and Libya. In 2012, 1.5 million Tuaregs lived in the Sahara. In Mali, Tuaregs are the majority only in the northern district of Kidal, although they constitute large minorities in the districts of Timbuktu and Gao, and they view all those areas as part of their traditional ‘homeland’. The Tuaregs were primarily nomadic pastoralists and traders. Their livelihood is affected by persistent droughts and feelings of exclusion and marginalization from the Malian state. For instance, there has been only one Tuareg Prime Minister in Mali (Thurston and Lebovich 2013).

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<sup>5</sup> Soudan Français is the name by which the French referred to present-day Mali during the colonial period.

## **Situating the Tuareg nationalism and rebellions in their theoretical framework**

As Benedict Anderson (2006, 7) contended, the nation is imagined as *limited*, as *sovereign*, and as a *community*. In that regard, one may view that the Tuareg constitutes a nation in their traditional homeland that spans across many countries in the Sahara region, including mostly Mali, Niger, Mauritania, southern Algeria, and Chad. Thus, it is particularly important to note that the Tuareg 'nation' does not match the contours of the nation-states (or state-nations) which were inherited from the colonial era throughout the region. To that extent, Jeffrey Herbst (2000)'s assertion that the trouble with borders in Africa is not that there are too weak, but that they are too strong is particularly relevant here. Despite successive rebellions and a cyclical pattern of rebellions since the independence years, the Tuareg have still not been able to carve a territory with international recognition of sovereignty. In fact, as it is the case with many other secessionist rebellions elsewhere in Africa (save for the cases of South Sudan, and Eritrea), the rigidity of the borders was exacerbated by the decision of the Organization for African Unity (OAU) at its inception in 1963 and the principle of inviolability of the borders inherited from colonization.

I argue that the very idea of nationalism and nationalist discourse is tied to assertive freedom and liberation. Self-governing is omnipresent in the framing of nationalism. In that perspective, I argue that Tuareg nationalism is assertive of freedom and liberation. It is rooted in the idea of liberating the Tuareg people and the territory that they occupy from a governing polity that they regard as foreign. In this case, Tuareg nationalism espouses a discourse of liberation of Azawad from the occupying states Mali and Niger. Hence, Tuareg nationalism is less rooted in an attempt to secede from those states and more in liberating their people and their territory from the occupation of those states. For example, the names of the rebel groups and political movements that claim to speak for the Tuareg usually include the words 'liberation'. Thus, Tuareg nationalism is discursive, dynamic, and is mutually intersubjective and continually retro-assertive through its language, memory, cultural artifacts and history markers. To that extent, I argue that the cyclical pattern of Tuareg rebellions reinforces itself as past rebellions constitute markers with which the subsequent rebellions ground their discourse.

### **Structural causes of ethnic violence**

Wimmer (2012, 31) contends that "it is the ethno-political struggle over the state that drives many violent conflicts." However, in the case of Tuareg nationalism, one sees clearly that it is not a struggle over the state, but a struggle to create to carve a new state out of ones inherited from the colonial period. Similarly, Fearon and Laitin (2003, 75) show that ethnic and religious diversity within a state does not make the country more war-prone and that grievances are not sufficient indicators of an onset of a civil war. Fearon and Laitin (2003) argue that the onset of a civil war occurs when the favorable conditions for insurgency are met. That means that financial, organizational and political weakness of central governments, compounded with the existence of rough terrain creates favorable conditions for insurgency (Fearon and Laitin 2003, 75-76). Indeed, the case of the Tuareg

rebellions in Mali certainly does lend support to Fearon and Laitin's arguments. In fact, the vast expanses of the Sahara desert in northern Mali and the mountainous region of the Adrars des Ifoghas, which is the traditional region of the Tuaregs, creates conditions that make insurgency easier to carry out.

However, whereas Fearon and Laitin (2003, 79-80) argue that conditions for insurgency explain occurrence of civil wars, independent whether there are cultural differences between groups, I contend that cultural differences between the ethnic groups plays an important role in the explanation of the Tuareg rebellions. I argue so because there are other ethnic groups that live in Northern Mali such as the Songhai and the Peul, but those groups have not attempted to secede from the Malian state. As the discussion below on the ethnic and sociological cleavages of Mali will show, the "racial" lines in Mali place the Tuaregs on one side, and the blacks on the other side, who include also the blacks that live in the North such as the Songhai and the Peul. Indeed, Mali's north is a region of diverse ethnicity deeply rooted in social distinctions with socio-political significance. The northern populations have local beliefs of "racial" identities distinguishing "white" Tuaregs and Arabs from "black African" communities (Lecocq et al. 2013, 344). These racialized nationalisms have expressed themselves differently in the past. For example, whereas Tuareg nationalisms fought against the Malian state in 1963-1964, and between 1990 and 1996, again from 2006 to 2009, the Songhai nationalism countered Tuareg nationalism in the 1990s (Lecocq et. al 2013).

Thus, political violence in Mali espouses the form of secessionist rebellions of the Tuaregs in the North. As Brubaker and Laitin (1998, 424) contend, the ethnicization of political violence is one of the prominent features of the post-Cold War era, in which we notice the "decay of the Weberian state" and the rise of the "quasi-states" in Africa (Jackson 1993; Jackson and Rosberg 1982). In his explanation of the origins of ethnic conflicts, Horowitz (1985) contends that the arguments based on modernization theory, economic interests or cultural pluralism fall short. Horowitz's psychological grounding of the origins of ethnic conflict seems to be more relevant for the case in Mali. As Horowitz (1985) explains, in post-colonial societies especially, colonial policies tended to strengthen (or create) ethnic identities by promoting some and painting others as "backward", which tends to create in post-independence ethnically divided societies an exacerbation of the sense of relative welfare compared to other ethnic groups. Thus, symbolic politics becomes salient in the competition for relative status of ethnic groups, and language is especially an important symbol in these politics. Whereas Horowitz (1985) discusses the logics of irredentism and secession in terms of "advanced" and "backward" groups, the case of the Tuaregs in Mali does not fit such frame. I think that for the Tuaregs, it is more relevant to speak of advanced region (southern part of Mali) and less advanced region (northern Mali), which is where the Tuaregs live.<sup>6</sup> Obviously, this argument needs to be understood in terms of relative development and delivery of services, given that as a whole, Mali is a very poor country and the state's capacity to deliver services is very weak. Horowitz (1985) is right

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the Tuareg elites argue that the Northerners do not have access to schools or health facilities.

nonetheless when he argues that “backward groups” in “backward regions” have very little incentive to stay in the state and have many reasons to try to secede. As Bates (1983) writes, modernity creates competition and the scarcity of resources leads to stratification; and competition espouse the forms of ethnic groupings because where modernization takes place determines who gets modernized because administrative and ethnic areas often coincide. Therefore, those engaged in the competition for modernity often mobilize the support of ethnic groups. In Mali, modernization has mostly touched the southern part of the country, where the state is more present and the access to natural resources and state delivered goods is more present.

### **Tuareg nationalism**

To better understand the origins and development of Tuareg nationalism, one needs to refer to the argument developed by Andreas Wimmer (2012), who contends that the nationalist idea of self-rule spread around the world, delegitimizing empires. Nationalism creates nation-states, often times after secession wars where weak institutions led to exclusionary ethnic politics in nation-building. Consequently, ethnic communities challenged those power structures following the establishment of a nation-state and if captured by ethnic divisions, this often led to civil war. “The likelihood of war more than doubles after nationalism has gained a foothold in a political arena; and it remains high over generations after a nation-state has been founded” (Wimmer 2012, 5). Moreover, Wimmer (2012, 8) shows that “it is not demographic diversity that breeds violent conflict, but rather exclusionary ethno-political configurations of power.” As Wimmer (2012, 20) has rightly argued, “weakly centralized states will not see durable alliances with all segments of the population and nationalism will not spread and become adopted as a main framework of identity. This is why ethnic closure – the organization of political loyalties and identities around sub-national communities – is a widespread feature of weakly centralized states with weak civil societies, with important consequences for the dynamics of ethnic politics and the potential for violent conflict.” Moreover, Wimmer (2012) argues that nationalism ideology, being based on the idea of self-rule (being ruled by one’s own), motivates political entrepreneurs to fight secessionist wars against “the aliens”. This is particularly relevant for the situation in Mali, where during the French colonization, the Tuareg fought off the French, and soon after the independence, the Tuareg elites sought to secede from the Malian state that they viewed as occupiers of their homeland that they refer to as “Azawad.”

Wimmer (2012) argues that ethno-political inequality in newly created states with weak capacity increases the likelihood of civil wars.<sup>7</sup> A long history of imperial rule makes the

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<sup>7</sup> Fearon and Laitin (2003) argue that civil wars break out when a government is too weak to suppress the discontent of its population whereas Collier and Hoeffler (2004) contend that greedy warlords try to take control of resources (oils, diamonds). Posen (1993) contends that states collapse leave ethnic groups no other choice but to attack each other. However, Wimmer (2012, 31) argues that political inequality and legitimacy need to be taken into account. “It is the ethno-political struggle over the state that drives many violent conflicts.”



population at the periphery distrust the new state. This corroborates the violation of the principle of like-over-like of nationalist doctrine; and its recurrence explains the cyclical occurrence of the Tuareg rebellion. As Wimmer (2012) claims, a high degree of ethnic exclusion will increase the likelihood of rebellion because it decreases the political legitimacy of the state. Moreover, secession is more likely in large states because the populations in the outer regions are less accustomed to being ruled by the political center. This, in fact, describes the situation of the Tuaregs in Mali.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the conflicts in the Sahara-Sahel are often linked to droughts in the region and the fragility of livelihoods in the area due the scarcity of resources. It is thus often argued that the drought that ravaged the Northern Mali in the 1970s and sent thousands of young men into exile looking for work in oil-producing countries of Algeria and Libya, are what later led to the Second Tuareg Rebellion that started in 1990. However, Benjaminsen (2008) refutes the argument that supply-induced scarcity fueled the Tuareg rebellion in Mali. For Benjaminsen (2008, 819), although the droughts played a role in the rebellions, that role was marginal and indirect given that “the droughts led to the migration of young men to Algeria and Libya, where they were exposed to revolutionary discourses. There was already a strong feeling among nomads and Tuareg in Mali of being marginalized by state policies of modernization and sedentarization. Embezzlement of drought relief funds by government officials in Bamako added further to the anger felt by the young men who took up arms against the Malian state. The drought of the 1970s and 1980s was probably not a necessary condition for the rebellion to take place.” One might then ask why other reasons drove Tuareg elite nationalism into taking up arms against the Malian state.

Humphreys and Mohamed (2003) use the Collier-Hoeffler (2001) model alongside the Fearon and Laitin model (2003) to analyze the probabilities of war onset in Mali and Senegal.<sup>9</sup> The authors find no greed hypothesis for the Mali case, but find a strong support for grievance-based explanation for the Malian conflict. The authors also find support for opportunity cost explanation of the war in Mali because of the weakness of the state and high unemployment rate in the areas affected by the conflict. There is also evidence of a spillover effect where the onset of war resulted in part because of conflict in neighboring countries (Humphreys and Mohamed 2003, 5).<sup>10</sup> Interestingly in Senegal for example, the conflict in Casamance is protracted while in Mali it is cyclical. Unlike Casamance, Northern Mali does not have natural resources able to sustain a conflict. Furthermore, the

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8 While discussing the rapport between autonomy and secessionism, Svante Cornell (2002) argues. “The institution of autonomous regions is conducive to secessionism because institutionalizing and promoting the separate identity of a titular group increases that group's cohesion and willingness to act, and establishing political institutions increases the capacity of that group to act. Autonomy affects each of the following areas: borders, group identity, state institutions, leadership, mass media, and external support” (252-3).

9 Their study in Senegal focuses on the secessionist conflict in the southern region of Senegal, Casamance. Unlike the cyclical pattern of the Tuareg rebellions in Mali, the conflict in Casamance is a protracted low intensity secessionist conflict that have lasted for three decades to-date.

10 For example, until the late 1990s, Tuareg rebellions in Mali and Niger followed the same cycles. A further research project on this project could study what accounts for the different trajectories of the Tuareg rebellions in Mali and Niger after the 1990s rebellion.

availability and form of financing affect duration and termination of cycles of rebellion. Tuareg rebels do not have extended resources to sustain protracted conflicts. Rebel leaders often found themselves in survivalist conditions, which made attractive a negotiated settlement that guaranteed a salary package (Humphreys and Mohamed 2003, 56).

One cannot make the argument that the conflict in Mali is driven by greed or an attempt to take control of natural resources. As Humphreys and Mohamed (2003, 34) point out, Mali's largest export after cotton and livestock is gold, with a 1994 value of \$67 Million, about 20% of its exports. Mali has become Africa's third largest gold exporter (Abdalla 2009). Mali has also diamond deposits but there is no links between these deposits or exports with the conflict. "Although there are un-mined gold and diamond deposits in the *Adrar des Iforas* these remain untapped due to high extraction costs. Instead, gold is mined and exported in the south of the country, far from the conflict zone. At no stage was a bid made by any of the rebel groups to gain access to the mines or the revenues from them" (Humphreys and Mohamed 2003, 34-35). Thus, the "greed" argument can be dismissed when discussing Tuareg separatism.

What about grievances? Northern Mali is populated by both Tuareg nomadic and semi-nomadic populations but also other sedentary ethnic groups. Historically, there have been different conceptions of property and livelihood between nomads and sedentary populations. Moreover the North has been economically marginalized, suffering from a lack of investments. But more prescient, there are also grievances based on inequalities regarding access to provision of health and education in the north (Humphreys and Mohamed 2003). As Humphreys and Mohamed (2003) write, the Tuareg separatists are also politically marginalized. For much of the period after independence, the North was under military rule, and the appointed governors were of the Songhai group. Until 1990, there had been only two Tuareg and two Arabs appointed as ministers, and only two Tuareg officers in the Malian army (Humphrey and Mohamed 2003, 47).

### **Back to the start: Competing nationalisms between Tuaregs and the Republic of Mali**

In this section, I argue that nationalism for the Republic of Mali competes with Tuareg nationalism in the years leading to independence. While the French empire was winding down, paving the way for the Republic of Mali to be created on the ashes of what was the Soudan Français, Tuareg nationalism was also competing for the same status, for a recognition of a different trajectory and the legitimacy of a Tuareg state. In fact, Tuareg-led revolts challenged the French colonial occupation in Mali and Niger in the 1910s (Thurston and Lebovich 2013). Moreover, as Thurston and Lebovich (2013) write, in the late 1950s, while walking towards independence, the Tuareg elites sought to emerge as an independent country, especially after France created the Common Organization of the Saharan Regions (French: Organization Commune des Régions Sahariennes, OCRS) in 1957, which was dissolved in 1963, and failed to materialize the Tuareg's aspiration to an independent state (Lecocq 2010; Abdalla 2009). The creation of Mali occurred on the backdrop of competing nationalisms from the Soudan Français during the French colonial

occupation to the independent Republic of Mali. Competing nationalisms are also visible in the adoption of the name Republic of Mali upon independence. That move proclaimed Mali as the heir of the medieval *Empire du Mali*, and viewed the colonization as a mere window in Malian history, and Modibo Keita, the ‘father of Malian independence’ and first President of the Republic of Mali, traced his lineage to Sundjata Keita, the founder of the medieval *Empire du Mali* as a testament of the continuity of the history of Mali’s empire (Lecocq 2010, 61).

The first Tuareg secessionist rebellion against the Malian state in 1963-1964 reflects the discontent of the Tuareg elites with the early post-colonial Malian state as well as divisions within Tuareg clans from the Kidal region after independence (Thurston and Lebovich 2013; Morgan 2012; Boilley 1999; Lecocq 2010). The Malian army brutally repressed that uprising, which left anger lingering for many decades to follow. It is thus not surprising that the fathers of some present-day rebel commanders, such as the MNLA’s Mohamed Ag Najem and Ansar al Din’s Iyad Ag Ghali, died in that conflict. In the 1970s, cycles of droughts ravaged the Sahara-Sahel region, and an inadequate response to them by the Malian government precipitated thousands of young Tuareg men into exile and travel to neighboring countries and Europe in search for work. That generation of young men, known as *ishumar* (from the French word ‘chomeur’ that means unemployed), would become the backbone of the rebellion that broke out in 1990. However, as Thurston and Lebovich (2013, 3) write, “Peace accords, development programs, and decentralization initiatives failed to assuage this anger, or to improve the lives of many northern Malians.”

This massive exile of young men gave rise to a cultural movement and a new way of life referred to as *Teshumara* (Lecocq 2010). Tuareg politics were transformed profoundly from within, which led to the formation of a formal Tuareg nationalist movement, unlike the spontaneous rebellion of 1963. As Lecocq (2010, 47) argues, “historical narrative and its politicization in the formation of this nationalist movement ... induced narratives of revolt, injustice, oppression, and suffering, as well as Tamasheq concepts of honour and shame, hatred and revenge, were instrumentalised in the construction of nationalist sentiments that found their expression in the rebellion of the 1990s.”

### **Earlier Tuareg secessionist rebellion as historical markers**

On 23 December 2011, on the eve of the latest Tuareg rebellion of January 2012, Ahmedeye Ag Ilkamassene published an article titled “Azawad: c’est maintenant ou jamais” (Azawad: the time is now or never) on Toumast Press. In the opening paragraph, he writes that the time is ripe to gain independence, and fulfil the dreams of Kaocene Ag Gedda, Mohamed Ali Ag Attaher, and Zeyd Ag Attaher. This reference to historical figures of Tuareg nationalism is extremely significant because it legitimizes the call for arms by reiterating the fact that this is just a new episode in the march for independence. In fact, after a small uprising in the town of Menaka in 1911, the French faced the Kaocen Revolt in 1916, named after its leader Kaocen Ag Mohamed, “when a Tuareg force, strongly influenced by Sufi anti-colonial

religious leaders and suffering from the effects of severe drought, occupied large parts of what is now northern Niger before losing ground and being brutally countered by the French military the following year” (IRIN 2012).

As stated above, Tuareg nationalism and history of rebellions is embedded in discursive narratives (Romig 2012). Lecocq (2010, 45) rightly contends, “Discourses on the past are shaped in the present, but simultaneously discourses on the past shape an idea of the present and therefore a possible future.” Thus, Lecocq (2010) argues that during the years leading to independence, the political and social interactions between the Malian state and the Tuaregs were shaped by preconceived notions of racial stereotypes. Moreover, the First Tuareg Rebellion of 1963 is “remembered and interpreted in a specific historical discourse, which served to muster support for renewed armed resistance against the Malian state since the 1970s. Thus, historical discourse both serves to explain events and to justify an intended course of events, but it also shapes reactions to events and thus events themselves.” (Lecocq 2010, 45). Further, Lecocq (2010, 153-154) adds, “These rebellions are indeed intimately linked in practice, ideology and historical memory. Kel Adagh historical discourse emphasizes a continuum of resistance against foreign domination stretching from the defiance of Alla ag Albachir and his band in the colonial period; through *Alfellaga* [the 1963 rebellion]; to *al-Jebha*, the rebellion of the 1990s and the recent events from 2006 to 2009.” As Lecocq (2010, 154) argues, Tuareg historical discourse emphasizes “Historical continuity of resistance; masculine values of honour and combat; the fighting itself; and especially the suffering of the population under the repression of the Malian Armed Forces.”

### **1963: The First Tuareg Rebellion crushed (or, how repression strengthened Tuareg nationalism)**

The 1963 Tuareg rebellion is commonly known in Tuareg historiography as the *Alfellaga* rebellion. It involved only a few hundred men, but Malian authorities responded very harshly by, among other things, poisoning wells in Tuareg regions, killing their livestock, executing civilians, and using forced labor (Bernus 1992, Boilley 1999). Merely a year after the rebellion started, the Malian army captured all the rebel leaders and declared the end of the rebellion. But this was indeed a turning point in Tuareg collective memory and history of nationalism. It became a memorial marker for subsequent discourse of Tuareg secessionism.

Before independence from France, the Tuareg elite sent strong signals about their discontent on being integrated in a post-independence Malian state. To make matters worse, the First Malian Republic, led by Modibo Keita, made little appeal to nomadic communities of the North. The Tuareg populations encountered changes in land ownership rules, a rigid adherence to established boundaries with neighboring countries, and new bureaucratic controls (IRIN 2012). Launched from the northern city of Kidal, the 1963 rebellion was mostly a hit-and-run campaign that triggered an all-out military campaign from the Malian army. “The well-documented massacres of civilians, poisoning

of wells and destruction of livestock have been repeatedly referenced in Tuareg literature and music, and in the manifestoes and programmes of later rebel movements” (IRIN 2012). Moreover, following the 1963 rebellion, the Malian state administered the Tuareg inhabited regions of the North as military districts, which kept deeply rooted resentment among the Tuaregs towards the Malian state (Gowan 2013).

### **The Second Tuareg Rebellion 1990-1996: the maturity of Tuareg formal nationalist groups**

In the 1970s, a drought ravaged the Sahel region and destroyed large parts of the Tuaregs’ herds, which constituted their livelihoods. As Gowan (2013) writes, “In both Mali and Niger, no serious attempt was made by government to alleviate the situation facing the Tuareg. When their animals died, many Tuareg moved into the cities to find work, for example in the uranium mines near Arlit in Niger” (12). But the lack of employment opportunities did not give these young men other options than to migrate to the oil producing countries of Algeria and Libya. As many of the *ishumar* sought work in the Maghreb or Europe, others went into smuggling food, petrol, cigarettes, and weapons. More importantly, the *ishumar* who left took with them the memories of the reprisals of the 1963 rebellion (Boilley 1999). At the same time, some of the Tuareg youth travelled to Europe and attended universities, which led to the rise of Tuareg intellectuals that developed the discourse of shared identity and destiny of all Tuareg populations across the Sahara.

Between the 1960s and the start of the second rebellion in 1990, Tuareg societies went through tremendous changes “from a rural society to an urban society; from an economy based on pastoral household self-sufficiency and direct exchange of a limited range of goods to one of wage labour and the introduction of new consumer items. It also changed from a society living in a geographically limited (if large) and coherent region, to a scattered diaspora of community pockets around West Africa, the Maghreb and Europe. These major changes in location and economy brought about shifts in gender relations; cultural forms of expression; education; and politics” (Lecocq 2010, 192).

By 1980s already, there were plans for rebellion for an independent Tuareg state that would cover parts of Mali and Niger (Thurston and Lebovich 2013, 22). The preparations for the rebellion started in late 1980s, led in part by *ishumar* and Lebanon veteran Iyad ag Ghali, but the fighting erupted in 1990. The Malian state responded harshly again. As Lecocq (2010, 22) writes:

“The rebellion took place in a generally turbulent period in Malian history in which dictatorship was replaced with democracy. Both the democratization and the Tamasheq rebellion led to an upsurge in Malian nationalism that found its expression partly in the resistance against any compromise with the Tamasheq nationalist rebels. These competing nationalisms finally led to a full blown ethnic conflict locally perceived as a civil war, or an ethnic conflict cloaked in a nationalist discourse of true Malians against alien nomad invaders.... But as the Tamasheq rebels were militarily superior to the Malian Armed Forces, compromise had to be reached.”

By the end of 1991, both parties were exhausted, which led to preliminary peace accords in January 1991 a *Tamanrasset* between the Malian government and the rebels, represented by Iyad Ag Ghali, leader of *Mouvement Populaire de l'Azawad* (MPA) and another group, the *Front Islamique de l'Azawad* (FIA) (Thurston and Lebovich 2013, 23). However, the Tuareg rebel groups split. The National Pact (*Pacte National*) was signed in Algiers in April 1992. The National Pact comprised six important clauses: "Special social economic and administrative status for the North; Tax exemptions for the inhabitants of the North for the duration of ten years; The creation of two special funds to reconstruct the North; Decreasing deployment and withdrawal to a limited number of northern towns by the Malian Armed Forces; The creation of structures to secure the gradual return of refugees after the end of the conflict; Integration of former rebels in the Malian Armed Forces and administration" (National Pact, 1992).

In fact, the Pact was much more than a truce between the MFUA (the umbrella organization of the various Tuareg nationalist groups at the time) and the Malian government, with Algeria acting as the mediator. It even included the provision of "seats in parliament for formerly displaced populations, funding for growth and investment for building roads and schools in the North. Moreover, the Malian army was set to scale down its deployment and bases in the North" (IRIN 2012). The National Pact (1992) and the Algiers Accords (2006) provided a 'special status' for the North which included a reduced military presence of the Malian forces in the region (Wing 2013c). But, as Wing (2013c) writes, "unfortunately the pullback of the state helped create more opportunities for criminal behavior. State officials (Tuareg and others) participated in the growing lucrative criminal activity in the north, including cigarette and drug trafficking."

However, as one would expect, signing the National Pact in 1992 was the easy part. Implementing it revealed to be much harder. Between the signing of the Pact in April 1992 and the end of that episode of rebellion in 1996, there was "an extremely volatile four-year period... marked by mutinies, inter-rebel disputes and serious outbreaks of inter-communal violence" (IRIN 2012). The implementation was painfully slow and inefficient. For example, "although integration of members of the MFUA into the army was due to begin within two months, yet the first meetings to discuss the integration only took place 10 months later in February 1993. Chief among the concerns were a failure to integrate MFUA fighters, and, later, a failure to pay fighters that were integrated." (Humphreys and Mohamed 2003, 25).

In March 1996, the four organizations that comprised MFUA disbanded at the ceremonial burning ceremony of 2,700 weapons (Humphreys and Mohamed 2003, 28). But, "Ten years later, a new insurgency was announced on 23 May 2006 with raids on garrisons at Kidal and Ménaka, opening up a new cycle of violence and a weary sense of *déjà vu* for those who had lived through previous rebellions." (IRIN 2012). It is worth noting that the 1990-96 rebellion killed between 6,000 and 8,000 people (Humphreys and Mohamed 2003, 4). Furthermore, the accords that ended the Second Tuareg Rebellion in 1996 did not include provisions for the sedentary populations, and it promised material benefits without the availability of resources to fulfill them (Humphreys and Mohamed 2003, 25).

As stated above, I argue that one of the structural factors for the resurgence of Tuareg nationalism is the inability and/or unwillingness of the Malian state to follow through with its promises during the peace settlements. Although some of the clauses were implemented, there are no structural processes that affect the Tuareg population as a whole. For example, the cooptation of the elites within the high levels of the administration and the army benefits mostly those coopted. As of 1998, some 3,000 former Tuareg combatants had been integrated into Malian security forces and civil service (Keita and Henk 1998). But there had not been investments or delivery of services in the North (Lange 1999). This explains why, a decade after the “*flamme de la paix*” ceremony in Timbuktu, a new cycle of the Tuareg nationalist rebellion reopened in 2006. Granted that, as a response to the 1990s rebellions, the government of Mali led by President Konaré had undertaken what it called the “*concertations regionales*”, and decentralization and local government were meant to be the pillars of the new policy, its implementation did not seem to be on the priority list of the Tuareg leaders, some of whom were coopted in the high levels of the government, Iyad Ag Ghali appointed as a diplomat, and Alghabass Ag Intalla elected as a deputy in the National Assembly (Wing 2013c). The subsequent regime of ATT did little to keep the political commitment to decentralization (Wing 2013c).

Moreover, Wing (2013b) writes that decentralization and dialogue were the hallmarks of democracy under President Konaré, the hallmark of his successor, President ATT, was his failure to follow-through in regards of decentralization and improving local governance and accountability. More specifically, “The government failed to follow through on peace agreements in the north, and the implementation of the Special Program for Peace, Security, and Development in northern Mali highlighted the divergent perspectives on security and the presence of the Malian state in the north. These factors contributed to the resurgence of a Tuareg rebellion in January 2012” (Wing 2013b).

### **The Third Tuareg Rebellion: 2006-2009**

Just 10 years after the “*Flamme de la Paix*” ceremony in Timbuktu which consecrated the end of the Second Tuareg Rebellion, “much of the optimism and momentum from that time had burned out. Coordinated attacks on garrisons in Kidal and Ménaka on 23 May 2006 signaled the start of a new chapter of violence. The raids were claimed by the Alliance Démocratique du 23 Mai pour le Changement (ADC), whose ranks included senior figures from past insurgencies” (IRIN 2012). One of the striking and unprecedented facts about the 2006-2009 rebellion (referred to in the literature as the “renewed rebellion”) is that it started when two integrated army officers defected from the Malian security forces with their troops, attacked army posts in Menaka and Kidal, and withdrew in the Adrar des Ifoghas. Other Tuaregs and notables joined them, including Iyad ag Ghali. And of course one of the grievances of the new rebel groups that made up mostly of the veterans of the former rebellion, was the non-delivery of the promises made in the National Pact of 1992 (Thurston and Lebovich 2013). As soon as this rebellion broke out, the Algiers Accords were quickly signed in 2006. But, As Lecocq et al. (2013, 345) rightly note, the peace accords signed in Algiers in 2006 “turned out to be merely a prelude to further protracted

fighting between Tuareg separatist fighters, mostly from the Kidal region, under the leadership of Ibrahim Bahanga and units of the Malian army composed essentially of Tuareg military officers and enlisted men, most of whom were of so-called *imghad* social origins, under leadership of Colonel Elhaj Gamou”.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, “Peace agreements have also included the training and integration of Tuareg into the Malian army, with further unintended consequences. Three of the four military units operating in northern Mali defected after the insurgency began in January 2012, bringing arms and as many as 1,600 troops with them to join the MNLA” (Wing 2013c, 7). Therefore, the seeds for the latest Tuareg rebellion were sown by the events that led to and ended the previous rebellions.

### **The 2012-2003 rebellion: the latest episode in the cycle of rebellions**

Tuareg fighters, belonging to the newly created National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA, its French acronym) attacked the towns of Menaka, Aguelhok and Tessalit in Northern Mali on January 17 2012. As one would expect by now, and confirming with the analysis developed in this paper so far, some of the 2012 fighters had also fought in the rebellions against the Malian army in 1990 and 2006, and their fathers had fought in 1963 (Thurston and Lebovich 2013). The 2012 crisis that eventually led to the collapse of the Malian state and the subsequent French military intervention, was set off by the MNLA rebellion, which was complemented by Jihadist Salafi movements.

The MNLA was created by former Tuareg fighters in the Libyan army, the ones that had left Mali at the end of the previous Tuareg rebellions of the 1990s and 2006. These former Libyan soldiers, led by future MNLA leader Bilal Ag Acherif and Mohamed Ag Najim, merged with the Tuaregs who had fought the 2006 rebellion and had just created the National Movement of Azawad (MNA) in 2010. From this merger, the MNLA was born in October 2011 (Lecocq et al. 2013, 345). The chief architect of the 2012 Tuareg rebellion which is the latest sign of the cyclical resurgence of Tuareg nationalism and the latest episode of the long list of Tuareg rebellions was Ag Bahanga, who was a veteran rebel leader of the 1990s movement and a leader of the 2006 rebellion as well. When his faction was defeated in 2009, Ag Bahanga sought refuge in Libya, and went off the radar, until he returned to Mali in January 2011, and persuaded former rebel leaders who had become commanders in Qaddafi’s army to join the rebellion in Mali again, among them, Colonel Ag Najim and Bilal Ag Acherif.<sup>12</sup> As argued in this paper, history is one of the driving forces of this cyclical pattern of Tuareg secessionist episodes. Tuareg nationalism finds its source and strength in previous historical episodes that mutually reinforce each other. For example, the political leader of the MNLA is Alghabass Ag Intalla, the son of Intalla Ag Attaher, the Ifoghas chief who favored cooperation with Mali back in 1963, while his

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11 Gamou and his troops, of the Tuareg Imhad origin, have remained loyal to the Malian army, and are fighting against the Tuareg rebels, who are mostly of the Kel Adagh origins. It is argued that the Imghad are of lower social status among the Tuaregs.

12 While the plans for a new uprising were well on the way, Ag Bahanga died in a car crash in the Sahara desert in August 2011 (Morgan 2012).



brother Zeid Attaher opted for the confrontation; the father of Ag Najim, one of the MNLA commanders, was killed during the 1963 rebellion (Morgan 2012).

The MNLA is the product of an alliance between the MNA and Ag Bahanga's National Alliance of Tuareg of Mali (French: Alliance Nationale des Touareg du Mali, ANTM). After its creation by the merger between MNA, the fighters who returned from Libya and ANTM, the newly created MNLA posted a communique on the internet on 16 October 2011 wherein it defined its main objective as "freeing the people of Azawad from the illegal occupation of their territory by Mali, which has been the cause of decades of insecurity in the region" (IRIN 2012). MNLA grievances are also rooted in past memories of atrocities committed by the Malian national army, the failure of the previous peace accords to deliver on their promises of ensuring security in the North and relief from poverty (IRIN 2012).

The MNLA fighters attacked Malian garrisons in January 2012. Although there have been many Tuareg rebellions in the past, this is the first time when it led to a coup in Bamako, and also for the first time, the rebellion gained control of all the Northern Mali, and proclaimed the independence of the "Republic of Azawad". The 2012 rebellion is also particular insofar as the Tuareg nationalist groups were not the only one in the game. In fact, within weeks of the MNLA taking control of the North Mali and declaring independence of the Republic of Azawad, they were overrun by the fundamentalist Islamist groups of Ansar Dine, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) (Wing 2013a; Thurston and Lebovich 2013; Morgan 2012)<sup>13</sup>. But the most interesting fundamentalist group for the purpose of this paper is Ansar Dine. Despite its Jihadi Salafist ideology, Ansar Dine is closely linked to the secular Tuareg nationalism because it developed under the leadership of Iyad ag Ghali, a key figure in the Tuareg rebellions of the 1990s and 2000s. However, by 2012, ag Ghali had broken links with the Tuareg separatist movement and joined a global Islamist attempt to create in Mali a fundamentalist state. As Lecocq et al. (2013, 345-346) write, Ag Ghali's "Islamist political project put him at odds with other leaders of the 1990s rebellion, including Bilal ag Acherif, who had integrated the MNLA, and Colonel Elhaj ag Gamou, who commanded an important unit in Mali's army. At a meeting in November 2011, Iyad's proposal that the MNLA be reformed along shari'a lines was rejected, which led him to create Ansar Dine."<sup>14</sup>

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13 AQIM has Algerian roots, resulting from the 1991-2002 civil war in that country, but has operated in the Malian desert for many years (Lecocq et al. 2013). The MUJAO is an offshoot of AQIM and primarily made of South Saharan recruits, and led by the Mauritanian Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou (Lecocq et al. 2013). Its ranks includes people of Songhai and Peul origin, and has been known to be involved in the Saharan drug trade (Lacher 2012, Dorrie 2012).

14 Iyad Ag Ghaly is a Tuareg from the prestigious Ifoghas clan. In the 1980s, along with many young Tuaregs, he joined Ghaddafi's Islamic Legion. He was one of the leaders of the 1990s rebellion in Mali, having created the Popular Movement of Azawad (French, Mouvement Populaire de l'Azawad, MPA (Thurston and Lebovich 2013). He signed peace accords with Mali's government in 1999, after which, his troops fought alongside the Malian army against splinter Tuareg rebel groups (Thurston and Lebovich 2013, 17). Ag Ghaly later emerged as a religious leader and powerful broker in the Sahara (Wing 2013c). In 2006, his men attacked Malian army garrisons in Kidal, then he negotiated the Algiers Accords of 2006 (Thurston and Lebovich 2013, 11). In 2007, he was appointed as cultural attaché in the Malian embassy in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, from which he was

## **The 2012 Tuareg rebellion: between continuity and mutations**

It is important to note that the MNLA's quick and effective military conquest of the North and its ability to defeat the Malian army was made possible not only by the return of fighters from Libya, but also the defection of many Tuareg officers and soldiers from the Malian army. Those soldiers and officers were previously integrated in the Malian army following the end of the previous rebellion (Thurston and Lebovich 2013, 4). There are also many new factors that differentiate the 2012 rebellion from the previous ones, and show the extent to which although Tuareg nationalism is grounded in its history and past events, it is nonetheless not a fixed phenomenon; it mutates and adapts to a new environment and is also partially the product of new contingencies (Fisher and Kohl 2010). For example, unlike previous rebellions, this time, the MNLA's official communications were in French, Arabic, and English (Thurston and Lebovich 2013). This is clearly an attempt to reach an international audience, and to place itself on par with the Malian government as an international actor that seeks to legitimately rule over a territory called Azawad. Moreover, the MNLA created a website ([www.mnlamov.net](http://www.mnlamov.net)) in French, English, and Arabic where it outlines its political project, its vision for human rights, and where it posts all its public statements. Furthermore, the international branch of the MNLA, in charge of its global communications, made efficient use of its access to French media to broadcast to the world their strategy, their grievances, and to showcase the legitimacy of their nationalist struggle for an independent Azawad. In fact, MNLA's statements often came from Paris, far from the Sahara frontlines (IRIN 2012).

Unlike the past rebellions, the 2012 crisis unfolded in a time period and area where fundamentalist Islamists and Jihadist movements had taken root. Ansar Dine, AQIM, and MUJAO outmaneuvered the MNLA and drove it out of the key cities of Gao and Timbuktu and established sharia law in those cities, the MNLA had control over Kidal only and sought to distance itself from Islamic fundamentalism and Jihadist ideology. The MNLA reiterated its vision for a secular and democratic Azawad state ("republique Democratique et laique"). The MNLA presented itself as an alternative to Jihadism, and vowed to chase the Islamists out of the Sahara, with the help of the international community.

The MNLA's proclamation of independence of the Republic of Azawad cites the UN Charter and its articles 1 and 55; it cites also a letter that Tuareg "notabilities and spiritual leaders" sent to the French President on May 30 1958, and argues that France collated Azawad without its consent to the Republic of Mali that was newly create at the independence (MNLA 2012). The proclamation of independence makes also reference of the "exactions, humiliations and genocides of 1963, 1990, 2006, and 2012" inflicted upon the people of

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expelled by Saudi authorities in 2010 "due to suspected contacts with extremists" (Lebovich 2013) . Upon his return to Mali, having failed to take control of the MNLA, he created Ansar Dine.

Azawad.<sup>15</sup> Claiming to have liberated the territory of Azawad, the MNLA thus declares the independent Republic of Azawad on April 6 2012 (MNLA 2012). One of the striking features of this declaration is the fact that it respects “the borders with the neighboring countries” (MNLA 2012). Historically, the Tuaregs have claimed that the Azawad spans across Northern Mali, East Niger, and Southern Algeria. But, pragmatism dictated that the MNLA carved out a territory within only the borders of Mali.

However, after northern Mali fell under the control of the fundamentalist groups of Ansar Dine, AQMI, and MUJAO, French troops intervened and re-established the sovereignty of the Malian state over the territory, leaving an enclave around the city of Kidal that is ambiguously under the wing of MNLA. Thus, the declaration of independence by the MNLA is moot, as reaffirmed by the June 2013 Ouagadougou peace accords between the Tuareg groups and the government of Mali. Moreover, the Tuareg nationalism has been criticized by the fact that ethnic Tuaregs are actually a minority in the Northern Mali that they claim to be their homeland. This is a fact that the MNLA does not deny, but they counter by arguing that the MNLA is not a movement for Tuaregs only. The MNLA claims that it fights for the independence of the Azawad on behalf of all the “Azawadiens”, all the populations living the region, whether they are Tuaregs or not. However, despite these claims, the fact remains that the composition of the MNLA is basically made of Tuaregs only (Thurston and Lebovich 2013).

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that history and narratives of bravery, resistance, and struggle are important in the discursive practice of Tuareg nationalism. This discourse materializes in the episodic rebellions against the Malian state, which in fact, are rebellions against the Malian nationalism, as Tuareg view theirs and the Malian nationalism as competing forces. I have also made the case that the cyclical pattern of the Tuareg secessionism is caused by institutional shortcomings such as the failure of the Malian state to follow through with the clauses that ended the previous rebellions. But, more importantly, I contended that the previous rebellions serve as historical and cultural markers for subsequent rebellions, which creates a cycle of mutually retrospective reinforcement mechanisms. Moreover, the cyclical pattern of the Tuareg rebellions (as opposed to a long and continuous rebellion) is also partially due to the lack of natural resources in northern Mali, which impedes the Tuaregs elite’s possibility of sustaining a long and continuous rebellion, thus leading them to negotiated settlements.

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15 Notice that it did not say the Tuareg people, which is certainly a criticism that the Tuareg are in fact a minority of the region and that MNLA does not speak for all the Tuaregs or all the inhabitants of Northern Mali.



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