

## Chapter 3

# Between Imajaxen (Warrior) and Timogoutar (Helplessness): Trauma and Identity Conflict in Indigenous Spaces

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter is drawn from a much larger qualitative phenomenological inquiry into the Kel Tamashek of the Central Sahara and its Sahelian transition zone. The impetus for this larger research was driven by US Army Generals John Mulholland (Ret), James Linder (Ret), and US Navy Admiral Brian Losey. These senior military leaders foresaw the coming clash between this powerful ethnic community and the rapid spread of globalization into the vast spaces of the Sahel and Sahara Desert. This ethnic community lives in an alternate reality in the northern parts of Niger and Mali, and the southern parts of Algeria and Libya. This alternate reality is of their own design and is well over a millennium in the making. The Kel Tamashek are of extreme interest to regional and international security forces because of their tendency to resist political control. After fighting the French Colonial governments to a standstill in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, they went on to overthrow the African-based governments in Mali and Niger several times each.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Indigenous communities live a dual life in the physical present and the metaphysical past and future. In this chapter, we will explore the nature of indigenous reality and the effects of trauma, using the Kel Tamashek of the Azaway Valley in northern Niger and Mali, and southern Algeria and Libya.

The Tamashek (aka Tamasheq (Mali), Tamajek (Niger), Tamahak (Algeria) language uses the Latin letter Gamma, as do a number of African alphabets requiring the representation of the voiced velar fricative. In the Tamashek language, the gamma sound is a guttural kh/gh/ka made in the back of the

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-3665-0.ch003

throat. I incorporate this letter in usage to accurately illustrate the way in which most Tamashek people understand the meaning of key words that use it. I incorporate those Tamashek words that require a significant amount of English words to fully describe the emic, or interior meaning of them. Dr. Jeffery Heath's (2005) *A Grammar of Tamashek (Tuareg of Mali)* has been my principal reference source in learning and employing the Tamashek language during my field research in the Central Sahel from 2013 to the present.

From the fall of 2013 to the end of 2014, I served as the senior special forces team leader supervising operations in the central Sahel regions of northern Niger and Mali. I also served as a psychological anthropologist conducting IRB approved human subject field research within the touchetts of the Kel Tamashek in the Valley of Azawāx. The focus of my field research was to discover the underlying drivers of the tribes participation in violent conflict and covert inhibitors to successful resolution. The findings and summaries in this chapter are drawn from that research which was used to complete my doctoral dissertation in 2015. These findings were also used to design engagement and messaging strategies that sought to help the Kel Tamashek withdraw from participation in violent conflict and adapt to globalization and environmental changes in the Sahel. Over 100 separate qualitative phenomenological interviews were conducted with social gatekeepers and their communities in 'essuf' which is a literal Tamashek word for 'bush' and carries a meaning of ancient, traditional ways of semi-nomadic life of the desert dwellers of the Sahara and its transition zone, the Sahel. As well, I conducted several sessions of group interviews with young college aged Tuareg boys and girls who were attending the University of Niamey. Collectively, these research interviews established a pattern of psychological archetypal thought and emotional conjugation that illuminated one of the most complex peoples of North Africa.

The Kel (people of) Tamashek (language of the amashek) are remnants of the Berber peoples of North Africa who were pushed southwards into the Sahara Desert by the 6<sup>th</sup> Century invasion of the Bani Hillal after their conversion to Islam. The Kel Tamashek are socially structured into agnatic (tribal) segments of related families that are called *Touchetts* or villages. As a people, they follow a version of the Muslim faith, but are quick to remind outsiders that they were first Jewish, then Christian, before finally converting to Islam. Their Islamic practices are Sufi in nature and include a great deal of pre-Islamic spiritual beliefs about demons, angels, and spirit possession that have survived every previous religious conversion.

## **Indigenous vs. Urban Realities**

The reality of life in indigenous cultural communities is vastly more complex than we can observe with all our five senses. The reality of indigenous cultural life trades the complexities of technology and automation for the complexities of thought and emotion. While every indigenous and traditional community is a unique biosphere that must be explored and understood separately, there are common themes that apply to most such communities. Some of these common themes involve physical and metaphysical constructions of reality and the interaction between humans and their environment. The Kel Fadéy subset of the Tamashek in Niger express this interaction as "*Nilo Guer – Jimawan id middlum* (We are under the sky and on the earth) *id Idgazane Medranan* (and we live a lot of dreams)" as described in an interview conducted May 26–30 in 2014.

Consider the following conversation that I observed at the home of Agalih Hamidoun in Niamey, Niger during ethnographic data collection in 2014 between a Tuareg father and his 6-year-old daughter, Zeynab:

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