

Mali's Nomads: Bulwarks Against Jihad

NICHOLAS JUBBER

TIMBUKTU, Mali—"We are the only ones who didn't leave." Sandy Ag Mostapha is standing beside his cattle, a black turban binding his head and a loose shirt draped over dusty trousers. We are in Tayshak, a Tuareg encampment in the desert about six miles north of Timbuktu, where a few tents, made from goat skins, are pitched between feathery acacias. Before the crisis of 2012, some 60 families lived here, but that number has been reduced to just 15.

EMILIA TJERNSTRÖM



“Everybody left to go to the refugee camps,” says Sandy, “and it is only now they are starting to return. But most have lost their animals. They were frightened by the noise of the planes, and if you lose an animal here in the desert, they will die because they depend on us for water.”

One of his sons is walking beside a donkey, beating its back with a stick, driving it 200 feet across the sand, exactly the same distance as the depth of the well from which it draws the water. In the orchestra of well music, the crack of the stick chimes with the creak of a pulley, then the sloshing of the precious liquid, drops of it catching the sun like gemstones as they leak out of a sweating goat-skin. The skins are dragged over the lip and emptied into the troughs, or poured into plastic bidons (small containers) to supply the human needs of the camp.

“Even before the crisis, our lives were hard,” says Sandy, “but I fear now they have become impossible. It is difficult to keep the wells in good condition, or to get medicine for our animals, and the biggest problem is finding pasture. There is no grass any more—that’s why the animals are dying. We used to get help from people in the town, but now no one wants to come and visit us. We have been abandoned.”

WHITE NOMADS

“*La crise*,” (the crisis) as Malians call it, has been catastrophic for the country’s no-

madic communities. Officially erupting in early 2012, with a series of insurgencies led by the Tuareg secessionist group MNLA (Mouvement National de Libération de l’Azawad), and a coup d’état in Bamako, it can be interpreted more broadly as the latest knot in a thread of conflict spooling back to the 1960s. This is the fourth major uprising in Mali’s five decades of independence, and each time the government has made promises, but failed to deal with the issues raised by the disenfranchised

Tuaregs. “The source of the crisis is the problems of the north—the lack of pasturage, wells, the lack of opportunities for young people,” says Mohammed Ag Oussade, director of the Tuareg cultural organization, Tumast, who dismisses the claim that Tuaregs are keen to establish Azawad as an independent Tuareg homeland. “Independence isn’t the main objective for people here. What they want is an improvement of

their lives and conditions.”

These issues are not exclusive to the Tuaregs. The Arabic-speaking Berabiche share caravan trails and pasture ranges with them, as well as the same unresolved issues. Battling the obstacles that beset nomadic life all over the world—land privatization, farmland expansion, scarcity of water resources, disease, famine, malnutrition, inter-tribal conflict, corruption—these struggling tribes may look haggard and half-broken, but they are the key to security in the Sahara, and ultimately to the battle

NOMADS ARE
NEEDED NOW
MORE THAN
EVER. THEY
REMAIN THE
SAHARA’S MOST
EFFECTIVE
DEFENSE AGAINST
JIHADISTS.

Nicholas Jubber, author of The Prester Quest and Drinking Arak off an Ayatollah’s Beard, is working on a book about nomads in North Africa.

against the waves of jihadism sweeping across Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa.

“The life of nomads,” says Mohammed Taher Ould Elhadj, “is nearly finished.” The mayor of Salam, chief of 40,000 mainly Arabic-speaking nomads in the desert northwest of Timbuktu, Elhadj is one of his nation’s most influential nomadic leaders. He cites the examples of dozens of herdsmen who have lost their flocks to bandits, failed wells, and disease, to punctuate his fears that the decline of mobile pastoralism may now be irreversible. “We had many problems even before the crisis—the lack of medicine, schools, markets, security. Life for nomads is hard, and it’s expensive. For example, to buy a sack of rice in our area costs twice what you pay in Bamako [Mali’s capital]. People are dying, from lack of medicine and many other problems, but also from the lack of hope.”

BATTLING JIHAD

Mali’s history is colored by the conflict between its settled and nomadic communities. The Songhay architecture along the banks of the Niger River, with its thick buttresses and parapets, spells centuries of self-defense against desert raiders. Resentment bristles in conversations with Songhay-speaking residents in Timbuktu. “I won’t have any Arabs in my house,” says local tailor Harbey. “If you see a Tuareg,” adds teacher Abdramane, “you see a vagabond.”

By contrast, in a wasteland outside Bamako airport, a Tuareg family scratches a living out of the arid soil. “I never wear my *tamelgoust* (Tuareg veil) anymore,” says family chief, Mohammed Ali. “But it’s the young people I’m worried about. The longer we stay down here, the more they will lose their culture and traditions.” His mother, wife, and sisters change into “town” clothes for fear of the “bad looks”

they receive if they go to the market in traditional Tuareg dress.

Such mutual suspicions are widespread, especially in the wake of the environmental crisis, but they overlook the interdependence of Mali’s settled and nomadic communities. Just as nomads are dependent on towns like Timbuktu to purchase the rice, millet, sugar, and tea that will sustain them on the caravan trails, so the towns rely on them to supply so much of their meat, dairy, and leather products. And in another critical respect, nomads are needed now more than ever. They remain the Sahara’s most effective defense against jihadists.

This last factor—whose importance stretches far beyond Mali’s own borders—has not been lost on Corporal Alagi Touré. A soldier in the Malian army for 12 years, and a veteran of numerous desert operations against jihadists and bandits, he believes nomads are the key to winning the war. “Many of the bandits try to hide in the camps of the nomads,” he explains, “but the nomads are tired of them, so they come to us and tell us where to find them. Sometimes, we visit the nomads and talk to them. We give them medicine, water, food, whatever we can, and they tell us what they’ve seen—trucks that passed, how many, which direction they took. They’re fatigued by the jihadists. Their food’s been robbed, their animals have been taken, so they want an end to this. They know if they cooperate with us, we can help get their lives back to normal.”

The belief that nomads are on the side of security is echoed by Mohammed Elhadj, who agrees that nomads are weary of the jihadists. “Our community didn’t create this problem,” he says, “but we are the ones who are suffering most from it.” He points out that none of the chiefs in his commune endorsed the jihadists who swamped Mali in 2012. Moreover, many nomads have been

instrumental in providing information to MINUSMA (the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali), leading to the capture or killing of jihadists at large in the desert. Like most of Mali's nomadic leaders, he blames the crisis on foreigners—Algerians, Mauritians, Libyans—and with some justification, for it was the arming and training of Tuaregs by Colonel Gaddafi's regime that gave the MNLA the skills and equipment to launch its incursions.

For many Malians, however, the Tuaregs and Berabiche remain too unsettled to trust. They point out the nomadic backgrounds of jihadist leaders like Iyad Ag Ghaly, the so-called "Lion of the Desert" and chief of Ansar ed-Dine, and Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the one-eyed former AQIM (Al Qaeda in the Maghreb) commander. While the varied backgrounds of prominent jihadists suggest more complicated roots (Abdelmalek Droukdel, for example, the emir of AQIM, grew up near the Bay of Algiers and studied mathematics at the University of Blida in Algeria), it is certainly true that young nomads—economically vulnerable, dislocated, and often embittered by their treatment in the

towns—have been susceptible to jihadism's financial and ideological incentives.

Nomads are not inherently more open to jihad than settled communities. But they are more likely to suffer from poverty and social exclusion. It is not only in a geographical sense that they live on the margins of society. Ag Ghaly and other preachers like him, lured with regular salaries and equipment, have reconciled Tuareg ethnic and cultural pride with Islam and articulated a path away from the humiliation of aid dependency. In Ag Ghaly's case, you don't need aid when you can fill your coffers from ransom deals. The preaching of men like Al Ghaly is also appealing to many in the Sahara and Sahel region, stoking, if not fully satisfying, the instinct for independence and self-determinism. But the greatest incentive, judging by conversations in Timbuktu, is financial.

Niamoyu Touré is a Songhay, a member of Timbuktu's dominant ethnic group, who suffered under the rule of Ansar ed-Dine when the militant group took over the town in March 2012 and subjected it to ten months under shariah law. "I used to be a mobile nurse," she explains. "I would



travel by motorbike to the nomad camps and villages. It was hard work, especially riding through the sand, but I was glad to do it because there was a lot of need in the camps. In the winter, people suffered from the cold, in the summer from the heat, and there were always problems with the animals, which we tried to help them with.” But in 2012, she stopped traveling to the campsites after her motorbike was stolen in the village of Agouni. “People had become bandits,” she continues. “Not all of them, of course, maybe one in ten, but it made life very dangerous. Once, some men with guns told me to give them all my medicine or they’d beat me to death. Another time, some nomad bandits took my motorbike and my luggage, which included my medical books. After that, I left the village, and I haven’t gone back. It became too hard.”

Niamoyu’s story chimes with the experience of Elhadj Wangari, a teacher in the same village, who saw many of his former students turned by the promise of jihadist wealth. “I passed the military barracks one day here in Timbuktu,” he says. “And I saw them sitting there, three

of my students, in the back of a pick-up truck. They were wearing jihadist uniforms and carrying guns. I said to them, ‘What are you doing? Why did you enlist?’ They said it was necessity. There was no trade between the town and the desert, life had become harder since the jihadists arrived, and they were offered 150,000 CFA [Central African Francs, or about \$300] every month to become a soldier. These are poor people, and they were suffering very badly.”

As Niamoyu and Elhadj point out, bandits and jihadists are a minority in nomad camps. Those who are left behind, the ordinary nomads, have to pick up the pieces. Walking around Tayshak, Sandy Ag Mostapha points out a low-roofed mud-brick building near the well. Before the crisis, it was a schoolhouse, and teachers from Timbuktu came to give lessons two or three times a week. But as security grew more elusive in the wake of the violence that was spawned, it became a hiding-place for combatants, and now has fallen into disrepair. Bullet holes and a crumpled lintel provide clues to a jihadist’s last stand, as well as assault by the elements.



Usually, residents protect their roofs during the pitifully short but tempestuous rainy season. Now there is nobody, and the wind and rain have caused more damage than the actions of any combatants. Cobwebs hang from the piled wooden desks. The windows are jagged and misshapen. Doors hang loose. In one building, a collection of nomadic gear—camel saddles, metal luggage trunks, a couple of food bowls—are scattered under a blackboard where the last lesson still remains chalked up until the class comes back.

“As soon as the jihadists took Timbuktu, people started leaving,” says Sandy. “Some went by bush taxi, others by camel or donkey, whatever means were available. We were afraid of the MNLA because they are strangers to us. But we were afraid even more of the jihadists because they don’t accept many things in our culture.” He tugs the gris-gris on his arm—a sheepskin amulet containing a selection of prayers—a popular talisman not only amongst Tuaregs but all of Mali’s ethnic groups, which are prohibited according to the Wahhabist teaching followed by the jihadists. “You see?” he says. “We are all Muslims, but there are many differences in our ideologies.”

RED NOMADS

Mali has one of Africa’s densest nomadic populations (5 percent to 10 percent of its 15 million people), and a long tradition of distinguishing among them. The lighter skinned, like the Tuaregs and Arabs, are described as “white,” the darker-skinned are “black” (including Songhoys and Bozo fishermen), and those in between are “red.” Among the latter are the Fulani, traditionally cattle-herders, whose communities have been hit hard by the environmental crisis and its fallout.

Under the ironstone ridge of the Bandiagara escarpment in Central Mali is the dusty plain of Gondo, a straggly land divided between millet and sesame fields and scant pasturage for cattle. According to Fulani elders like Ali Hajji, chief in the village of Djoungiani, it once was a land of plenty. “There were jujubes,” he recalls, “and plenty of baobab fruits. If you took your animals into the bush, you didn’t need to take any food. There were guinea-fowls, partridges, wild goats. There was always something to cook.” But the Sahel droughts between the 1960s and 1980s ravaged the landscape, to the extent that there are numerous grasses and plants that no longer grow. This savage twist of nature has had a devastating impact, not least in the human conflicts driven by the limited resources.

“It’s getting harder and harder,” says Hamid Barry, a herder in the village of Gorti. “We’ve established corridors for our herders to move with our cattle, but the farmers keep planting inside the paths, and then they demand reparations if our cattle damage their crops.” These disagreements can quickly escalate. Last winter, his son Suleiman was involved in one such dispute while taking the family goats to pasture. Passing a millet field, he led his flock across a part of the field that had already been harvested. But the farmer was afraid Suleiman’s flock would trample on the crop yet to be harvested and shouted at him to lead the goats away. “The farmer wouldn’t let him pass,” says Hamid. “He called out to his neighbors, and they came along. There were three of them, armed with axes and sticks. They took hold of Suleiman and beat him. His brothers brought back the herd, and Suleiman stumbled back into the village a little later. He was injured very badly, and we had to take him to the health center.

ACTION STEPS

- There are many environmental needs—from dune-fixing to well-digging to tree-planting. As Amadou Dicko, representative for the Ministry of Water and Forests in Djoungiani, points out: “The people increase, the animals increase, and the forest shrinks. If we don’t resolve it in the next 15 to 20 years, there is no hope.” A holistic approach to environmental care is needed. The impact of herders on vegetation needs to be tackled (especially the damage to trees, which strips the land of vital shade), but in the absence of alternative sources, herders are unlikely to do otherwise. The biggest challenge is water, which is often found only beginning at 300 feet below the earth. The need for more wells and water tanks is voiced all over Mali, from the Gondo plain to the desert camps around Timbuktu.
- As Mohammed Ag Ossade of Tumast suggests, herders who have lost their livestock through the conflict need help to restore their herds. One way this could be achieved is through microfinancing projects. There also needs to be more attention to education in nomadic areas, to combat overgrazing as well as animal health. Sandy Ag Mostapha comments: “I want my sons to be nomads but I also want them to be educated. Then they will know what to do when the animals are sick.”
- For people outside Africa who are keen to help, helping private aid agencies is worth considering. The best of these not only interact with local communities, but are led on the ground by them. A good example is the Joliba Trust in Central Mali, which works with Fulani and Dogon communities, organizing microfinancing projects and midwife training, arbitrating in disputes between farmers and herders, and planting trees and boundaries to reduce conflicts.
- In the political sphere, there is a need to renew talks between the Malian government and the MNLA. The current relationship between Tuareg communities and the Malian state is clearly unsatisfactory. But it’s highly doubtful an independent Tuareg state would be viable. “If they develop the North,” says Timbuktu historian Salim Ould Hajj, “if they lay good roads and enable merchandise to pass through, the Tuaregs will benefit from this, and they will throw away their arms.” Economic opportunity—for nomads or for jobseekers in the towns—is the strongest defense against banditry and jihad. Not only does it reduce jihad’s economic attractions, it also undermines Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb’s claim that only shariah can bring social cohesion and well being to Mali.

—*Nick Jubber*

We didn’t have enough money to pay for the medicine, but fortunately the farmer’s father found out what his son had done, and he came and offered his apologies and paid for the medicine.”

Similar stories proliferate around the plain. When herders go near the millet fields, they expose themselves to charges of damage. But there are so many fields, and they are planted so widely, the herders

often have little choice but to cross them. Inevitably, conflicts ensue, along with fines and penalties. At the worst extreme, this can lead to a massacre. In December 2012, in the village of Sari, six miles from the border with Burkina Faso, more than 30 people were killed and the entire Fulani community displaced, after a dispute over a cattle thief. “There was no security,” explains Boureima Barry, a local herder, “because of the fighting, they thought they could attack our people and not be punished. And they were right.”

The conflict between cattle herders and farmers stretches back to the 1950s, when farmers from the Dogon ethnic group that inhabit Mali’s vast central plateau descended from the cliffs to cultivate the less rocky soil on the plains. Over the decades, expanding populations, improved farm tools, and the use of camels and donkeys for hauling, has stretched competition for the area’s limited resources. This can be particularly harsh in the driest periods of the year, when water is in perilously short supply. “We have to dig 300 feet to reach the water table,” explains Ali Hajji. “So we are dependent on foreigners with their equipment and pumps. The taps keep breaking down, and there are too many people using the wells.” All this lends itself to disenfranchisement, banditry, and, inevitably, some turn to jihad.

“We have a lot of *marabouts* (traditional preachers),” explains local educational di-

rector Barry Sevaré, “because the Fulani were among the first to be Islamized in Malian society. But some of them joined the jihadists because they thought they were fighting for Islam, and they took their students with them to battle—hundreds of them. Now there are many families who don’t know what happened to their sons.”

Like the Tuaregs and the Berabiche, the Fulani communities have fallen on both sides of the conflict—victims as well as perpetrators. But inevitably, like their fellow pastoralists in the desert, they are lumped together by their sedentary neighbors, as a source of constant suspicion.

BLACK NOMADS

Even without its crisis, Mali would be struggling. In 2009, before the current crisis, it ranked 178th out of 182 countries in the UNDP Human Development Index, with 60 percent of the population below the poverty line. In 2013, it was 182nd out of 187. With so many living at the very edge of survival, every political disaster has a seismic impact, tipping thousands from the breadline into the gutter. This is underlined by a visit to the Bozo communities of the Niger, traditional fishermen who have been working the currents for centuries.

Ibrahim has been fishing since he was a boy. He learned in the usual way, by watching his father and then trying it out himself at the island village of Kona Daga, where his family’s iron-roofed mud-brick

MALI’S RATE OF URBANIZATION (4.8 PERCENT ANNUALLY) IS AMONG THE HIGHEST IN THE WORLD, AN ADMISSION OF DEFEAT FOR A COUNTRY WHOSE PLAINS, DUNES, AND CARAVAN TRAILS HAVE SUPPORTED SO MANY NOMADIC COMMUNITIES.

house is built on a hilltop, to spare it from seasonal flooding.

"I got my own pirogue [a traditional flat-bottom fishing boat made from fire-curved boards] when I was 20," he says, "and that's when I became a fisherman. I've caught everything there is to catch in the river: carp, dogfish, salmon, capitaine [hogfish]. It varies year to year. Some years I do well, some not so much, but I've got a lot of experience, and I usually know where to find something."

Today, luck isn't on his side. Having unbundled and dropped his net, jerry can marker-buoys bobbing on the surface at either end, he reels it in, gouts of water spilling off the cord. He pulls up the last jerry can and tosses it on top of the bundle, lifting his shoulders in a shrug. His net is empty.

Ibrahim explains, "When I was younger, you could get 20, 30 fish in one haul. You didn't even have to go very far. You went out for the day and you would catch 25,000 CFA [about \$50]. Now, if I want to catch a lot of fish, I have to go on long trips. I take a small tent, a torch, my brazier, some coal, and my net. Sometimes, I stop in villages and camps along the way. I give some money to the chief, and he grants me permission to sleep in all the villages in his area. But even if I am away for a month, there is no guarantee that I will catch many fish. The river used to be generous, but not anymore."

Like many Bozo, he talks about the river as a powerful force, and makes "sacrifices" (usually balls of rice and eggplant) to appease the river genies. But, when questioned in detail, he attributes the reduced hauls not to the river's miserliness or supernatural whims, but to damage by man. The last few years, he explains, have witnessed a devastating shift in the equation between fishermen and fish, the

former increasing as fast as the latter are diminishing. Where the trade used to be exclusive to the Bozo, now you find Fulani and Songhoys and other ethnic tribes along the river-routes.

"Many of them came to get away from the problems," says Ibrahim. "People came to Mopti to escape the jihadists, and everyone thinks they know how to fish. But they don't know the river like we do. They aren't as good at looking after it."

He underlines his point when a capitaine fingerling leaps into his pirogue. It flaps amongst packets of tea and a bag of sugar, before Ibrahim scoops it up and drops it back into the water. "It can grow to be a big capitaine," he explains. "This is one of the problems these days. Too many people, they catch a baby capitaine and eat it, but they should give it back to the river until it is ready."

OFF TO THE CITIES

The Bozo, the Fulani, and the Tuaregs all depend, as they have for centuries, on their expertise with their environment. That they have managed for so long is a testament to their skills. But, increasingly, the difficulties of their lifestyles are drawing younger members of their communities to the cities. Mali's rate of urbanization (4.8 percent annually) is among the highest in the world, an admission of defeat for a country whose plains, dunes, and caravan trails have supported so many nomadic communities for millennia.

Economic and political prospects are hardly promising, with talks between MNLA and the government stalling, accusations of arbitrary arrests, and the early hope of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita's presidency descending into accusations of nepotism and profligacy, most notoriously in the purchase of a \$40 million presidential jet.

But there are some signs of hope. Nomads are increasingly interacting with the army to help track down jihadists, and there is a growing recognition that development in traditionally nomadic areas in the north is essential to a lasting and peaceful solution. “If there is no intervention to help us, we will lose everything,” says the mayor of Salam, Mohammed El-hadj. “We need development. We need better schools and hospitals, better administration and security.”

Mohammed Ag Ossade, director of Tumast, agrees: “Many of the nomads have lost their flocks, or were forced to sell them and go to the refugee camps. Now they have nothing. The government must help them, development organizations must help them, otherwise how can they go back to their earlier lives?”

FIGHTING JIHAD

This is the heart of the security issue, for as soldiers like Corporal Touré point out, it is only through healthy, contented nomadic communities that jihadism can be combated. Military surveillance and artillery have a limit. Nomads are more effective stewards of the desert. As Touré admits, “They know the desert better than us.” But as long as nomadic life wallows in its current state of despair—“harder than it has ever been,” as Sandy Ag Mostapha says—cooperation is only likely to be sporadic.

However much aid is given to herders to replenish their lost livestock, it is unlikely to reverse the decline of nomadism.

Bereft of their herds, discouraged by the unreliability of pastoralism, many younger nomads look to the towns, hoping for a less punishing, more instantly profitable lifestyle. Talking to sellers of mobile phone credit and other low-paid workers in towns like Timbuktu and Mopti, it is common to hear of backgrounds in desert encampments or the bush.

But nomads have never been homogenous, and many are keen to continue, as Ag Mostapha puts it, “walking in the footsteps of our ancestors.” Issa Barry is an example—a young herdsman on the Gondo plain, he explains, “I am happy when I’m with the herd. In the city, if the electricity stops working, they are like babies without their mother. But we can look after ourselves because we understand nature.”

His grandmother is in her 80s, and has lived through it all—colonialism, revolutions, coups d’état. She grew up when the bush was still well-canopied by trees, the baobabs were generous with fruit, and lion hunts were common. Now, she says, the land is less generous, but there are other reasons to be optimistic: “Life is better now. We have more varieties of food, transport is faster, and we can receive news from neighboring villages more quickly. If we work hard, we will have a good future. But if we don’t, it will be very difficult for us.”

The hard work has already begun. Whether it will reap a good harvest, or sink in the mire of corruption that has infected Mali for so long, remains to be seen. ●