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**“The Truth about the Desert”**

**Exile, Memory, and the Making of Communities among Malian Tuareg Refugees in Niger**

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### **English Summary**

This publication examines the diasporic living conditions and their effects on Tuareg refugees' self-understandings, changing socio-political hierarchies, cultural practices and religious identity formations in Niger. It focuses, in particular, on male refugees's responses to the loss in social status and respectability induced by adverse conditions of exile. Unlike most others, it is not a study of a Tuareg polity with a traditional emphasis on the nobility, whose loss in power, and status, and alterations in nomadic and semi-nomadic life style in the course of twentieth century due to droughts, and famine induced exile, and the persecution or simple neglect of northern populations by the Malian central state have been documented by scholars over the past decades. Instead, this book offers an ethnography of two Tuareg groups of inferior social status, and examines arguments and social practices by which the two refugees groups in Niger redefine themselves as two social collectivities in response to their living conditions in exile. It argues that by presenting themselves as collectives, the refugees groups redefine their inferior social status in the Tuareg society left back home in northern Mali.

One protagonist group is composed of free-born non-noble, white or red Tuareg, who fled Mali to settle in urban Niamey between 1963 and 2012. The second group of refugees comprises the unfree Bellah-Iklan who came from Menaka region and live since 2012 with several other non-Bellah-Iklan refugees in Abala, southern Niger, in a refugee camp administered by the UNHCR. In spite of significant differences between the situation in Niamey and Abala, in both settings, a situation of material deprivation and rampant structural or enforced unemployment, and experiences of being treated with hostility or arrogance, as foreign, dependent and supplicant undermine male refugees' sense of dignity, male honor and respectability, fuel intergenerational struggles over economic and moral responsibilities and obligations, and intra-marital conflicts.

These conditions prompt the refugees with vassal social status background to imagine all white free-born Tuareg as a homogenous social collective, “a Tuareg people”, and through this, the informants in urban Niamey seek to become equal to the noble groups at the top of the social structure by blurring intra vassal cleavages and variations between free-nobles and the nobility. In their part, the unfree born, Bellah-Iklan refer to their living conditions in

Abala, common history of servitude, and subjection, their racial and also their religious identity as well as marginalization within the Malian nation-state, as reasons to renounce membership in the Tuareg ethnic group, and to claim a common identity as “Black people of the desert” in the exile situation. Through this claim, the Bellah-Iklan reflexively downplay intra-Bellah-Iklan cleavages and redefine themselves as morally superior and the powerful group in relation to the free white Tuareg, implying a significant inversion of power vectors between the former Tuareg masters and the former slaves.

While this book analyses in fine detail these refugees’ arguments in several chapters, one chapter examines how both groups of informants define their membership of the social collective they express attachment through daily practices. In Niamey, these daily practices consist of visiting each other, listening to Tuareg music by Tinariwen, speaking Tamasheq, their language back home, clothing, through endogamy, mutual solidarity, and the desire to return back home in the future. In Abala, the Bellah-Iklan express their membership to the social collective through attending male conversations under the hangar in the refugee camp, mutual solidarity, endogamy, the desire to return back home to change the political imbalance between them and the free-born Tuareg in Menaka, and listening to guitar music by the Bellah-Iklan musical group while rejecting free Tuareg music. These practices not only express the differences, for example, between free-born Tuareg refugees and their neighbors, Hausa, and Zarma Niamey, or between the Bellah-Iklan and the free-born Tuareg in Abala, but also they differentiate the informants of this study from other free-born Tuareg refugees who did not engage in the mentioned bonding practices in Niamey, and from other Bellah-Iklan who do not come to the Hangar, creating new lines of in-group cleavages that, ultimately, make their project of an all-inclusive community formations unfinished at this stage.

To understand these dynamics of constructing in-group inclusions and exclusions in the Nigerien diaspora, this book centers on the following aspects: exile as a transformative social experience; the “interplay of narratives and moral projects”; and stereotyping as reflexive social practice. The analysis draws on the literature on productive repercussions of the social conditions of exile; the theoretical spheres of studies of memory; and, finally, to the body of literature on stereotyping, and ethnicity. The results afford a much more dynamic understandings of Tuareg socio-political hierarchies, and highlight refugees’ aspirations and capacities to remake their imaginary and material worlds through moralizing labels and racial stereotypes that reformulate their own social and ethnic identity in the face of adverse and often deeply humiliating living conditions. By highlighting the dynamic nature of moralizing discourses, and their relevance to collective identity formations, and how “othering” practices

entail the positing not only of social difference, but of moral hierarchies, the study contributes to the anthropology of morality, anthropological debates on ethnicity, and memory politics.