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“Property and Gender Relations among Twareg Nomads”

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PROPERTY AND GENDER RELATIONS

AMONG TWAREG NOMADS¹

by Barbara A. Worley

The Twareg are a stratified society of pastoral nomads who inhabit the Central Sahara. They are Muslim, and they are culturally descended from the ancient Libyans that inhabited the Fezzan and desert regions of North Africa, who are depicted as captured warriors with long, braided hair in Pharonic Egyptian art, and who figure in the classical Greek histories of Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, and others as the Garamantes, who controlled caravan trade across the Sahara.

The Twaregs' military dominance in the Central Sahara depended to a large degree upon their pillaging in agricultural zones, the use of slave labour to perform domestic work and herd the livestock, their extraction of payments and goods from Saharan caravaneers, and their almost continual raiding of other pastoralists' herds.

When the French conquered the Twaregs in the early 20th century, they divided the Sahara and Sahel into several modern countries, and set up colonial governments. In doing so, the French forbade raiding and warfare, replaced many of the traditional chiefs, negatively sanctioned the payment of tribute by the dependent vassal herders to the warrior aristocracies, liberated captive domestic servants, restricted the movement of pastoral nomads by means of required identity cards and police checkpoints at strategic locations, and imposed economic handicaps in the form of a head tax and a livestock sales tax to help subsidize the French colonial establishment in West Africa. As a result, most Twaregs began doing the work of herding themselves.

About twenty-five years ago, these countries of the Sahara and Sahel gained their independence from French colonial rule, leaving modern countries economically and politically structured by the French and still very much under the influence of France. By leaving the post-colonial government in the hands of ethnic groups hostile to the pastoral nomads, the French virtually guaranteed the deterioration of Twareg economic and political organization under modern national governments.

The Twaregs that I have been working with since 1976, the Kel Fadey confederation in northwest Niger, made their peace early on with the French, and because they did not join the Twareg revolt in 1916 they were allowed to maintain their original internal political and economic structure pretty much undisturbed, although they lost the right to raid and manage their external affairs (Saenz 1987).

The customs that continued to some extent in practice among the Kel Fadey are matrilineal succession to the chieftainship, the tribute collected by nobles from their dependent vassals, and the inheritance of slaves. These customs continued on with varying degrees of consistency up to the Independence. At Independence, the captives were definitively freed, tighter controls were imposed on taxation, and in the wake of the two major Saharan droughts since 1969, with the implementation of development policies strongly opposed to pastoral nomadism, the Kel Fadey economic structure has completely unraveled. As of 1984, the majority of Kel Fadey had lost many of their family members, all their livestock, and their livelihood.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Northeast Anthropology Association Meetings, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, March 20, 1987.

Against this backdrop let me present the story of Tinfana, a prominent Kel Fadey Twareg woman who lived between about 1885 and 1954, whose wealth in livestock is said to have been equal to that of the Kel Fadey Twareg chief of the time, and to whom was attached a great number of dependent vassals. She was the sister of the last matrilineally-appointed Kel Fadey chief, and before his death he richly endowed Tinfana and her sisters with a large corporately-held trust in cattle and other livestock, by means of a special pre-Islamic Twareg custom called lkhabus, that is usually used to draw off herds from a parent's estate before the death of the parent so that daughters would not be impoverished through the effect of Muslim inheritance law, whereby sons receive twice as much as the daughters, but in this case was used to benefit sisters.

My informants, including Tinfana's direct descendants and the descendants of her former vassals, say that she "did the work of chief". Tinfana on her own behalf made extensive loans of goats, sheep, donkeys, and camels, which provided a livelihood to maintain her numerous vassal dependents who were allowed the use of the livestock, while ownership and control remained with Tinfana. Her vassals brought tribute in yearling livestock, butter, cheese, tanned hides, and other consumable products to Tinfana, just as they brought such tribute to the confederation chief.

Tinfana generously provided for her female descendants in setting up an lkhabus estate for them in herds, slaves, and two swords which she had purchased herself, one of which has gold imbedded in the impression on its blade, which is representation of a drum, the symbol of the group's leadership. Tinfana's female descendants benefitted, moreover, in the inheritance of Tinfana's lkhabus estate in cattle, originally set up by Tinfana's brother. Under the provisions of lkhabus, all properties in an lkhabus estate continue to be inherited through the female descendants only. The ownership and control over such property is exclusively women's, and women's right to exercise this control is legally sanctioned by means of a written testament witnessed by the chief, who has jural authority.

Robert Murphy (1964) was the first anthropologist to report on this custom of lkhabus, and in my most recent research I collected case histories of lkhabus among the Kel Fadey Twaregs of Niger. Lkhabus is a word derived from Arabic al habus, and the original Twareg custom, known as akh-idderan among Kel Fadey Twaregs, was an adaptation of a Muslim principle, the pre-mortem funding of a public institution, to a Twareg customary law that allows women to inherit substantial numbers of livestock. In my research, which included interviews with Twareg and northern Berbers all through Niger and Algeria, I discovered that this custom exists--by the same name and in almost identical form--not only among Twareg in Niger, but up until recent times it existed among Algerian Twareg in the Hoggar Mountains and in the western oasis of Tit, and among the northern Berbers of the Kabyle and Aures Mountains.

Tinfana's position in Twareg society was accordingly highly respected. She is referred to by all who remember her as ttfbl, a term that I will leave undefined for the present. Among Kel Fadey Twaregs, the word which denotes the rawhide-covered, wooden tribal drum, which is the symbol of the chief's military, political, and jural authority, is tfbl. It is etymologically related to the Arabic radical T-B-L* 'drum'. By connotation, tfbl has a second meaning among Kel Fadey Twaregs: 'chief'. Thus, in Tmajq, the Twareg language, the masculine noun tfbl ('drum;chief'), when it is prefixed by the feminising prefix /t-/ , has a feminine counterpart, ttfbl. The term ttfbl is used in referring to the wife of the chief. But it was also assigned to Tinfana, who was not the wife of the chief. When I asked Ayshatu, the wife of the old chief what the term ttfbl meant, she made a solitary depression in the sand with the back of her hand and said "The tfbl and his wife have one and the same place".

This seemed puzzling to me until one day, almost seven months after the death of Ayshatu's husband, and the installation of the new chief, I noticed that the wooden tribal drum was still sitting in Ayshatu's tent, and had not been transferred to the tent of the new chief. I asked her why this was so, and she replied, "Because it's my drum!". Her brother who was sitting there with us began slowly

drawing lines in the sand as he said, "Livestock, vassals, slaves, and the drum: these are the property of women." Ehare, imghad, iklan, ttbl: cin cadoden.

The ancestress of the Kel Fadey is said to have come from the East, presumably from the Fezzan or the desert regions to the west of Egypt, and with her she brought vast herds, the original vassal tribe the Ibergalan, along with their ties of allegiance to her, she brought slaves, and supposedly the same wooden kettle drum that is now the property of Ayshatu. All these have continued to be inherited through women. In my genealogies, it is clear that the drum has passed from woman to woman, mother to daughter, through women that have been married to chiefs, for the past six generations in living memory. Ayshatu, the wife of the deceased chief, says that the inheritance of the drum is "like ikhabus," through daughters only. Women referred to as tttbl are those who can trace their kinship back to the ancestress through both father's and mother's lines--who are thus potential possessors of the drum--and who control significant property inherited through these lines.

Tinfana had no formal position of political power, although my informants say she had political "say-so". She is remembered by many Kel Fadey Twaregs today as a strong-willed and influential woman.

From this picture we can see that there is potential for female prominence, at least among Twareg pastoral nomads. Although such a degree of economic control as Tinfana's was enjoyed only by noble women, I should add that in Twareg society ownership and control of livestock is exercised independently by both men and women among vassals, and that women throughout Twareg society enjoy a degree of autonomy and social privilege that is highly unusual for a Muslim society (Worley 1987).

Twareg women are not sequestered or veiled; they freely engage in courting relationships and ordinarily select their own husbands; they may leave their husbands, instigate a divorce, and remarry without their parents' consent; and they usually maintain custody of children after a divorce. Twareg women have great freedom of movement outside the tent and between camps, and are a part of the public sphere nearly as much as the men. In political discussions women are often consulted, and their advice is considered valuable. Vassal women have an important input into the subsistence economy, as they herd the flocks and process the milk. They must have a broad range of skills and knowledge to be able to perform men's work in herding camels when men are absent for long periods during raiding and trading expeditions.

Twareg women organize nearly all major social events, and they are often the main actors in ritual life (Worley 1987). Twareg men as a matter of principle do not strike women. The women own the tents and all the furnishings in the tents, and may pack them up and leave husbands without any interference from the husband or his family, and their decisions are supported by their own families. Twareg women are generally capable of providing for themselves because they own and control herds independently from their husbands and brothers. Both noble and vassal women regularly engage in making gifts and loans of livestock to kinsmen and neighbors to establish and maintain social ties on their own behalf. Traditionally, such practices have allowed Twareg women to enjoy a degree of social prestige comparable to that of men.

Karen Sacks, perhaps more than any other anthropologist in the past few years, has led the opposition against the so-called "state bias" in anthropology, that is, a kind of ethnocentric perspective from the point of view of industrial capitalism. Sacks labels this "social darwinism", since it is based on an assumption that the natural world is necessarily competitive and hierarchical, and social inequality is necessarily natural. Social darwinist anthropology apparently accepts as plausible the notion that women in all cultures and throughout the social history of their cultures have had fewer legal rights, less economic control, less political influence and lower prestige than men.

Sacks says this is not so. A recent focus in gender studies is the ethnology of societies in which women have important social roles and numerous rights equal with men, demonstrating that women do not universally occupy degraded social positions. The alternative, says Sacks (1979:3), is a "marxist and feminist anthropology (that) can affirm the reality of equality in other times and places and increase our understanding of how to obtain such a social order for ourselves." Thus the underlying political point of this approach is to reveal the cross-cultural evidence that pokes holes in the social darwinists' arguments, and that bring to light cultural practices that would make possible changes that would ameliorate the condition of Western women.

One of the greatest obstacles to cross-cultural study of women's status is the problem of defining "women's status" itself. Naomi Quinn (1977:183) pointed out ten years ago that it is more useful to treat women's status--not as a unitary construct--but as a "composite of many different variables, often causally independent from one another". Robert Lowie (1920:186-187) pointed out almost exactly the same thing 67 years ago, in similar words--and he cautioned that "only confusion can result from ignoring the fact" that women's status derives not from one, but from many different factors. Ironically, say Robert and Yolanda Murphy (1980:179) in "Women, Work, and Property in a South American Tribe", the study of women's status in the past century has "moved from ordered error to a chaos of fact" as writers have sought a unicausal explanation for the assumed universally inferior social position of women. Martin Whyte's (1978) exhaustive HRAF study of the determinants of "women's status" cross-culturally reaffirms the need to take all aspects of a culture into consideration in attempting to assess the relative condition of men and women in any one society.

Even with careful and diligent research into all facets of men's and women's lives, we must be prepared to come to grips with the ultimate reality that there are, after all, areas of men's and women's social life that simply are not comparable and that can never be measured against one another. As Robert and Yolanda Murphy (1974:208) put it, in Women of the Forest, "We are confronting the question of the superiority of the male without a set of absolute standards of what constitutes superiority". The issue of equality ultimately meets with the problem of dissimilarity in assessing the gap between the sexes. Yet it would, I believe, demonstrate a clear Western bias to assume that this dissimilarity is in itself either proof of an inherent and immutable hierarchy, or else an obstacle to feminists seeking to be informed by societies in which women are powerful and respected.

Is it possible for men and women to be different, but equally valued? Put another way, is it possible for women to be quite different from men in certain important areas of their social life, and yet enjoy an amount of prestige and power equal to that of men?

In the case of the Twareg, we have women who think of themselves as qualitatively different from men, who engage in traditional female activities such as bearing children and regularly cooking family meals, and whose social role is very different from men's. Yet it is widely acknowledged in the literature, and my own research has confirmed that, in nearly all aspects of women's status among the Twareg, women enjoy an assertiveness, independence, prestige, and respect that is about equal to that of men.

The fact that Twareg women do not hold political office may seem definite proof that "men are dominant" and that, therefore, "women are subordinate", but one has only to look at the degree of women's influence in nearly all matters and the social prestige that they enjoy in general to see that Twareg men and women have a quality of life that is nearly equal, and that, empirically, the "domination" of each sex in this culture is about equal quantitatively, although different qualitatively. Twareg women were probably never "oppressed", except following colonialism, and increasingly so in this situation of rapid social change caused by droughts, government policy, and orthodox Islam.

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