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Gerbert van der Aa, *In Search of the Tuareg: the Veiled People of the Sahara*. Amsterdam: Vanderaa Publishing, 2018. 208 pp. ISBN 9789082927528.

Reviewed by: Wendy Wilson-Fall, Lafayette College

The book *In Search of the Tuareg: the Veiled People of the Sahara* is an interesting journalistic narrative about the experiences of Tuareg communities, in both the Maghreb and the Sahel, during the post-colonial era. It is not complicated by the exoticism and nostalgia that so often accompany texts about this community, and neither does it offer conspiracy theories regarding the current turmoil that plagues the northern Sahel. In nineteen chapters the author frames his understanding of the current situation of the Tuareg population with anecdotes of his personal experiences over a period of twenty-five years. In doing so, he comments on several important benchmark events and circumstances that draw our attention to the varied and problematic recent history of the Tuareg.

In broad strokes, the book gives examples of the current plight and contradictions of this formerly nomadic community to give readers an understanding of Tuareg perspectives on their current situation. The author references historic events to anchor these descriptions, sharing anecdotal scenes that span more than two decades, at times adding his own opinion to the opinions of his Tuareg hosts. This is both the strength and the limit of the book, for it does not pretend to offer an academic treatise on the life of the Tuareg, but rather it invites the reader to share particular moments at particular times that are illustrative of different Tuareg lives.

Van der Aa takes a sympathetic view in most cases, but also inserts critical observations that affect our understanding of the whole story he tells. An example is in the chapter “No Apologies for Slavery” where he recounts his interactions with Yattara, a Tuareg from Niger. Yattara confides that “like many *iklan* I’m ambivalent. I hate the racism of many white Tuareg, but I know from experience that they’re not all the same. In the old days some families treated their slaves better than others.” (34) In the same chapter, the author includes quotations from the well-known Mano Dayak, now deceased, who was a former travel agency owner from Agadez. He points out Dayak’s fairly apologist stance on slavery among the Tuareg, and his exploitation of the image of the Tuareg as victims (38-39).

To his credit, Van der Aa acknowledges the difficulties of defining slavery, and the current debates among scholars regarding the many forms of unfree labor that have historically been obtained in West Africa. On the other hand, the recurrent use of the general term “black” is worrying. The inclusion of quotes using the term ‘blacks’ adds important texture but when the author uses the term more generally it is a little disappointing. There are several instances where Van der Aa uses this description when a more specific identity would have added to the richness and credibility of the text. For example, in the first chapter, “Kidnapped,” the author discusses skin color as a sensitive issue, and refers to “centuries of marriage with black slaves.” This is of course true, but a

little more detail about where the captives came from, and the relationship between the Tuaregs, Songhay and Hausa would have been helpful here. There are a few places where slave owning among all groups is discussed, and the question of class is taken up. Yet, when Van der Aa speaks of Timbuktu or Gao, the Songhay or the Hausa, there are few descriptions that help the unschooled reader understand that the two cities were established under 'black' rule; and neither is it clear that the Songhay and Hausa controlled extensive territory over centuries, or that the Tuareg were part of that world long before their complaints about living 'under blacks' in the current nation states of the Sahel.

The author seems, at times, to unwittingly fall prey to the trope of perceiving Timbuktu as solely a Tuareg enterprise, and the Tuaregs as the only marauders of the Sahel, leaving out references to the huge quasi-states such as Ghana and Mali that managed the wealth that drove the caravan traffic that the Tuaregs famously protected. Because of these omissions one does not get the sense of the hierarchies that all these societies shared, or that the Tuareg were not the sole rulers of the northern Sahel. Describing who the 'blacks' are in some of his vignettes would have added a deeper context for the life of the Tuareg. For instance, when speaking of Niger at one point, he mentions that the "capital [Niamey] was the domain of the black population" which is a terrible simplification (34). Likewise in these descriptions one would not know if Ousmane dan Fodio or Mansa Musa were "black" or "white" (84-85); their relationship to the Fulbe or the Mandinka is not mentioned.

Another unfortunate lapse in accuracy lies in Van der Aa's description of the Great Green Wall project as a personal initiative of former President of Senegal, Abdoulaye Wade. As it happens, the *Great Green Wall for the Sahara and Sahel Initiative* (GGWSSI) is a project of the African Union that includes most, if not all, countries from the Sahelo-Sudan zones. Although it is true that Wade was head of the AU at the time, it is probably inaccurate to attribute the whole project to him. The Baha'i environmentalist Richard St. Barbe Barker first introduced the idea in 1952.¹ The current aspirations of the project are much reduced from Barker's initial hopes in terms of participation and acreage to be covered. It remains controversial among both environmentalists and social scientists, but it was not a capricious initiative that originated either with Wade or the many NGO's that are associated with it, though on the surface it may appear so.

In spite of these weaknesses, one does not doubt the considerable experience that the author has in Africa in general, and in the Maghreb and the Sahel in particular. Many of the stories contained in this volume pivot around a central character whose remarks serve as an interesting entry into one or the other aspect of Tuareg existence. Some reflection on the economics of Tuareg pastoralism would have been useful for understanding current Tuareg instability. Pederson and Benjaminsen (2008) explicitly point out that the Tuareg way of life largely fell apart because of the loss of slave farming labor.² Still, the author approaches all of his subjects with seriousness, and readers should expect the direct language known in journalistic writing. The book offers a useful chronology of the attempts of Tuareg populations to gain independence, their encounters with various governmental and local adversaries, and the unfortunate events of Mali in 2012. In this last case, the author does an excellent job of describing the different players in the take-over of the Tuareg rebellion (Mouvement National pour la Liberation de l'Azawad – MNLA) and the ensuing mayhem in northern Mali that included Al Qaida in the Maghreb (AQIM), Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO), and recent related

alliances, in Chapters 12 - 19. He also offers interesting critiques of writer Jeremy Keenan's interpretations of what happened in the unfolding of these events.

I enjoyed reading this well-written book, in spite of various gaps that were disturbing to me as someone who has lived in the region, worked in northern Mali, and engaged the scholarly literature on the cultural and historical processes the author describes. The quick explanation that "it's long been known that growing populations and over-grazing have been the main cause [of desertification]" (101) triggered, for me, a sense of regret. Which growing populations, one wonders? As a scholar interested in pastoralism, I regretted that the newer scientific findings on the inadvisability of extensive farming in arid zones, and the growing populations of farmers in these zones, were left out. Once again, it appeared that pastoralists were being blamed for desertification, or so it seemed. This may be evidence of the dangers inherent in journalistic descriptions of very complicated social and environmental histories, even as coverage of the vicissitudes of life in the region are essential and needed for better public understanding of its violent present.

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Endnotes:

¹ See <http://wilmetteinstitute.org/the-man-of-the-trees-and-the-great-green-wall-a-bahais-environmental-legacy-for-the-ages/>

² Pedersen, Jon and Tor A. Benjaminsen, "One Leg or Two? Food Security and Pastoralism in the Northern Sahel," *Human Ecology*, 36(1): 43-57, 2008 February.