Much to Learn About Living: Tuareg Architecture and Reflections of Knowledge

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Abstract: The primary aim of this work is to examine the varied outlooks that have influenced perceptions of the Tuareg and their architecture from both within Tuareg groups and without. Beginning with a sample of studies of the Tuareg throughout history, the story that emerges is ones of a mythic persona created of the European traveller's hopes and fears. It becomes easy to see how contemporary ideas about culture and identity shape the dialogue more than actual interaction with the Tuareg themselves. Changes in perception are not a one way occurrence. Just as outsiders have used the the dialogue around the Tuareg as a cultural mirror, so have the Tuareg used their living situations to reflect their own changing ideals. We can speculate about the ways in which the Tuareg tent may have always been used for the reflection of the ideas and ideals of Tuareg culture in the hopes that it will help us understand current patterns and further allow us to acknowledge the arbitrary frameworks imposed by ethnographers. Finally we can understand both ethnography and tent construction as two of the many ways of making sense of the world around us.

The primary aim of this work is to examine the varied outlooks that have influenced perceptions of the Tuareg and their architecture from both within Tuareg groups and without. By looking first at the elements that have shaped the western view of Tuareg society and their dwellings, then looking at elements that shape the internal Tuareg dialogue around nomadic architecture, I hope to show how each perception is shaped by it's own cultural history. In this way I try to find common ground in each groups' ways of knowing and perceiving the world around them through creation—whether that is the creation of ethnographic studies or nomadic dwellings. Like Rasmussen, my interest is "to make the distant more familiar and the familiar more distant" (2001:xviii).

I begin with a sample of the ethnographic studies of the Tuareg throughout history. While the internal history of the Tuareg has been passed on through generations of oral history and poetry, the written history comes from a very different perspective. Written by the (mostly) European traveller, it created a mythic persona that still persists today. In the second section, I look at some of the reasons behind the formation of that legendary identity and why it persists into the current era. Over time it becomes easy to see how contemporary ideas about culture and identity shape dialogues around the Tuareg much more than any actual interaction with or observance of the Tuareg themselves. Following that, I show that those changes in perception are not a one way occurrence. Just as the west has used the the dialogue around the Tuareg and their architecture as a medium to reflect their ideals, in more recent times the Tuareg are using their architecture as a medium to reflect their own cultural changes. Finally, we must understand the possibility that the Tuareg tent may have always been used as a medium for the reflection of the ideas and ideals of Tuareg culture. I speculate about several ways this could be approached in the hopes that it will further open the subject up to discussion and allow us to acknowledge the sometimes arbitrary importance ethnographers of the past have placed on various aspects of non-western cultures.

Of course, as a part of a specific culture, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that there will likely be unavoidable issues of reflection and culture blindness in this writing as well. In references to 'the West,' I adhere to Graulund's definition, which does not necessarily connote a physical location or bounded population but is, (admittedly stereotypically) "what the 'western world' and the 'western way of life' have conventionally been defined by: capitalism, industrialization, Enlightenment, rationalism and, not least, its European origins" (2009:81). The idea of the "post-colonial" is just as complex. For this purpose I will use Spurr's definition of "a historical situation marked by the dismantling of traditional institutions of colonial power, and as a search for alternatives to the discourses of the colonial era" (1993:6).

At the end of this study, I seek to speculate about the frameworks informing the creation of the Tuareg tent and influences on the process of tent building over the centuries. It's use as a dwelling has remained remarkably consistent through the ages according to the scant information available from early history (Nicolaisen 1997:31). Architectural origins are a fascinating subject precisely because there are no clear answers, and likely never will be. In speculating, I am not primarily concerned with the way the topic is approached by the modern Tuareg, as I feel that is their own story to tell, or at the very least, requires significant fieldwork on the part of an outside ethnographer. Nor would I imply that it is a singular logic that is utilised in the creation of a tent, either in contemporary or historical circumstances. Architectural reality is an amalgam of past ideas, available skills and present materials, sourced from nearly infinite phenomena. Instead I would like to briefly examine a few of the possible frameworks that may have helped shape the role of the tent as it exists today. In this way I hope to exemplify a few of the many possibilities that have been hastily obscured by the Eurocentric frame of the past two centuries.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that neither the people nor the architecture of Africa exist in a time isolated vacuum. The Tuareg of today have no more knowledge of their great-great-grandfathers thought process or worldview than I could of mine. Reasons adapt and actions change along through generations, most without the conscious thought of anyone involved. Many Tuareg and non-Tuareg groups throughout the history of the Sahara have used tents both as primary and travel dwellings. It is also very probably that they exchanged them extensively through battle and trade (Prussin 1995:6-11). From the outside ethnographers perspective, a balance must be struck between "the indeterminate relationship between the eventfulness and flux of one's own life and the seemingly frozen forms of the ongoing cultural tradition" (Rasmussen 2001:xxix) It is thus the nature of the ethnography to be outdated as soon as it is put to paper. As I hope to show, this fact is just as important in the study of ourselves as ethnographers as it is to those we study.

Early Accounts

Accounts of interaction with the Tuareg are available from at least the 10th century. Ibn Hawkal (10th century), El-Bekri (11th century), Edrisi (12th century), Ibn Batutah (14th century), and Leo Africanus (16th century), all documented the Tuareg in some form, usually as *Mulatthamin* or "the veiled ones." Of the early historians, fourteenth century Arab scholar, Ibn Khaldûn probably has some of the most detailed commentary on the life and people of the Sahara, though he apparently never actually met them (Nicolaisen 1997:31). Other than some notations by Khaldûn, the reality of the history of the Tuareg is hazy at best. It is not surprising then, that there is a constant danger of observers assuming that their "traditional or pre-colonial society was in some way static, or 'timeless', without any internal dynamic" in the eyes of the rest of the world—a trap that most of Africa has had to contend with throughout the past three centuries (Keenan 1977:11). Nicolaisen (1997) and Keenen (1977) propose theories based on the few available historical sources but like in all lengthy oral histories, facts and fictions merge "into the realm of mythology" and are "inevitably subject to the distortions and manipulations that are made to validate and justify the correct socio-political order" (Keenan 1977:24).

Khaldûn sets the stage for the view of a romanticised nomadic lifestyle so valued by the Victorian explorer of the future. He writes,

> Beduins are more disposed to courage than sedentary people. The reason for this is that sedentary people have become used to laziness and ease. They are sunk in well-being and luxury. They have entrusted the defense of their property and their lives to the governor and ruler who rules them, and to the militia which has the task of guarding them. They find full assurance and safety in the walls that surround them, and the fortifications that protect them… The Beduins, on the other hand, live apart from the community. They are alone in the country and remote from militias. They have no walls or gates. Therefore, they provide their own defense and do not entrust it to, or rely upon others for it… Fortitude has become a character quality of theirs, and courage their nature. (Ibn Khaldūn 1967:94)

While is is hard to know the exact circumstances of Khaldûn's life and times, sources point to a man of prominence and education who travelled extensively. There are many layers of meaning to his writings and no doubt changes in translation and intonation over the centuries. However it is safe to say that, at least to the average public of his time, he springs from a strata of "sedentary people" that he critiques so harshly. Despite this, he comes to the conclusion that "superiority comes to nations through enterprise and courage. The more firmly rooted in desert habits and the wilder a group is, the closer does it come to achieving superiority…"(1967:107) Khaldûn is perhaps one of the first travel writers that saw themselves as a separate 'adventurer' class of men that, on some ground, could identify more closely with nomadic groups than their own. He seeks to elevate the traits of "enterprise and courage" he sees in himself (Graulund 2009:82; Spurr 1993:7). The Muqaddimah marks the beginning of the following centuries' of ethnographic writing and colonial discourse on nomadic groups that reflect more on the hopes and desires of observers than those being observed.

Reflections of the West

In 1755, Rousseau predicted the progression of the next one hundred and fifty years of ethnographic and travel writing:

> In the two or three centuries since the inhabitants of Europe have been flooding into other parts of the world, endlessly publishing new collections of voyages and travel, I am persuaded that we have come to know no other men except Europeans; moreover it appears from the ridiculous prejudices, which have not died out even among men of letters, that every author produces under the pompous name of the study of man nothing much more than a study of the men of his own country… (Rousseau 1755:159)

Nearly 100 years after Rousseau, Heinrich Barth (1858) and Henri Duveyrier (Heffernan 1989) both encountered Tuareg groups and were generally successful in their ethnographic information-gathering goals. These two seem to be the last who were witness to Tuareg groups that did not already have deeply embedded notions about Europeans that were prohibitive to information collection. In a comparison of pre-colonial discussions, we can witness a change in attitude of both reports and informants that foreshadow colonialism. For example, Barth, as an academic, linguist and member of a relatively small group of travellers in a British expedition led by James Richardson, encountered Tuareg groups that were curious, suspicious and critical but relatively open to questioning and information exchange (Spittler 1995:6). Working in Barth's favour was his academic training, impressive linguistic abilities, and importantly the lack of previous European contact with the local population. Similarly, for Duveyrier in 1859, his experience appears to have been so welcoming that the Tuareg "represented the ideal trading partners for the French and the perfect spiritual counterbalance to a patriarchal European society" (Heffernan 1989:344).

However, by the time of Fernand Foureau's French colonial "Mission Saharienne" in 1899, both European actions and local perceptions had changed. Among other things, Foureau's French expedition looked much more like a small invading army, with 287 soldiers, 1004 camels and two cannons. While it was not a military expedition, it behaved as one, once going so far as to point the cannons at the palace of the Sultan of Agadez in an ultimatum for information (Spittler 1995:13). In response, the Tuareg were at the the least withdrawn, and at most actively defensive in their response to requests for information. In the years prior to Foureau's mission, several other French exploratory expeditions had ended in violence and death on both sides, most notably, the Flatters Expedition in February 1881 in which the Tuareg are said to have massacred 97 French soldiers in southern Algeria (Heffernan 1989:348). In short, due to increasingly aggressive colonial tactics, and equally aggressive responses, power dynamics and perceptions on both sides of communications had radically changed in less than fifty years. Duveyrier's chances at allying with the Tuareg as "friends for all time"[1] were gone (Heffernan 1989:348).

Foureau's party was faced with an uncooperative local population that, even as informants, were perceived by Europeans to be lying. As such, they devoted only 50 of the 1200 page expedition results to descriptions of the Tuareg of the Aïr. Instead the report focused on geography, zoology and botany—things which could be observed without much human interaction (Spittler 1995:11). Many subsequent European accounts had similar trouble gaining cultural information. Research and literature concerning the Tuareg reflects the ebb and flow of anthropological investigation in general. For colonial French expeditions, a great effort was put into obtaining a general population census that would account for a taxable population (Spittler 1995:19). The combination of scant ethnographic information and bombastic military reports invariably led to highly speculative accounts from European travellers, which by the end of the Victorian era had elevated the Tuareg to the near-mythological status of a 'noble warrior' class. True to Rousseau, the ethnographic writings on the Tuareg reflected more about the western view from which it was written. One simple reason was that there was not much actual interaction about which to write. What information was available left convenient handholds for the overlay of Victorian values and ideals so ethnographers and travel writers of the time simply needed to fill in the gaps.

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[1] "ils seront nos amis á tout jamais"

As Porch points out, "There was probably no people who excited the curiosity of nineteenth century Europeans more than the inhabitants of the central Sahara—the Tuareg" (1984:65). Graulund (2009) takes Rousseau a step further to say that the traits that are perceived to be lacking in a western society are those that are most mythologized in writings and perceptions of others. Through this lens, we can more readily examine the mythic accounts of the Tuareg from the Victorian era to near present day. Beginning with Rhodes and King, "the mythologized Arab" becomes an "existential hero" even while being generally looked down upon from a racialised plateau (Spurr 1993:130). Thus the European myth of the nomad and the Tuareg in particular, began as exemplifying all that a proper Victorian found lacking in his own society, namely: "purity of race, the notion of 'land', the depravity of all that is untraditional, the repression of the individual's need as opposed to that of the masses, the valorization of martial prowess and the consistent stress on the need for a superior will" (Graulund 2009:89).

To look at a simple example, we can examine the many Victorian accounts that stress the impressive height of the average Tuareg man (Heffernan 1989:393; King 1903:218; Rodd 1926:34). Porch finds it poignant that modern statistics put the average Tuareg male at around 5' 8" and explains that for a man of such an average height to be consistently considered "tall" the Europeans used in comparison "must have been considerably smaller" (1984:73). While the comparison of descriptive height may have just as much to do with carriage and demeanour as historical statistics, it is a significant example of one of the hundreds of bits of descriptive minutia that add up to the perception of the Tuareg. In this case this simple perception contributed to the vision of the tall, imposing and veiled "blue man of the desert" that persisted in film and literature well into the 20th century.

However, it is not only the idealised differences that probably appealed to the Victorian explorer. There were some significant characteristics and values that the Victorian armchair explorer could find eerily familiar. For example, for both the Victorian traveller and the victorian era Tuareg, luxury goods brought back from raids were held in high esteem. One could imagine a Victorian era curiosity cabinet not out of place in the Tuareg philosophy had it been more portable. Like the Victorian explorer, they "seldom raided for food or for the necessities of life" (Porch 1984:78), instead preferring their spoils to be in the form of clothing, camels and jewels. Additionally, multi-layered dress and regalia were of such importance that in some cases negotiations could not be started until the proper attire was in place (Porch 1984:74). On this count, the colonial French were recognised as formidable opponents. One account quotes a Tuareg conceding, "Tuareg and French officers are the best dressed people in the world" (Porch 1984:74). Less flatteringly, both Tuaregs and Europeans have both been said to possess feelings of racial superiority and entitlement, such that all others were "obliged to give them what they wanted" (Porch 1984:75). Both were also said to be blessed with unwavering pride and honour in being a member of their particular group so that "even in defeat, they would consider themselves superior to their conquerors" (Porch 1984:78). Aligned notions about romantic love, the general equality of women and the socially acceptable role of a servile underclass also undoubtable drew the European to a perceived brotherly understanding with the Tuareg. In early writings (Cauvet 1925; King 1903; Rodd 1926) there is stress on the idea that the Tuareg are a 'Caucasian race'—which perhaps ties into Victorian and early 20th century ideas about a pure lifestyle that can be integrated with ideas about their own group. As Porch writes, "In Africa, where so much is strange to Europeans, the Tuareg's 'Caucasian type of face' offered them a deceptively reassuring link with their own continent" (1984:72). Whether the Tuareg had a similar inclination about these similarities is unclear. Looking at the similarities in hindsight, it is easy to see where a European ethnographer, faced with inadequate information, might feel qualified to fill the gaps with details he might find familiar or logical.

As a result of such romantically familiar portrayals, the Tuareg man became a stock character in contemporary fiction. By the 1930s, this dreaded, intelligent character was subsequently cast in a number of adventure fiction novels and serials (Harvey 1937; Wren 1926) as a fearsome warrior and ‘the last of the noble savages’ (Porch 1984:71). The Tuareg characters possessed just enough value alignment to be understandable and while possessing just the right type of differences to be idealised as pure and feared as dangerous. These stock characterisations contributed exponentially to the mythological status of the group in the eyes of the west. It is in this balancing of the ‘noble savage’ and ‘noble familiar’ that the Victorian visions of the Tuareg found their sweet spot in western literature and culture in the early 20th century. The way in which the myth of the honourable but vicious Tuareg is at once deified and feared takes root in the similar conflicting elements of Victorian society that are also deified and feared: bravery in battle and the ability to inflict harm, chivalrous love and the burgeoning women’s movement, survival skills and cultural propriety. This practice exemplifies Spurr’s theory that colonial discourse bears a “constant uncertainty, leading to an inherent confusion of identity and difference, a simultaneous avowal and disapproval of its own authority” (1993:7).

The Victorian was “an era in which travel writing, scientific observation, and natural philosophy could still be combined in the same work” (Spurr 1993:63). Perhaps because of the precedent set by victorian travellers and the popularity of later travel accounts, it is often difficult to distinguish between a generalised and mass marketed travel account and a type of relaxed ethnography. Facts are frequently jumbled even in the most regimented of accounts. This causes quite a bit of confusion in the study of a group that already is separated by large geographic distances, and ethnographic accounts that are likewise influenced by ideological and temporal distances. As Pierre Bourdieu states, “there is no way out of the game of culture” (1984:12) and thus this jumbled colonial discourse saturates all elements of western culture that reference the Tuareg including “imaginative literature, journalism, travel writing, ethnographic description, historiography, political speeches, administrative documents and statutes of law” (Spurr 1993:5).

New Approaches

Nearly all writing concerning the Tuareg followed this elastic and interpretive format until the 1960s (Bernus 1966; Nicolaisen 1963). Nicolaisen follows a clear structuralist model in his study, focusing much of his work on variable kinship models and physical attributes of structures and artefacts. Bernus is focused on the physical and political climate of the Tuareg of the Sahel. In accordance with contemporary anthropological views of the time, great attention is paid to structural details while little to no time is spent on emotional or interpretive subjects.

After that, in what might be seen as a reaction to both Victorian and structuralist frameworks, we begin to see work that attempts to "locate the savage within us, in our historical origins and in our psychic structures" (Spurr 1993:7). Slavin (1973) attempts to bridge the gap between the romantic and the structural with a travel journal that is nevertheless described as an "expert" account (1973:xiii). It contains several point that differ significantly from previously accepted study of the Tuareg. For example, it defines the Tuareg as specifically a non-matriarchal society though "it is correct to say that whatever status is held by the mother is inherited by her offspring, rather than that of the father being inherited" (1973:24). It is possible that over time the role of women had become less distinct in Tuareg society in the years prior. It is equally possible that western ideas of what constitutes a matriarchal society had changed since earlier writing. It is also probable that Slavin recognised that elements such as a woman's social mobility and influence and property ownership, were finally understood as more complex than simple dichotomies. The reality was probably some combinations of all three. If understood as a more recent example of Spurr's hypothesis that ethnography projects "a modern, western angst" that only serves to reflect back on the society to which the writer belongs (1993:131), disavowing matriarchy in the 1970s, may simply be a reflection of concerns about the changing role of women in the west and a longing for the simpler times that the 'pure' tribesman of the desert embody. Nicolaisen's structural examination explains that it is not necessarily that one gender or the other predominate but that men and women are seen as inhabiting different cultural spaces altogether, a situation which "emphasises gender asymmetries" (1997:718), another popular analysis that is perhaps a product of his time.

Labelle Prussin (1995) has more to add on the importance of gender hierarchies in Tuareg society while distinguishing regional architectural and stylistic differences. Prussin's feminist and cultural relativist focus is understandable considering her placement in time as a female architect and academic of the 1980s and 1990s. Prussin also begins to turn the discussion toward the modern anthropological self-consciousness by examining her own interest in extrapolating on the previously unanalysed "value of private, domestic, women's architecture" (1995:x). Unlike most accounts of the Tuareg that came before, she is clear about the secondary cultural framework that is superimposed onto other societies from the perspective of the contemporary west. Prussin's accounts self-consciously highlight ideas that reflect the authors point of view and the specific time and place of writing.

Rasmussen's hermeneutical approach to fieldwork follows in the footsteps of Prussin's self-consciousness but shifts to focus on experiential differences. She highlights the changes that have occurred specifically as a result of broadening western and Islamic influences and acknowledges the post-structuralist reflections of ethnographers. Finally, accounts of the Tuareg come full circle with Rasmussen's examinations of the specific social place of the ethnographer in Tuareg society (1996; 1997a). Rasmussen writes about the Tuareg, "while I agree that anthropologists have tended too often artificially separate local communities from global systems, nevertheless I feel that because global forces have played into local forms and conditions in unexpected ways, much more is involved here than mere hybrids" (2001:xxiv). In this she succeeds in minimising "the depersonalzing gaze that separates subject from object in anthropology and ethnography" (2001:xxxiv).

There are other contemporary studies of Tuareg culture that take less interest in acknowledging the complexities of increasing global interactions between nations and groups and instead seem to desire a more direct manumission of the colonial 'savage' image. Hagen (2000) lays a framework for a more integrated study of the history of the Tuareg that takes into account the many cross-cultural exchanges that undoubtably occurred on trans-saharan trade routes throughout very early history. Though at times tenuous, Hagen makes an argument that links the Tuareg to early ancient Egyptian civilisation. While not implausible, it is clear that ties to a group that is so revered in contemporary historical myth as the ancient Egyptians would help to clear the name of the 'noble savage' as well as insert it neatly into ideas about the progressive evolution of European history that still persist today. As a vehement arbiter for the Tuareg's place in history, it is not Hagen's theory but her seemingly ulterior motive that may discredit her argument in the eyes of modern historians. However, it must be remembered that if seen instead in the context of the Victorian era, an argument like Hagen's would have very likely changed the dialogue about the Tuareg for the rest of history as well as be taken as historical evidence by ethnographers up until today.

Going forward there is more emphasis on structured fieldwork that is deeply integrated with or comes directly from the communities being studied. For instance, Kohl's studies of beauty, border crossing and globalisation comes from a place more deeply embedded in Tuareg life and culture (Fischer 2010; Kohl 2009; Kohl 2010), though due in part to a more contemporary format it still occasionally blurs the contours of travel writing, photography portfolio and modern ethnography.

Aside from exceptions of Kohl and Rasmussen, what was true for Barth in 1858, is most likely still true for most ethnographers today. As outsiders, "we are too far removed… to observe them in all aspects of their daily lives" (1858:391). However, we must acknowledge that the reverse is also true, we are to deeply embedded in our own mires of culture to truly observe anything truly objectively. Keenan writes, "There have been very few objective studies of the Tuareg… with the result that many misconceptions have arisen and been reproduced in much of the more popular accessible literature" (1977:7). While there has been some very insightful study since it's writing in 1977, this is still true today. In examining the history, and most specifically the precolonial history of the Tuareg, it seems one of the few places to go from here is to return to ethnography of the past to further examine the self consciousness (and non-self consciousness) of previous accounts, perhaps combing out some of the fact from the fiction in order to further examine the local frameworks that may have been ignored in the glare of a European reflection. However as Keenan also reminds us, our historical analysis may raise "many questions which most inevitably must remain unanswered" (1977:10). Even in looking at contemporary work, it's important to take such information from the time and place from whence it comes, while acknowledging that our own unique anthropological frameworks are inextricably embedded in our outlook.

The Tent as a Mirror

Nomadic architecture is one area of Tuareg culture that has enjoyed significant study throughout the years. Khaldûn comments on desert architecture and maintains that sedentary culture is the goal of civilisation. He cites the desert ways of life, and Berbers specifically, as responsible for the lack of sedentary architecture in the Maghrib. According to Khaldûn, "one needs skill to learn [crafts], and since the Berbers did not practice them, they had no interest in buildings" (1967:270). He maintains that the nomads do nothing more than "see to it that they have pastures for their camels" (1967:272). It is for this reason he writes, that the few buildings that are in the Maghreb fall into ruin, as they are built only with perishable materials. While he admires them their bravery, Khaldûn clearly sees the dwellings of the nomads to be inferior. Even now the idea is deeply embedded one, it is a bias that has been evident since Roman times. Vitruvius, with his focus on the durability, propriety and beauty of built form, discredits portable architecture as primitive, explaining that people "created better types of houses as the days went by" (Pollio 2001:34).

Albeit brief, one of the first European studies of nomadic architecture was the Victorian account of Godfrey Rhodes (1858:110). Rhodes overview of 'Tents and Tent Life' encompasses quite a comprehensive study that had much to lend to a Victorian expeditionary military. With descriptions of dwellings in different regions and suggestions on tactics of encampment in widely varying environments, it is clearly a reflection of the needs of early colonialism. In Victorian literature, the tent is oft-presented as one of the elements that serve as a kind of "proof" of that unsullied link to a shared history and rugged connection to the land. While the term Berber, Beduin and Tuareg are often confused in early accounts (or in reality, not very well defined to begin with (Kohl 2010:460)), the tent is often the first sign of the presence of this noble "carpet knight" (King 1903:287). Rhodes alludes to the purity of the Beduin tent as "the same at this day as in the patriarchal age" (1858:xv). In King's account, the Tuareg tent has a "homliness, comfort and even luxury which made me envy the desert chief his home" (1903:309). Studies of Tuareg groups dating to the early 1920s (Cauvet 1925; Rodd 1926; Rodd 1929) focused solely on societal and racialised traits of the population, scarcely mentioning details of their surroundings. Rodd describes one of his guides in a legendary scene familiar to the Christian European reader, “in Biblical surroundings in a group of three tents with his flocks and his children and his grandchildren” (1929:15). After the 1920s, interest in Tuareg architecture wanes until 1963 with Nicolaisen’s structural perspectives, followed by Prussin’s architectural and feminist-cultural examinations (1968; 1974; 1995) and Rasmussen’s hermeneutic approach (1996; 1998).

The tent, as an idea, fits neatly into the Victorian spectrum of cultural evolution, and places it’s inhabitants clearly in a pre-modern state. For writers in the age of Darwin, a linear architectural evolution seemed an appropriate method for examining the world around them. For them, both species and cultural characteristics showed that they “exist at different stages in a process of improvement whose end or highest point is represented by modern European civilization” (Spurr 1993:64). This classifications system served colonial administration systems well, as “the classification of indigenous people according to their relative complexity of social organization becomes more systematic and articulate as it directly serves the interests of colonial administration” (Spurr 1993:68). As the Foureau’s Mission Saharienne came to understand, people first needed to be found before they could be controlled. Sedentary groups were easier to keep track of and thus more important to their administration.

The tent itself has been romanticised in modern culture as a representation of freedom and an idyllic simpler time. Faegre (1979) waxes poetically about an idealised nomadic life. It is clear that like so many before him, he sees in a nomadic lifestyle elements that are perceived to be lacking in his own. “The tent does not erect a clear boundary between inside and outside… the nomad feels at home with these conditions and prefers this contact with the outdoors” (1979:7). As a westerner who has no doubt spent nearly all of his life on the inside of regimentally rectangular rooms and buildings, it is not surprising that he concludes, “we have much to learn from the nomads about *living*” (1979:8).

Reflections of a Changing World

Writing about hunter-gatherer societies, Whitelaw explains that there is a divide between how non-sedentary and sedentary societies are viewed in the anthropological world. The divide can be seen as an extension of the architectural evolutionary paradigm that is

> exemplified by the focus on the functional organisation of space among hunter-gatherer societies, and the symbolic organisation of space among sedentary agricultural societies. This contrast reflects bias in the orientation of anthropological work on each type of society, rather than any real difference in behaviour between such societies, a bias which… treats hunter-gatherers as less complex behaviorally, socially and symbolically, and which accepts a less elaborate explanation for their behaviour as satisfactory. (1994:217)

By perpetuating the idea that nomadic dwellings are lower on the ladder of architectural evolution, erroneous assumptions are made about the social complexity of Tuareg ideas about living space. Prussin and Rasmussen touch on more complex theories of spacial organisation but both feel there is much more to be understood. Prussin reminds us that "Tent history is a far richer, more complex amalgam than unilineal explanation allows for: weaving together the threads that could synthesize history and anthropology into a plausible historic reconstruction remains a challenge" (1995:1).

It is clear from Rasmussen's and Prussin's work that "nonlinear bases of knowledge construction" (Rasmussen 2001:xiii) abound in Tuareg groups and that these frameworks don't always fit nicely into Eurocentric predetermined categories. There is an ongoing tension between the commonalities perceived by Victorian explorers and the more modern disappointment when the frameworks surrounding common cultural elements are found to be widely different. For example, Rasmussen reminds us to keep in mind that widely accepted oppositions like sacred and secular "are essentially western categories" and such diametric frameworks should not necessarily be imposed upon others (2001:xii). Prussin's work too, does well to remind us that expectations related to male and female binaries are subject to our western assumptions.

Just as western ethnography has reflected the frameworks inherent in western society, the Tuareg tent has reflected their own. As time and experiences have changed the reality of life for the Tuareg, the tent and its place in society has changed. The Tuareg worldview, like that of many other groups, has adapted over time to accommodate the complexities of post-colonialism, national border marking, shifting ideas about Islam, the changing roles of women, and the economic influence of the west, to name a few. As both a living space and a historic identity marker, the tent plays a crucial role in situating knowledge construction and therefore has become one of the negotiators of change (Rasmussen 2001:xix).

In recent years the travel needs and habits of the Tuareg have progressively changed. In their more sedentary life the 'borderlands' of traveling women and men are no longer new physical locations but changing states of mind and organisations of space (Rasmussen 1998:157). The tent has persisted through the shifting landscape of values and ideas about property ownership that have effected the lives of the Tuareg since colonialism. Rasmussen notes the contemporary tendency for men to own mud houses in a more westernised sense, while their wives maintain their tent in the courtyard (1996:17) "This spacial ordering reflects changes in household structure that are linked to phases of the life course" (Rasmussen 1997b:23). The architectural divide between angular mud houses for the husbands and rounded tents for wives falls neatly in line with more pervasive ideas about gender. Roundness and fullness are associated with women while angularity—"slimness and gauntness are considered male ideals" (Kohl 2009:71).

As men travel, women mark the familial transition through structural changes to the tent.

> Several days after her husbands return in March 1983, my field hostess changed the tent doors in her compound from facing outside toward the compounds of her sisters' and mother's households to facing inward, toward her own household's central courtyard. In addition, she moved her sleeping place from the kitchen tent to her nomadic tent. (Rasmussen 1998:177)

In short, with men at home, the tent is focused on the nuclear family, with men away the tent becomes part of a matrilineal group. In a wider context this can be seen as just one of a growing number of "improvised activities" that replace those from the earlier nomadic ways of life (Claudot-Hawad 2006:666).

Every group has it's own values, assumptions and ideologies about themselves and the world around them, individuals act on their environment in ways that shows these changing values. While it is true that "possibly innumerable" elements are at work in the situating of knowledge (Marchand 2010:S5), Rasmussen concludes that for the Tuareg, "built form and spacial arrangements of compounds reflect concepts of person and destiny as well as jural changes and alterations in household composition and organization over time" (1997b:23).

Possible Paths to Understanding

With a clearer view of historical reflections in ethnographic writing about the Tuareg and their various types of tents, we can begin to examine some of the possible frameworks that may have occurred throughout history. Much more fieldwork, and hopefully work from within the contemporary Tuareg community, is needed to accurately frame the self-perceived role of the tent in culture and community. Indeed its various positions throughout history may never be known. Rasmussen's work (1996; 1997b) shows evidence that the tent is not just a mirror in which the west can examine it's reflection. In modernity it has become instead a cultural window in which both sides can see their own reflection superimposed. For the contemporary Tuareg, the tent's placement and orientation reflect on broader cultural changes resulting from western influence.

As for the historical view, we must acknowledge a world of nearly infinite possibilities, while at the same time understand that there is not enough documentation to prove any hypothesis correct or incorrect at any point in precolonial history. However that does not mean that investigating different frameworks is not a worthwhile pursuit. In what has been called "a theoretical minefield," (Picton 1986:554) there are many possible answers to the question of knowledge construction and intent, especially when the cultures that produce a work are far away in physical or temporal space. Vansina suggests that it is both worthy and futile to speculate on a creators intentions. To analyse a subject is not to always have the right answers, but to ask the right questions.

> Historians always have to make such heartrending choices. The past is too complex to be rendered in all it's richness, with all its interconnections... Moreover, to refuse a clear choice means that the fabric will remain on the loom forever. One can always spend another decade teasing out further evidence... but to do so hinders the progress of scholarship by delaying the communication of the result of ongoing research. (Vansina 1990:xii)

Understanding some of the possibilities in Tuareg tent construction may help frame ethnographic work of the future—in pre-documented Tuareg society or any other—while helping us better understand contemporary outlooks.

Balance and Harmony

Rasmussen reveals a Tuareg worldview that believes that "for every illness there is a medicine." There is a focus on actions that establish balance and harmony that pervade not just medical treatments but all aspects of Tuareg life (2001:xxviii). For example, for some Tuareg, there is a belief that living in houses can cause illness (Nicolaisen 1963:330). As an item of such importance, it may be reasonable to include the structure and shelter of a tent as part of the crucial balance of life. For some this means that "the tent is a mode of creative expression, a way of reordering a person's relationship with animals and plants, with the earth and the sky, with the rhythms and forces of nature" (Prussin 1995:xx) for others it is "a replica of the cosmos" (Casajus 1987:58). Looking at the role of the tent through the frameworks of Marchand (2010) and Harris (2007) it is possible to see the tent as a broadly defined 'way of knowing' about the world (Harris 2007:4). As Prussin argues, the tent is inextricably linked to the roles of women in Tuareg society, not just as the creator and owner of a tent, but in a morphological sense too. "Roundish women imply the centre of the family, the pillar of the tent, and the stability of the community." (Kohl 2009:69). It is clear from most accounts that a tent is not just an acceptable shelter, but a deeply embedded element of Tuareg society that helps, in some way to create order and harmony in the lives of the people it shelters.

To further examine that balance, we can build on Nicolaisen, who explains the construction of a Kel Aïr mat tent with structuralist exactitude. First, the heavy, square bed (*tédabut*) is placed on the ground, holes are dug into the ground behind the bed and the two forked posts that hold cushions are secured into them. After the interior structure is created, the rounded arches are erected, followed by four straight side supports (*tigettewin*) and crossbars (*isgar*). Rope is wound around the centre arch and thin flexible cross pieces are fit into the coils of rope. Two rectangular mats are laid across the top of the frame, followed by oval mats on top, followed again by long narrow mats that go over the main arch, which are attached with knotted cord. If the weather requires, the narrow rectangular mats are run around outside perimeter. Nicolaisen remarks, “The work seems to be very easy to the women who measure no distances. They seem to carry out their work automatically” (1963:353).

From Nicolaisen’s description we get a very insightful and detailed mechanical breakdown of the process, a process which he remarks, can happen in approximately a half hour if not for the stop-start nature of the women’s life, as they are “interrupted in their work by many other household duties, by their crying babies, or by visitors from other camps” (1997:440). What Nicolaisen does not examine, and that which I think is owed more thought, is what might only be described as the physical and mental *rhythm* of tent building and the ways in which a young woman comes to know how to construct it. To take an ontological perspective and imagine the physical motions of tent building, one realises that the process oscillates between motions and shapes, between circle and square, curved and straight lines—from the square bed, to the digging of holes and the erecting of posts, from the rounded arches to the straight poles, to the circling ropes, and so on until the dwelling is complete. Through a lens that associates ideals of ‘roundness’ with women and ‘straightness’ with men, it is not surprising that the tent is the physical result of the marriage ceremony, for a tent like this can not stand without both coils and posts, round/female and straight/male elements working together in perfect coordination. Nicolaisen (1963:353) specifies that not all Tuareg women erect their tents in this exact order nor do all Tuareg groups use mat tents, or tents that create this particular form. However, given the Tuareg emphasis on balance and harmony, there may be a similar philosophical ideals, or at the very least, a more complex ‘way of knowing,’ at work here that is absent in previous examinations of Tuareg architecture.

A Way of Knowing

Much has been written about the creation of the tent as a major part of the Tuareg marriage ceremony. Linguistically “making a tent” is a metaphor for becoming married, and “woman within [the tent]” (*tamtot-n-amas)* denotes a woman married for longer than three years (Rasmussen 1997b: 30). The creation of the tent creates a temporal border between before and after marriage. From Rasmussen’s study we can conclude that it also represents a border between together and apart. Within the marriage ceremony, the creation of the tent is a stepped process in which a groom 'gets to to know' his bride over the seven day ceremony. In the first four days of a marriage ceremony, the tent is erected in first a rudimentary way, then gradually each day until day four when a 'correct' finished form is erected. Following the tent structure, the husband's relationship to his new wife must progress through four stages of learning as well. As Rasmussen explains, "on the first night, the bride is your sister, on the second, she is your mother, on the third, she is your mother-in-law, and on the fourth she becomes your wife" (1997b:60). It could be said then that the building or rearrangement of a tent, either for the first time as in a marriage ceremony or seasonally with the migration of a husband, is the physical creation of a personal status, a making of knowledge "entailing co-ordinated interaction between interlocutors and practitioners with their total environment" (Marchand 2010:S2). By creating and recreating the tent, the Tuareg wife could be said to embody and physically craft their social situation in time and space. Accordingly, upon a woman's death, "her tent or grass building is destroyed and the land beneath it is left enclosed with a fence for about a year or until a granddaughter marries" conversely, a man's mud house is inherited by his children (Rasmussen 1996:18). A mud house is merely an object to be inherited, a tent is much more than that. A women's tent is inextricably tied to her being as an individual and her place within a family. When she ceases to exist, it too must cease to exist.

Temporal Frameworks

Rasmussen touches on temporal frameworks that may also provide a more whole view of the role of the tent throughout history. Nicolaisen (1997) and Foucauld (1951) are the only ethnographers to date who make any brief reports about methods of Tuareg time reckoning. Calendrically the Islamic lunar system takes precedent. However the names of the months are thought to have been introduced before the spread of Islam (Nicolaisen 1997:786). For the Kel Ferwan, Islamic year names are not generally recognised, instead year-names are based on the geographical location of the camp during the religious feast of *tafaské*. Occasionally for the Kel Ferwan and Tuareg groups of the Ahaggar, year names are derived from other location-based and experiential phenomena such as "the year when the Aïr Tuareg revolted against the French under the leadership of Kawchen,"—meaning the Gregorian calendar year of 1917 (Nicolaisen 1997:786).

Reflecting the groups status at the millennial turn, one anonymous Tuareg interviewed by Kohl stated, “We Tuareg are tired. In the Sahara we have lost everything, and in the cities we have gained nothing. We are poor. For years our heads were blocked, we didn’t send our children to school, and now we vegetate. We don’t live but we also can’t die.” Equating movement to living is also noted by Trotha in the Tuareg adage, “travel means learning how to live”[2] (2001:151). As Salmond reminds us, “intellectual activity is a journey,” (1982:71) and it may be that for some Tuareg, frequent journeys and the movement of tent compounds marks the passage of time through one’s life.

In addition to the marriage ceremony and seasonal tent re-orientation discussed by Rasmussen, a number of smaller spacial rearrangements and markers involving the tent take place to mark familial transitions. After the birth of a child, a windscreen is erected inside the tent to physically separate a mother and child from elements outside the tent (Rasmussen 1997b:90), and the death of a child is sometimes marked by a movement of camp (Rasmussen 1997b:131). After a year of marriage, a *tineselem* or “greeting the tent” is held in which sisters-in-law arrive at the tent to celebrate and welcome a new bride into the family (Rasmussen 1997b:68). Children’s name days too are marked by processions around the tent “in order to see the world” (Rasmussen 1997b:92). Thus, interactions with the tent mark not just marriage ceremonies but other significant events in the lives of women and children.

In newly sedentary circumstances, the rearrangement of the tent according to the absence or presence of a travelling husband may be seen as filling a psychological void left by the absence of physical / temporal movement required. Rasmussen notes, “this seasonal spatial arrangement reflects, and also reinforces, a change from matrifocal to patrifocal orientation in socioeconomic life upon men's return from caravan trading” (1996:19). There are changes in social expectations that are related to the traveling status of a husband such as “more domestic isolation and patrifocal domination” during a husband’s time at home (Rasmussen 1996:20). In a sensory-memory framework, it is the tent itself that might be seen as an indicator of cyclical time and a marker of social expectations within that timeframe. Much as the recollection of autumn leaves may cue memories and emotions about the beginning of school for some in the West, tent directionality and dwelling arrangements will cue memories and emotions associated with the matrifocal or patrifocal locus of the family, or with other life transitions. For "to remember something is not just to repeat it, but to reconstruct, even sometimes to create, to express oneself, and other parties to life and history as well" (Rasmussen 2002:125).

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[2] “Reisen heißt leben lernen”

Rasmussen emphasises that the tent is seen as a stabiliser in the personalities and lives of it's inhabitants. Movement away from the tent can cause changes in character for both men and women as its stabilising force becomes faint. "Travel away from this tent requires protection against various categories of dangers, human and nonhuman" (1998:164) and precautions must be taken accordingly. It may be understood as being somewhat of an 'out of time' experience in which standard markers are not present and things seem out of balance. According to Soldini, "The tent provides maximum protection against the weather, but for the nomads the feeling of 'being at home' is in the foreground"[3] (1983:101). Rasmussen's works seem to support the temporal importance of the tent but reminds us that "linear chronological schemes of memory, narrative, and history" are to be understood as a western construct (2002:114).

Prussin's studies in the early 1990s worked consciously in a feminist anthropological framework, and some of the views have had a proven validity over time. In 1995, she noted that,

> because women were, and continue to be, the architects of the indigenous built environment in nomadic societies, consideration of the changing role and position of women in such societies is of paramount importance in understanding the relationship between vernacular and institutional tent architecture. (Prussin 1995:2)

Through Rasmussen's subsequent work, Prussin's statement proved itself true. Decades later, Rasmussen noticed that the tent's placement, and to some extent it's role in the household had changed, along with the changing roles of the women who built them. Prussin's accurate cultural forecasting should remind us of the importance of examination from a number of different perspectives. Examination from many angles may help us better understand the future as well as the past.

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[3] "Das Zelt liefert gegen Witterungseinflüsse einen optimalen Schutz, doch für den Nomaden steht das Gefühl "zu Hause zu sein" in Vordergrund."

At the same time we must be aware of the cultural frameworks that each ethnographer intentionally or unintentionally brings into view.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we must accept that there are variable paths to knowledge. One path, that we can and must employ going forward is our ability to examine historical motives for analysis and overlaying cultural frameworks. The history of Tuareg ethnography is so steeped in overlapping cultural reflections that it is at times impossible to untangle fact from fiction. As Tidrick states, "what they had to say… was almost always interesting—but as much for what it tells us about themselves as about their subjects" (Tidrick 1981:37). Only by looking inward can we successfully look outward. The persistence of the 'last of the noble savages' myth in western culture tells us mainly about what we feel we've lost in our modern world—namely a rugged self-reliance and closeness to the land, an idealised primordial sense of freedom. While there is little danger of a return to the lack of reflexivity present in Victorian ethnographies, we can nevertheless continue to learn from the past, even if it is only a past formed of western aspirations. Indeed it is sometimes the only available window into an ever-changing history.

Just as the ethnographic frameworks of the past have put the focus on a space of alterity that reflected western cultural standards and values, Tuareg nomadic dwellings reflect their expectations of and existence within their society and in an increasingly globalised world. We can see in more recent work (Rasmussen 1997b; Rasmussen 1998; Rasmussen 2001) that the Tuareg tent serves not just as a shelter but as an important liminal object that negotiates relational, spacial and temporal boundaries in the lives of it's owners. It's creation, orientation, placement and modifications are markers of both individual and institutional memory within Tuareg society. As "the past is thus built into the discursive and non-discursive ordering of the lives we live" (Rasmussen 2002:114), we can speculate about the role of the tent in the history of Tuareg society. While speculative ideas can neither be proven nor disproven with any real certainty, it is still important to explore the possibilities, as they may shed light on future developments in an ever changing world.

It may be that by living in the world and acting upon it's physical elements—whether that is by writing ethnographies or constructing tents—is one unequivocally human way of coming to understand our situation.

As Ingold states, “humans come to know the world not by virtue of having first removed themselves from it, but through the very process of living and making their ways in it” (2010:361). Whether or not we choose to ‘dismantle the machine’ of anthropology as Ingold urges us to do (2010:363), in examining others’ paths to knowledge we must not forget that all the time, we are travelling down our own paths along the way. For both western ethnographers and the present day Tuareg, “we have, perpetually and never-endingly, to be making ourselves. That is what life is, what history is, and what it means to be human” (Ingold 2010:363).

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