

TROUBLES IN NIGER

Elhadji returned to Niger from his annual US trip in mid-June to face the reality of a full blown armed insurrection in and north of Agadez. Tuareg rebels and the military are fighting a guerilla war. The government has seemingly arbitrarily imprisoned some Tuaregs. Elhadji went home to Agadez for two days to buy food for his older brothers and sisters and elderly relatives. Then, because he felt he was at risk, he fled to Niamey with Kola, their five children and several other relatives jam-packed into his 1980s car. The Sahara is their home and they are not happy living far to the south of the Tuareg lands. Elhadji says they cannot go home until the troubles are over. Nobody has any idea when that will be.



Niamey house under construction.

In 2006 Elhadji built a house in Niamey so that he and others who work in the jewelry business

would have a safe place to stay. In addition to his immediate family there are as many as 40 people camped in and around the house. Most of the artisans have followed Elhadji to Niamey although their families are still in Agadez. Since the weather is hot they work and sleep outside under a large shade. The silversmiths often work through the night to replenish the stock of jewelry sold during Elhadji's successful US trip.

To understand the current turmoil it is necessary to know some history. Like almost all African countries there are several tribes in Niger. Most of the people are either Hausa or Djerma, who refer to themselves as black Africans. The Tuaregs, sometimes called light-skinned Africans even though some have skin as dark as the majority tribes, make up less than 20 percent of the population. Most of the people live in the Sahel, the southern part of the country which has more rain and some subsistence farming. The Tuaregs and other pastoral tribes such as the Fulani live mostly in the north which lies within the true Sahara. Most of the minerals (uranium, coal, possibly oil and gold) are in the north.

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There are longstanding animosities between the light-skinned and black Nigeriens although in Agadez the Tuaregs and Hausa live in harmony. The government,

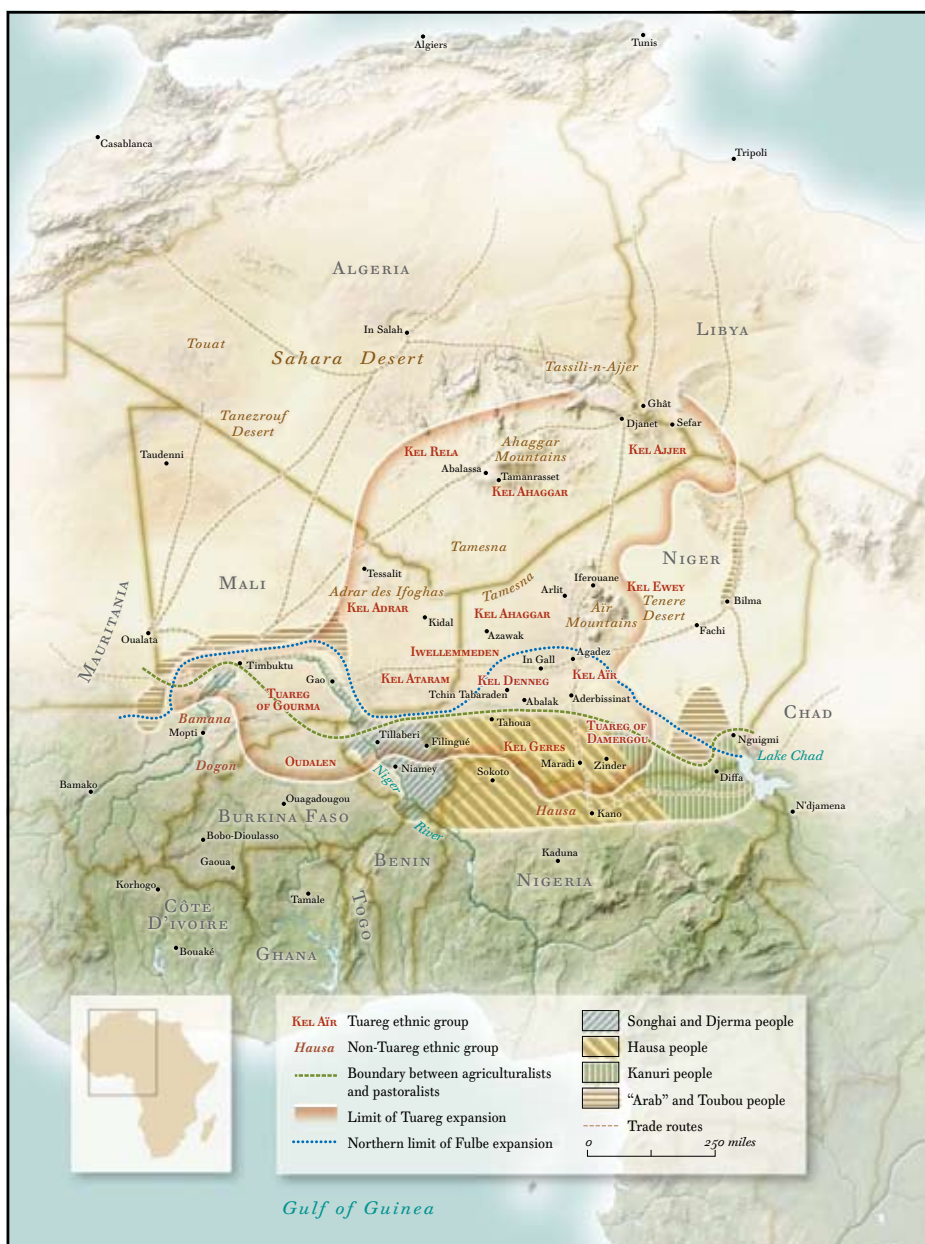
both national and regional, is controlled by the black Africans.

Tuaregs first rebelled against the government in the early 1990s. Initially their demand

was the right to have their children taught Tomashek, the Tuareg language, in school but it escalated to a demand for autonomy. The rebellion was settled with the signing of a peace agreement in 1995 which was supposed to give the Tuaregs better access to education, medical care and a share of political power, particularly in the Department of Agadez.

For several years the schools, especially in Agadez, have been in session only sporadically because the government has not paid the teachers regularly. The Tuaregs claim that they have not received the promised medical care and other services from the central government. The Governor, Commandant and other high level officials in the Department of Agadez are all from the south.

The Niger Movement for Justice (MNJ) tried unsuccessfully to negotiate with the government to force it to honor the terms of the 1995 agreement. The MNJ also sought a share of the wealth from the uranium mines and the oil and



From "Art of Being Tuareg: Sahara Nomads in a Modern World"

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uranium exploration being carried out in their traditional lands. The government, especially, president Mamadou Tanja, has refused to talk, contending that the rebels are bandits and drug smugglers and not representative of a genuine cause. The armed uprising began in February 2007 and has escalated since then. Wikipedia has additional information on both rebellions.

INQUIRING MINDS

Do Tuareg women make jewelry?

Only Tuareg men and boys from the Inadan (blacksmith) class work with fire and metals. Women sometimes help by stringing beads for the necklaces. Since they typically are the keepers of things of value women are responsible for safeguarding the silver and stones as well as the finished jewelry. (On my first trip to Niger I was handed the bag of silver we had just bought at the Grande Marche in Niamey because "women take care of it" and I was the only woman on that shopping expedition.)

Inadan women make beautifully decorated leather bags, often of dyed goat skin which they buy in the market. They gather in the afternoons to either work on individual projects or to collectively make a large camel saddle bag. Larger bags are trimmed with fringe which may consist of stripes sewn together and then intricately cut out to reveal a color underneath, often a bright turquoise.

Koumama Tuareg Jewelry selected to participate in the first annual Tiburon Art Festival

The Koumama Tuareg Jewelry was selected in a juried competition as one of 50 artists who will exhibit at the First Annual Tiburon Art Festival on Ark Row in downtown Tiburon, California on August 25 and 26. Since Elhadji is in Niger Isabelle Gillis and I will represent him.

If you have an "Inquiring Minds" question that you would like for us to answer in a future newsletter, please send us an email at the address below:

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