Introduction

> [I]f race is socially and historically constructed, then racism must be reconstructed as social regimes change and histories unfold … [W]e [must] recognize that a new historical construct is never entirely new and the old is never entirely supplanted by the new. Rather the new is grafted onto the old. Thus racism, too, is never entirely new. Shards and fragments of its past incarnations are embedded in the new. Or, if we switch metaphors to an archaeological image, the new is sedimented onto the old, which occasionally seeps or bursts through. Our problem then, is to figure out how this happens and to take its measure.
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RACE IN NORTHERN MALI

The language of racial difference has become a common feature of political discourse in many parts of postcolonial Africa, especially in the countries of the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Great Lakes. Yet understanding how Africans have come to deploy idioms of race to describe intra-African differences has often been handicapped by academic scholarship that insists on race being understood as an exclusively European-American ideology. Mahmood Mamdani's well-known book on the Rwandan genocide is illustrative of this larger problem. He frames African uses of racial language as a kind of false consciousness derived from the colonial experience: "At the core of the ideology of Hutu Power was the conviction that the Tutsi were a *race* alien to Rwanda, and not an

[1] Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Race in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 20–1.

indigenous *ethnic group*. The shift in political vocabulary was a return to the vision of the colonial period." Hutu Power propagandists "claimed to be radical nationalist and populist. Yet, in defining the Tutsi as a foreign race, even if without knowing it, they were reaffirming the colonial legacy and construing themselves the same way that Belgian colonialism had construed them prior to independence."[2] For Mamdani, the appearance of racial language stands as an indictment of the wider failure of postcolonial Africa to liberate itself from the effects of the colonial experience. As such, the Rwandan genocide is presented as an ironic tragedy; ironic because Rwandans employed the same tools as the colonizers – "even if without knowing it" – in their contests for power.

This book offers a different perspective, arguing instead that there are African histories of race that do not obey colonial logics. Along the Sahel in West Africa, a long history of racial language is evident in the writings of Muslim intellectuals well before the arrival of Europeans. Sahelian writers made a fundamental distinction between "whites" (Ar. bīḍān), for those who claimed Arab pedigrees, and "blacks" (Ar. sūdān). In these texts, "blackness" worked as a marker of inferiority that created significant legal disability for people who could be labeled in this way. When the Sahel was colonized by France beginning in the late nineteenth century, the colonial administration used these existing local conceptions of racial difference in the organization of its rule, in part because they corresponded to European denigrations of people defined as black. If we wish to understand the ways that racial languages work today in the countries of the African Sahel, we must explore the intellectual history of this region in much greater depth. Only then will we be able to evaluate the influence that European racial ideologies had in shaping postcolonial political language, and the extent to which Mamdani's evaluation of Rwanda – or more recently Darfur[3] – offers a convincing explanation of this history.

Among the most important flashpoints of racial conflict along the Sahel are the northern regions of Mali and Niger. In 1990, simultaneous revolts were launched by ethnically-Tuareg militias against the authority of the Malian and Nigerian governments. These actions began a conflict that came to be known as the Tuareg Rebellion (1990–1995). Small in scale compared to other African civil wars, these events nonetheless

[2] Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 190. Italics in original.

[3] Mamdani has made an almost identical argument for Darfur (Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror* [New York: Pantheon, 2009], 147–52).

degenerated quickly into violence defined by locally understood categories of racial difference. The Tuareg – and later Arab – rebels identified themselves as "non-blacks" who were fighting against "black"-dominated governments and armies in Mali and Niger. The expressed objective of the rebellion was the creation of independent or autonomous territories for Tuareg and Arab people, where they would constitute the racial and ethnic majority.

Rebel grievances were often expressed in racial terms. Tuareg intellectuals presented a picture of themselves as an oppressed racial minority forced to fight brutal and corrupt regimes that targeted them because of historically driven racial animus. In a book published by the Nigerian Tuareg intellectual Mano Dayak in 1992 at the height of the conflict, he accused the governments of Niger and Mali of an explicit policy of terrorizing the Tuareg people as vengeance for the Tuareg history of enslaving blacks: "The Republic of Niger decided to make the Tuareg pay dearly for their 'insolence' and for their past as 'slave' masters."[4] In a document published in 1994 by Tuareg rebels in Niger outlining their political demands for the creation of a "Tuareg zone," control was demanded over all areas of Niger that had once been "administered" by the Tuareg before the arrival of the French colonial state at the end of the nineteenth century. As such, the rebels claimed land in which Tuareg populations were quite small. In this "Tuareg zone," the rebels demanded that the future electorate exclude all non-Tuareg populations not considered (by the Tuareg rebels) to be autochthonous. In the Nigerian press, this was understood as an attempt to reimpose Tuareg domination over local blacks.[5] In the words of André Salifou, a southern Nigerian intellectual close to the government at the time, "certain Tuareg have decided to recall their pre-colonial past, which consisted of raids and other pillaging essentially at the expense of the sedentary populations. They want to play the most important role in the Sahel which has been abandoned by the European colonialists for thirty years and where power is exercised by the Blacks, which is to say, in their eyes, by inferior beings."[6]

Rebel demands in Mali for the "liberation" of the Azawad region (the Saharan area immediately north of the Niger Bend) as a Tuareg and Arab homeland met with similar responses. In a pamphlet published during

[4] Mano Dayak, *Touareg, la tragédie* (Paris: Editions Jean-Claude Lattès, 1992), 63.
[5] Dominique Casajus, "Les amis français de la cause touarègue," *CEA* 137, XXXV–1, (1995): 243–4.
[6] André Salifou, *La question touarègue au Niger* (Paris: Karthala, 1993), 11.

the conflict by sympathizers of the loyalist black militias created during the war, the territorial claims made by rebel groups were mocked: "The Azawad is free. It is not occupied by any Songhay, or by any Fulbe, or Sarakollé. No black sedentary people claim the Azawad [which is nothing but] an expanse of desert." The real aim of the rebel movement, the pamphlet claimed, was the "recognition of a right to the villainous appropriation of the land of the regions, the property of the sedentary peoples." The rebels "are racists and enslavers. They consider all blacks to be slaves, inferior beings." They "want recognition of the right to dominate the black people." The Tuareg "have always been bandits, living from theft, raids and brigandage. The people of the North have a foreign body in the social tissue."[7]

The language of slavery was central to the racial framework of the conflict and, as we will see, to the larger history of racial ideas in the wider region. In Mano Dayak's book, he attempted to downplay the history of slavery in Tuareg society: "In times of war, the winner took his booty. The Tuareg frequently took prisoners whom they brought back with them to their camp. But after that, these slaves integrated into Tuareg families." Instead of being treated as slaves, these captives "were treated practically in the same manner as everyone else." They could acquire livestock and gain their freedom. Dayak argued that even using the term "slaves" was a mischaracterization of history, and of the racial situation in the present. They were "more domestic servants than slaves. Their descendants are the black-skinned Tuareg that we find amongst us today." For Dayak, "[t]he theme of slavery has been, and continues to be, used to stir up the hatred of the people of the South against us. The harsh policy which the governments of Mali and Niger have adopted towards the Tuareg represents nothing more than the continuation of vengeance. They … speak to us again and again about this past in which they were the servants and we were the masters."[8]

The writers of the anti-Tuareg pamphlet had an answer to claims made by those like Dayak: "Co-citizens of the North, let us sweep all of the nomadic presence from our towns and villages, from our lands, even the uncultivated lands! Tomorrow the nomads will settle there as a dominating people. Black sedentary peoples, from Nioro to Meneka, let

[7] Anonymous, "La Voix du Nord, no. 00" (no date). See also Hélène Claudot-Hawad, "Touaregs au Mali: 'Négrafricanisme' et racisme," *Le Monde diplomatique* (April 1995): 30.

[8] Dayak, *Touareg*, 21–2.

us organize ourselves, and let us arm ourselves for the great battle which is brewing. Let us drive the nomads back into the sands of the Azawad." To end the rebellion, the pamphlet writers proposed a full race war: "The only way to put an end to the war is for the black sedentary peoples to rise against the nomads. The authorities and the military know it. The nomads know it also … We must not be naïve. The white Tamachek are not our 'brothers.' They know it and we know it."[9]

I began the research for this book in 1999, four years after the end of the Tuareg Rebellion. At that time, it seemed to me that racial language and racial tension permeated social intercourse in northern Mali. People used racial labels to talk about themselves and others as a matter of course. Yet it was the competing claims of racial oppression that struck me as especially ubiquitous. Understanding why racial arguments were so common in political contexts became a focus of my research. As the following story of my visit to a village called Tin Aicha indicates, finding answers to my questions was far from straightforward.

I visited Tin Aicha in the course of oral research that I carried out in the autumn of 2002. It is a small settlement on the north shore of a large seasonal lake called Lake Faguibine (approximately 100 km west of Timbuktu). I went there to investigate an ongoing conflict over land ownership. I had been given the names of two individuals who lived in the town: a "white" Tuareg man and the "black" chief of the village who was identified to me as a "bellah," a term used to refer to people of slave origin in Tuareg society (and whom I will call "bellah-iklan," combining the Songhay and Tamashek terms for this status category). These two men, I was told, would be able to give me the different perspectives on problems associated with land tenure.

Tin Aicha is an otherwise unremarkable place of sand dunes, acacia trees, sheep, goats, and scattered compounds with straw shelters and the rare adobe structure. In good years, Lake Faguibine fills with water from the annual rise of the Niger River floodwaters. When this happens, the land in the lake basin becomes agriculturally rich and can be farmed. In the early years of the colonial occupation in the 1890s, French officials considered the region to be the breadbasket of northern Mali, its grain markets the most important in the subregion. But when I visited, many decades had passed since the lake had last filled with enough water to reach the shores of Tin Aicha; instead of crops, the lake bed was thickly covered with trees and bushes. Located in the high Sahel, the land is

[9] "Voix du Nord."

barely able to support a sparse population engaged mostly in a pastoral economy across the hot, dry sands that stretch between Timbuktu to the east and the Mauritanian border 150 km to the west. The people who live in Tin Aicha speak Tamashek, the Berber language of the Tuareg people in northern Mali. But whereas the village is linguistically homogeneous, it is divided racially. The majority of villagers are black, although there is a significant minority who are Tuareg of noble – or at least nonslave – descent. They consider themselves, and are recognized by most others in northern Mali, to be nonblack; depending on the language being used, they describe themselves, and are described, as white or red.[10]

When I arrived in the village, I found my way to the home of the village chief. Word of my arrival spread and soon everyone with a local political interest came to see what had brought me to the village. That I was a researcher and not a development worker caused some disappointment, but as the issues of my research were revealed in the ensuing discussion, interest increased and I became embroiled in a heated conversation with several of the white Tuareg about the "traditional rights" of land ownership in the area. My main interlocutor turned out to be the man I had been directed to meet. He was a retired teacher who had settled in the village and become something of a local historian and political agitator on behalf of his faction of the community. At one point, he invited me to come with him to his home so that he could show me some of the historical materials he had collected.

At his house, he showed me an array of documents in French and Arabic relating to the history of his community – the Kel Entsar – as well as copies of colonial documents relating to land tenure, relations with other groups, and copies of letters and petitions he had written to Malian governmental authorities concerning various grievances. He showed me an incomplete history of the Kel Entsar that he was himself writing, and I offered him some advice on where he might find additional sources that would interest him. The combination of material was not at all unusual for someone in his position. The documents that were of most interest to him, however, were colonial conventions drawn up by the French administration to regulate rights to land in the fertile basin of Lake Faguibine. He had several of these and he wanted my assistance in helping him locate others. We both knew that in these conventions, the

[10] Throughout the book, I will often use the terms "black," "white," and "race." It will be understood, I hope, that even when not indicated by quotation marks or parentheses, these terms are not meant as objective descriptors of physical or "racial" difference, but as social and cultural constructions.

French colonial state had assigned the land rights of the northern half of Lake Faguibine, including the land around the village of Tin Aicha, to the Tuareg nobles of the Kel Entsar. Slaves – or bellah-iklan – who until the very end of the colonial period remained in servile relationships with their Tuareg masters and overlords, provided the labor. The colonial state and Tuareg political leaders made it impossible for the bellah-iklan to own land because of their status as slaves. The retired teacher hoped that through his campaign he would be able to reclaim the agricultural land of Tin Aicha for his community, not so that they could work it but in order to return to a sharecropping relationship with bellah-iklan who would farm it for them. The great act of treachery in the teacher's eyes lay at the feet of the "black" Malian government that had turned the land around Tin Aicha over to a group of bellah-iklan in the first place, thus depriving his community of its "traditional" rights and undermining the natural social hierarchy in Tuareg society.

When I was later able to interview the village chief, he told a different story. In his version of events, the land around Tin Aicha had been unoccupied when bellah-iklan, displaced by the Sahelian famine of 1973, had first settled there in 1976. No one owned the land then. The Malian government, with the assistance of an American Quaker nongovernmental organization had rightly given them access to the unused land and supported the new settlement by providing seeds and livestock, and by building a school and a health center. The village chief employed the commonly understood agriculturalist version of traditional land tenure rights in northern Mali by claiming that since the bellah-iklan were the cultivators who had put the land into use, it belonged to them. These bellah-iklan, he claimed, were not the former slaves of the noble Tuareg in the village; they had full rights to the land as freemen. The village chief told me that the white Tuareg had only arrived in the village after the end of the Tuareg Rebellion, and they had been attempting to dispossess the local black inhabitants of their land ever since. They had also been trying to unseat the local black officeholders such as the village chief and mayor. Accordingly, these particular Tuareg had absolutely no legitimate claim on the land because they were from a different area and had only come to Tin Aicha after a disagreement with their fellows hundreds of kilometers away.

It was not uncommon in my research to encounter conflicting local accounts of the past and differing claims of grievance and traditional rights. But when I was later able to investigate the history of the Tin Aicha settlement, I discovered that the initial settlers who had been given

land in the reconstituted village were mostly white Tuareg who had been living in a local government-run camp for famine victims since 1973. According to a report by the American Quaker organization that had financed the Tin Aicha resettlement project, only 8 of the 200 families settled in the village and living there by 1978 were bellah-iklan.[11] The Tin Aicha project was conceived of as a means of sedentarizing semino-madic pastoralists and putting them to work as farmers – goals shared by the Malian government and international development organizations at the time (and since). The report on the project suggested that the destitute settlers had begun to undertake agriculture for the first time in their lives – work that was dishonorable for them in their cultural terms. However, the hoped-for transformation of these pastoralists into sedentary farmers proved illusory. It turned out that they approached farming as only a necessary evil required of them until they could reconstitute animal stocks and return to their former pastoralist lifestyle. When that happened, most of them left Tin Aicha or found bellah-iklan who would sharecrop the agricultural land for them. When the civil war started in the early 1990s, the whole population was forced to flee from the sedentary villages of the Lake Faguibine region.

At the time that I visited Tin Aicha, I failed to understand something that was very important: the racial tensions there were not the product of changed relations between former masters and former slaves; instead, they pitted people who shared no long-term personal connections with each another. Both the black bellah-iklan and the white Tuareg in Tin Aicha made racial arguments in which they presented themselves as the victims of racism. For my bellah-iklan interlocutor, the Tuareg are racists because they perceive and treat blacks as socially inferior, servile, and as slaves by nature. Their true goal is the resubjugation of black people as workers and servants. Their actions in Tin Aicha proved the truth of this yet again. For the white Tuareg teacher, on the other hand, the postcolonial government of Mali, which he described as controlled by blacks for the interests of blacks, had dispossessed his people because they are not black. The Malian government had given land to people of slave origin, and more recently had sought to exterminate or expel his people during the Tuareg Rebellion in the first half of the 1990s. These arguments, made in the small village of Tin Aicha, are instances of much wider uses of racial ideas across northern Mali, in which competing narratives of

[11] The American Friends Service Committee, *Tin Aicha, Nomad Village* (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1982), 62.

racial oppression animate social and political relationships and undergird different moral orders.

My visit to Tin Aicha exposed for me the problem of trying to draw too close a connection between a particular local history of relations between groups of people over generations and the articulation of racial arguments. This may appear an elementary sort of problem for historians of race in the United States, where dislocation, migration, and industrialization went hand in hand with the development of racial formation. At the beginning of my research I had hoped to use microhistories of relations between particular groups of people over time as a way of tracing the emergence of racial ideas and racial identities, especially among former slaves and their former masters. But the problem that the Tin Aicha case highlights is that racial arguments are, almost by definition, abstractions that do not adhere well to real places and real people. Race works instead as an argument about the world, as a moral ordering device, even at times as a way of conjuring a utopian vision; it does not work nearly as well in organizing the details of individual relationships. It is precisely the abstractness of race that makes it so effective because it is not easily susceptible to empirical disproof, and it can coexist with social relations that belie the premises of different racial arguments.

This book traces the development of arguments about race in one place along the edge of the Sahara Desert in West Africa over centuries. It demonstrates the ways in which these ideas were deployed by people in this region, and it reveals some of the social, economic, and political "work" that race was made to perform in different contexts. It is, therefore, a book about the particular configurations of the abstraction of race along the West African Sahel, and the concrete effects that racial arguments have had on the social relations of the people who have lived in this place.

WHY RACE?

The use of the term "race" to describe non-European constructions of human difference, especially prior to European colonial expansion, may cause some readers pause. One possible objection is based on the idea that the term "race," or some cognate in local vocabularies, must be present in order to carry the meaning of the modern ideas of racism. There is no meta-term in the Sahelian Arabic sources that I will use in this book, or a particular treatise that I can point to, that clearly articulates a theoretical framework of such a term. In different contexts, certain

words (Ar. qawm, qabīla, ʿirq) stand for race, but there was no Arthur de Gobineau or Herbert Spencer of the West African Sahel. However, such an objection is really just a form of nominalism. As David Nirenberg has pointed out, it is as if, in a European context, one were to argue "that because the word *Rasse* did not enter German until the eighteenth century and the word *Anti-Semitismus* until the nineteenth, we need not look for these concepts in the earlier history of German-speaking lands." The nominalist challenge is similar to objections based on narrow definitions of race. As Nirenberg puts it, we should not be surprised that "those who define race as the application of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century vocabularies of biological classification to human populations differentiated by skin color are certain that it cannot be found in earlier periods. Such definitions fail to make sense even of modern racial ideologies, which are themselves not only tremendously diverse but also change a great deal over time."[12]

The common problem with objections based on single terms or narrow definitions based on a modern Western idea of race is that they rest on a fiction that there is a coherent model in European racial thought with which to compare ideas about race elsewhere. Every serious scholar who has attempted to trace the historical development of racial thought in Europe has shown just how diverse these ideas have been.[13] The notion of race has become far too attached to one particular set of historical concepts – that of nineteenth- and twentieth-century "scientific" models of race – as if these were its only "true" manifestation and should somehow be equated with a universal race theory.[14] Even in Europe, racial thought was never especially coherent. At its zenith in the second half of the nineteenth century, famous writers on race such as Gobineau and Paul Broca argued for completely different sets of ideas about what race was and what it meant, disagreeing fundamentally about racial mixing and its consequences. It is just empirically untrue that there was ever a single coherent form of racial thought that could stand as a nominal model for what "real racial thought" is.

[12] David Nirenberg, "Race and the Middle Ages: The Case of Spain and Its Jews," in *Rereading the Black Legend: The Discourses of Religious and Racial Difference in the Renaissance Empires*, ed. Margaret R. Greer, Walter D. Mignolo, and Maureen Quilligan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 73–4.

[13] Two of the clearest examples are Michael Banton, *Racial Theories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and Ivan Hannaford, *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

[14] David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 41.