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The state and the rebel: Online nationalisms in Niger

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The advent of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) – particularly the internet and associated networks – have made it possible to express previously repressed nationalist sentiments, forbidden languages, ethnic loyalties, and new identities free from the control exerted between the boundaries of the state. New forms of nationalistic conflicts (that take place in what Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1996, 2001) call ‘netwars’) are now being waged along the lines of multiple forms of loyalties (civic, state-induced, or ethnic or subversive). Since the advent of democracy in Francophone Africa, the state has lost its monopoly over the media and now cannot control actors (particularly diasporic communities scattered around the world) who are disputing its hegemony and legitimacy. Citizens who no longer live in the national territory are fighting back against divisive and subversive tendencies in the name of national cohesion, unity, territorial integrity, and democratic governance. For example, in Niger since the beginning of 2007, two rebel movements led by Tuareg insurgents have been fighting the government on both the military and the virtual fronts. They have invaded existing virtual networks such as discussion forums and online media websites and created their own websites and chat rooms. In the name of national unity and peaceful development, they are being countered by the state as well as other citizens of the diaspora.

This article analyses how Tuareg identity has been framed over time by colonial anthropologists and administrators in Niger and how this identity is now being expressed online by current Nigerien Tuareg rebels in the context of conflicting nationalisms involving the state and its opponents. The discussion argues that, contrary to the deterministic role attributed to ICTs, it is the ‘external’ social and political conditions that determine the online contours of nationalistic expressions and conflicts. This article falls within the framework of the ‘structuralist-constructivist’ theory devised by Bourdieu; consequently, it approaches such conflicting nationalisms as ‘symbolic struggles over the power to produce and to impose a legitimate vision of the world’ (Bourdieu 1989, 20).

The topic here is limited to the Nigerien Tuareg movements and does not address in any way the Malian Tuareg movements or the pan-Amazigh movement. Where necessary, however, references will be made to the one or the other for the purpose of clarifying issues related to Nigerien Tuareg movements.

**Keywords:** netwars; online nationalism; Nigerien Tuareg movements

Niger is a landlocked country with a surface area of one million, two hundred and sixty-seven thousand square kilometres. It has a rich history, inseparable from the history of some of the greatest empires of West Africa (the Kanem-Bornu empire, the Songhay empire, the Fulani empire of Usman Dan Fodio, the Hausa states, and

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the Tuareg confederations, for example) of which its peoples are the direct descendants (Delafosse 1912; Abadie 1927; Decalo 1979; Fuglestad 1983). Although usually classified as a West African country, its geography and a large part of its population make it very strongly related to North Africa because it has always been situated on the trans-Saharan caravan route that still exists today. This played a crucial role in the spread of Islam in West Africa, in mixing populations of Middle-Eastern and North African origins with populations of sub-Saharan Africa, all through the development of the multi-secular trade of gold, salt, slaves, and craft objects (Abdoulhadi 1999; Shillington 2005). Indeed, three-fifths of Niger’s surface area is covered by the Sahara. Most of Niger’s natives are farmers and nomadic herdsmen who can be subdivided into nine major ethno-linguistic groups: the Hausa, the Songhai-Zarma, the Tuaregs, the Fulanis, the Kanuris, the Budumas, the Arabs, the Gurmantches, and the Tubus (Institut National de la Statistique 2007). Since the end of French colonisation in 1960, political life in Niger has been essentially characterised by moments of stability and moments of turbulence – in particular, several coups d’état (Politique Africaine 1990; Charlick 1991; Kimba 2008) and armed insurrections led by Tuaregs during the 1990s (Salifou 1993; Grégoire 1999; Bourgeot 1994) and again since 2007.

The Tuaregs were nomadic people (most continue to be so today) usually classified among the larger group of Berbers of North Africa. However, today most Tuaregs live in cities and villages in West Africa, principally in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. Although Nigerien Tuaregs have retained their language, culture, and lifestyle, they have developed over time some characteristics that distinguish them from the original Berber populations (Aboubacar 1979; Hamani 1994). For example, over the centuries, the Tuaregs have mixed with populations of West African origin (Delafosse [1912] 1972; Abadie 1927; Aboubacar 1979; Bernus 1987). However, touristic imaginary based on colonial racialist classifications have always overshadowed this reality of the Tuareg world.

The Tuareg identity as conceived by colonial anthropology was charged with racial connotations. According to Bourgeot (1994), from their first encounter with colonisers, the Tuaregs have been defined by features exactly opposed to those said to be possessed by their neighbours the ‘blacks’. Tuaregs were attributed physical traits that were said to be those by which racial anthropologists defined ‘the white race’. In Niger, however, only a tiny portion of the Tuaregs could be identified with these features (Aboubacar 1979). Consequently, this approach implicitly excluded the large majority of colonial Niger people, who were recognised only as tributaries, freed slaves, or simply slaves. Indeed, Tuaregs were included in the ethnic group (or rather the race) only in a marginal way, and only social hierarchy concepts were applied to them. Thus were born, in mentalities and within what formed one cultural and social unit, the idea of ‘true Tuaregs’ and ‘false Tuaregs’ that touristic agencies and the media quickly sanctified.

The ‘racialisation’ of the Tuareg people
Maurice Delafosse ([1912] 1972) and Maurice Abadie (1927) were the first two anthropologist-administrators to trace the contours of this ‘racialisation’ of the Tuareg identity referents. Both coupled ‘the race’ (that is, the biophysical characteristics) with a ‘moral portrait’ according to the representations of the
colonial administration and how it wanted the populations to see and define themselves. Thus, colonial Niger populations were essentially classified as ‘white’ and ‘black’ populations based on Delafosse’s definition: ‘I reserve the name of race to the great divisions of the mankind, such as one commonly understands them. Therefore there will be only two races: the white race and the black race’ (1912, 104). Delafosse proceeded from the most inclusive categories to the least inclusive ones: races, families, groups, people, and finally tribes. In this way, he identified two ‘races’, seven families, 40 peoples, and a multitude of tribes. Within the ‘white race’ he identified two families and four peoples: the ‘semitic’ family made up mainly of the Arabs and Fulanis and the ‘hamitic’ family made up of the Tuaregs and the Moors. Tuaregs and Moors were further divided between the two ‘semitic’ and ‘hamitic’ families according to the ‘racial purity’ of the group being referred to.

However, just like Maurice Abadie after him, Delafosse did not fail to underline the enormous difficulties facing any classification of this kind. He highlighted the insufficiencies of the anthropological method resting on the study of the physical characters of the individuals as follows: ‘classification thus obtained will be purely artificial, each grouping being composed of extremely various elements as to their origin because of the migrations, the conquests, the unions between individuals of various people, of the great number of imported slaves of remote countries, etc.’ (1912, 109). Delafosse thus recognised that the model of race proved to be non-operational because of the impossibility of isolating one group from others according to anthropometric criteria. Abadie (1927, 134) subsequently made similar remarks:

No more than in Europe or in the other parts of the world, one does not find, in Central Africa, an absolutely pure race. Big invasions, migrations of people and the many interbreedings which resulted from them, the foundation and the collapse of the great empires, continuous wars, a long practice of slavery, the exoduses in mass of entire populations to escape tyranny from cruel princes, contributed to modify and sometimes to make disappear the primitive characters of the races which flocked to the African continent.1

Yet this did not prevent him from making the following affirmation: ‘I estimate that the groups hereafter can alone be considered as belonging to the white race: Arabs, Tuaregs, Peuhls, Toubous’ (1927, 138). Thanks to the imposition of ‘legitimate divisions’ (Bourdieu 1989, 20) by colonial administrators and anthropologists, the categories thus built became ‘visible’ and appeared on the social and political landscape as truly existing groups. In the particular case of the Tuaregs, official and ‘scientific’ divisions created a binary opposition within the ethnic group according to a line of demarcation based on what colonial anthropologists called ‘racial’ purity: ‘It seems that the Tuaregs of noble families, are of pure Berber blood, while many of those of the vassal families (Imrads) are more or less mixed in consequence of unions with negroes or Fulanis’ (Abadie 1927, 133). Thus, leading Tuareg aristocracies and classes in general were credited with ‘white’ origins (even today it is not uncommon to hear and read – especially on online discussion forums – the many ‘descendants’ of those groups praise their ‘racial purity’), while any black – especially in Tuareg country – was taken for a slave or a slave descendant.

These stereotypes were prevalent in the anthropological studies that followed as well as in the media, tracing the general perception of the configuration of ethnicities in Niger and the relations that they maintained among themselves. In both scientific
and journalistic articles, the idea of a ‘racial barrier’ separating the two groups is prevalent, whereas, at least in Niger, nothing makes it possible to affirm the existence of a ‘pure Turaeg anthropological type’. For example, Adamou Aboubacar writes that ‘the Berber and Libyan groups disappeared in great part probably by mixing with the blacks. Only some white tribes, probably by strict observation of racial discipline could be maintained up to now’ (1979, 27). Edmond Bernus (1987, 7) writes:

Under the term Tuaregs are comprised populations which came from the north of the Sahara (Ahaggar, Air, Adghagh of Ifoghas) to reach and cross the Niger River and the borders of present-day Nigeria. During these migrations by small family groups, the indigenous populations were often absorbed and integrated into the Tuareg entity, after they had adopted the language, the behaviours and attitudes of their invaders. It is thus a mixing of human groups that was constituted on the spot under the name and in the form which are theirs today.

The social hierarchy itself married the contours of the so-called ‘racial barrier’ only in an imperfect way as many nobles and aristocrats were blacks, meaning nothing distinguished them from others (Hamani 1994). Yet this did not prevent the ‘revolutionary’ discourse of some Tuareg rebels from building on this myth in an attempt to preserve and defend a presumed pure, clean, and original bio-cultural identity against the construction of the nation state, whose finality was allegedly to dilute the identities, especially those of the Tuareg populations.

The construction of the Tuareg nation

The first separatist claims leading to the formulation of a Tuareg nation are to be found as far back as 1957, the year the Organisation Commune des Régions Sahariennes (the Common Organisation of the Saharan Areas (OCRS)) was created by France (Journal Officiel de la République Française, 11 January 1957, 578; Salifou 1993; Bourgeot 1994; Djibo 2002). According to Bourgeot (1994), the OCRS had been conceived by the French colonial power as one administrative unit comprising the various parts of the Nigerien, Malian, Chadian, and Algerian Sahara under the supervision of the French Ministry of the Sahara. It actually aimed to cut down the size of Algeria, excising its southernmost provinces that were rich in oil and providing shelter sites for French nuclear experiments. Belime revealed French intentions in the following terms: ‘It is simply a question of giving to Saharans (that is, Tuaregs) a particular form of statute’ (Belime, quoted by Bourgeot 1994, 9–10). Thus, the Sahara was to be withdrawn from the new African countries in order to ensure that France retained its underground riches. The consequences of this territorial reapportionment for these countries were to be the loss of ‘1.036.000 km² for Niger, almost nine-tenths of its total surface area with approximately 600,000 inhabitants and 770,000 km² for Chad, or six-tenths of its surface area with approximately 750,000 inhabitants’ (ibid, 31). The area thus delimited corresponded in part to the space traditionally occupied by the Tuareg people (if the Imanan and Tagazar in the western part of Niger are not included); it also comprised a majority of populations that were not Tuaregs. According to various authors (Salifou 1993; Bourgeot 1994; Hamani 1994; Grégoire 1999; Djibo 2002), the prospect for an autonomous Saharan republic seemed to have played an important role in sparking nationalistic sentiments among the nomadic Tuareg populations. However, it would
be misleading to think that the idea of an independent Tuareg nation state gained credence among all Tuaregs. Before the arrival of Europeans, Tuaregs were organised in multiple independent confederations and never experienced a centralised authority (Bernus 1981; Bourgeot 1994). During colonial times, as well as after independence, the various Tuareg confederations and tribal chiefs have had different political affiliations and attitudes towards the administration (Salifou 1993; Hamani 1994). For example the Communauté Touarègue de Souche Noire (the Black Tuareg Community), in a manifesto published in the governmental weekly Sahel Dimanche (March 11 1994) and titled ‘Pour l’Unité nationale’ (For National Unity), clearly demarcated itself from the rebellion.

Nevertheless, in 1957 and thereafter, French political intrigues, as well as ideas forged in connection with the Tuareg people (as fierce and irreducible desert warriors), were to be used to reinforce the territorial and separatist claims of certain rebel movements. Grégoire (1999, 58) notes for example that ‘the map of the claimed regions’ drawn in the ‘Programme-Cadre de la Résistance Armée – Armed Resistance Programme and Framework’ presented by Tuareg rebels during negotiations with the Nigerien government in February 1994 in Ouagadougou, ‘looks strangely like the map of the OCRS’. However, it was how the successive political regimes of Niger later managed the economic and social issues related to the OCRS and Tuareg populations that shaped for decades to come the territorial and identity claims of rebellious movements.

Although, in May 1959, Diori Hamani successively signed two ‘conventions’ where he agreed to ‘co-operate’ with the OCRS, this co-operation, that was viewed only from an economic angle, never took effect when it came to recognising the Sahara as an independent administrative and territorial entity (Salifou 1993; Djibo 2002). Indeed, from the onset the Territorial Assembly of Niger made this clear, ‘Le Niger ne saurait souscrire en aucun cas à un découpage politique et administratif susceptible de mettre en cause l’unité territoriale’ (Salifou 1993, 38). (Niger would not accept, in any case, a territorial and administrative reapportionment which may endanger the territorial unity.)

However, while the government of Diori Hamani (1960–1974) astutely managed the problem by creating a Ministry for Nomadic Affairs, the dictatorial regime of Seyni Kountché (1974–1987) forced thousands of Tuaregs to seek refuge in Libya following the drought in the 1970s (Bourgeot 1994). Some young Tuaregs underwent military training in Libyan camps and then set up a radio station broadcasting ‘subversive’ propaganda to Niger. In 1990, in the Nigerien town of Tchintabaraden, several Tuaregs accused of collaborating with rebels were killed by government forces. This disproportionate response by the army served as a catalyst for separatist claims and the starting point of armed insurrections. Indeed, the massacre was carried out under the regime of Ali Chaibou, not Kountché, who died in 1987. It also coincided with mounting claims for democratic governance as well as union worker and student demonstrations that led to the National Conference of July 1991. The Tchintabaraden massacre was debated by participants, who set a trial for the army officers involved in the killings; but the National Conference rejected the separatist or federalist claims made by some Tuareg intellectuals and affirmed the unitarian and ‘indivisible’ character of the state and national territory. The rebels were then invited to express their federalist ambitions within the framework of pluralist democracy.
However, some Tuareg intellectuals opted for armed insurrection and created the FLAA (Front de Libération de l’Air et de l’Azawad – Liberation Front of the Air and the Azawad), whose principal demands were the withdrawal of the army from the north of the country and the proclamation of a federal republic. In the years that followed, five other movements of Tuareg rebellions emerged after the FLAA: the ARLN (Armée Révolutionnaire du Nord-Niger – Revolutionary Army of North Niger); the FLT (Front de Libération Tamoust – Tamoust Liberation Front); the FPLS (Forces Populaires de Libération du Sahara – Popular Liberation Front of the Sahara); and the MRLN (Mouvement Révolutionnaire de Libération du Nord-Niger – Revolutionary Liberation Movement of North Niger). The diversity of these movements simultaneously expressed the various external influences (Libya, Algeria, France) exerted on the protagonists, the dissensions, as well as the tribal divisions and various strategies adopted by the actors in positioning themselves to share government posts in possible future negotiations with the political authorities of the country. As of 30 November 1993, the rebellion had already resulted in 153 deaths among civilians as well as the military.4

However, the rebellion did not gain a broad popular following among the Tuaregs as a whole, perhaps because it had been condemned by the tribal chief. As for the political parties born of democracy, although some were primarily composed of Tuaregs and demanded federalism, they all agreed to reject violence as a means of resolving political problems.

Democracy and decentralisation

Among the many recommendations that emerged from the National Conference, the most salient were demands for political pluralism, the institution of a democratic government, and the decentralisation of political power. Decentralisation was undertaken in light of the multiple abuses of power that had marked the history of independent Niger; but its primary trigger was probably the Tuareg rebellion and its consequences. It aimed to create conditions in which people could freely administer their own territorial entities, but it fell short of instituting autonomy or federalation. Instead, the unitarian and indivisible character of the state were again reaffirmed, and decentralisation only amounted to the modification of the various territorial units, the creation of new ones, the fixation of their limits, and their reapportionment into different ‘communal’ entities. Thus, the 36 arrondissements (districts), the largest territorial units after the eight départements, took the title of départements while the original départements became régions. The urban and rural communes became the smallest territorial entities within the arrondissements. Régions, départements, arrondissements and communes were all instituted as territorial collectivities with legal bodies (elected councillors and mayors), free co-administration with the state, and financial autonomy.

In 1995 an agreement was concluded between the government and the Tuareg rebels. Apart from the decentralisation of Tuareg regions, likely to be administered by Tuareg-elected officers, this led to the integration of several thousands of young Tuaregs into the army, the police, the gendarmerie and the general administration. Development projects for the northern areas of the country were also created, and political agreements intended to give to Tuaregs and other populations of Niger a greater control of their destiny were concluded. Several leaders of the rebellion were
appointed to ministerial positions, to high offices in the territorial administration, and as heads of development projects. As the application of these agreements was considered insufficient by some of the leaders of the rebellion, new armed movements have recently been launched, including the MNJ (Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice – Movement of Nigeriens for Justice) – now in existence for almost two years – and the FFR (Front des Forces de Redressement – Front of Rectification Forces), which appeared in May 2008.

The new Tuareg rebellion: The MNJ and the FFR

The leader of the MNJ is Aghali Ag Alambo, an influential former member of the FLAA (Derda 2007). Like most members of his movement, he is a native of Iférouane; indeed, it is primarily in the area of Iférouane that the movement has now concentrated its bases, attacks, and landmines (De Capua 2007). Another characteristic of the MNJ is that many students, former officers and members of the Tuareg diaspora in France have joined it, and constitute the main source and target for the online ethnonationalist discourse.

Meanwhile the FFR was created in May 2008, apparently in response to the public disavowal of Rhissa Ag Boula, its instigator, by the MNJ leader Aghali Ag Alambo (Alambo 2008). Rhissa Ag Boula was the previous leader of the Front Populaire de Libération de l’Azawad (Popular Front for the Liberation of the Azawad) and later the ORA (Organisation de la Résistance Armée – Organisation of Armed Resistance) which, in the name of the Tuareg rebel movements, led the talks with a government delegation during the 1995 conclusion of what came to be known as the Ouagadougou agreements (Deycard 2007). After the talks of 1995, Rhissa Ag Boula became a minister in the Nigerien government for more than seven years, before being arrested and imprisoned for having allegedly organised the assassination of a political rival in his département of origin (Jeune Afrique 2004). He was released thanks to the intervention of Muammar Kaddafi, the Libyan leader, after his brothers and other relatives organised an armed movement to secure his liberation. Other figures of the rebellion of the 1990s, such as Aoutchiki Kriska, joined him in creating the FFR.

The role of new information and communication technologies in framing Tuareg ethnonationalist discourse

Before analysing the use of new ICTs by the rebellion, it is important to present the level of penetration of these technologies in Niger. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), in 2007, Niger had the lowest ICT development indicator in the world (ITU 2009). It counted 0.07% computers per 100 inhabitants in 2005, 0.17% landline phones per 100 inhabitants in 2005, and 0.28% internet users in 2006 (ITU 2007, 2008). However, these figures may appear misleading if we do not take into account three important factors: the collective use of ICTs because of issues related to access and cost (mainly through cyber cafés when it comes to the internet); the unprecedented pace of adoption of cell phones (according to the ITU (2004), ‘Africa is the World’s fastest growing market’) and the minority that uses ICTs is the most politically active, the most educated, is urbanised and occupies a central position when it comes to promoting and fostering change in society. Thus, tens of
cyber cafés exist in Niamey, the capital city and are daily frequented by hundreds of
users, mostly young educated people. A recent (2009) study of the INS and PNUD
(Institut National de la Statistique and Programme des Nations Unies pour le
Développement) indicates that, out of 15 million Nigeriens, more than 1,300,000
aged 15 or more (or 20% of the entire population) use mobile phones. In 2005, the
percentage of users was only 4.6%. However, important disparities exist between
the various regions of the country. A sizeable 57.8 out of 100 inhabitants of Niamey
are mobile phone users against only 54.1 out of 100 inhabitants of Agadez, a
notorious tourist destination. Regions such as Maradi and Zinder each account for
only 11% of users. There exist also disparities between sexes since women account
for only 12.8% of users who ‘frequently’ use mobile phones while men account for
28.2%. Besides, 52.2% of people living in urban settings use mobile phones while this
figure is only 13% for those living in rural areas (Institut National de la Statistique et
Programme des Nations Unies pour le Développement 2009). One important aspect is
also the fact that thousands of Nigerien students are studying outside their country,
mainly in France, Nigeria, Algeria and Morocco but also in the USA, Canada, and
elsewhere. They are the main users of the internet in Niger. Therefore, the low level of
penetration of the internet in the country does not affect them. Besides, they appear
to be the most active online and are the primary target of rebellion online activities.
The rebellion is also targeting the general population of Niger through the internet,
using other methods: for example the FFR’s website, http://redressement.unblog.fr,
is hosting a radio that voices their claims probably because the FFR is aware of the
fact that, in this country where 88% of women and 72% of men are illiterate (Institut
National de la Statistique and Macro International Inc. 2007), radio is the most
effective medium when it comes to overcoming spatial and illiteracy constraints in
communication.

From this perspective, the main difference between the rebellions of the 1990s
and the MNJ and the FFR is the use by the latter of new information and
communication technologies to foster their claims. They have all set up websites6
(including online radio, video and photographs even for those who do not read), are
active on Nigerien online forums, regularly release information and propaganda for
online newspapers, and participate in Tuareg and Berber diaspora online chat groups
and discussion forums. They have also gained the support of many European and
international NGOs, civil society organisations, and political parties as well as
personalities in the West, which are all active on the internet.

Website analysis
The MNJ’s website
The MNJ website can be found at http://m-n-j.blogspot.com. It was created in April
2007. The two oldest postings date back to 18 April 2007. One is titled ‘l’identité: un
défi à relever’ (Identity: A challenge to overcome) and the other is the declaration of
existence of the MNJ of the 13 March 2007 (Programme des Revendications du
Mouvement des Nigeriens pour la Justice. Mouvement des Nigeriens pour la Justice
MNJ 2009). In the first text the MNJ affirms that

the struggle of Amazigh (Berber) people is a right which the Tuaregs, who suffer
marginalisation in Niger as well in Mali, have no intention of abandoning. Several peace
accords have been signed between the governments and rebel movements, but these agreements have never been observed because the immaturity of our political leaders is a reality. All commitments to improve the situation of the northern regions have remained unfulfilled, while our resources are being plundered by the various governments in Niamey.

The rest of the text focuses on the exploitation of uranium, the status of Tuaregs 'whose full citizenship is not recognised by the government', corruption, and the threat posed by the various al Qaeda activists in the Nigerien Sahara. It concludes by honouring the memory of Tuareg martyrs (firhun and Kaocen who fought against colonisation) as well Mano Dayak, one of the leaders of the 1990s’ Tuareg rebellions. The second text announces the creation of the MNJ and names its leaders, Aghali Alambo and Acheriff Mohamed.

The website itself comprises three columns. The first one, on the left, is topped by the flag of the MNJ, a characteristic Tuareg shield featuring, on the upper side the Tifinagh letter for Z, commonly known as the ezza letter and usually presented as the central character of the word Amazigh (Berber) presented under their curved form by the MNJ. The colours of the flag are also those used by the Berbers: blue, green, and yellow presented in the reverse order by the MNJ (yellow, blue, green) with the original colour of the ezza letter, the red colour, retained. On the down side of the shield, is drawn a kalashnikov (assault rifle) crossed with a Tuareg sword. Under the flag, the website indicates 'how to contact the MNJ’ and gives an email address for that purpose. This same column features the various messages and analyses of the MNJ concerning the political situation in the country, the military actions undertaken by the movement, and its programme and foundational texts as well as its press releases and news related to the Tuareg world. The text is constantly updated as the situation evolves on the military front as well as on the political one.

The right-hand column is topped by a stylised motto claiming the Nigerien people’s aspirations for ‘good economic governance, justice and equity for all’. Under this motto, photographs of the various leaders of the movement, starting with Aghali Alambo, are presented. A list of the archived messages follows, going from 2007 to 2009. It comprises a total of 322 texts, in just two years of activity (April 2007 to April 2009). The highest number of texts, 27, was produced in November 2007 and the lowest, one, in September 2008. The month of November 2007 was one of the most active moments in the existence of the MNJ with many successful attacks carried out against the army and abundant press releases and coverage. Finally, the bottom of the website lists links to the different kinds of information one can find on the MNJ: the news, the contributions from sympathisers of the Tuareg movement, political analyses of the country’s situation, how to access audio and video contents, and photographs featuring the Tuareg combatants, and various other events related to their struggle.

The site is in French alone, and employs neither Tamachek, the language of Tuaregs, nor Tifinagh, the Tuareg writing system. Although the latter is not widely known, being used only by Nigerien Tuaregs, the featuring of Tifinagh characters and texts might have been a very good way of asserting the attachment of the MNJ to Tuareg cultural independence.

Other shortcomings of the website are related to the limited possibilities for interaction with the MNJ through a forum or a link for questions and answers, for example. Although an email address is given for the media to contact the MNJ, it
seems that those who created the website conceived it in terms of a top-down approach where the movement provides information rather than interacting with its audience. The website also lacks outside media articles or links to other websites or organisations. However, it is widely known in Niger and abroad as the main source of documentation and updated news about the MNJ and its struggle against the government.

**The FFR’s website**

The FFR’s website, http://redressement.unblog.fr, dates back to May 2008. It opened with the preamble of the organisation’s constitution in the form of a press release announcing its creation. It starts by giving the motives for the creation of the FFR. The first is the assertion that the activities of the Tuareg movements, according to the FFR, ‘remained blocked and constantly postponed’ for more than one year (an oblique reference to the MNJ while highlighting its disagreement with it). The other motives relate to ‘the lack of initiative which is dangerously threatening the existence of the movement’, the fact that civilians are the sole victims of the conflict, and the fact that the movement should have as its objective the defence of the population under whose name it is fighting; the ‘massacre’ of Tuareg populations perpetrated by the army in Tidène, Tamazlak, Dabaga, Gougaram, Tezirzayt, and Tadek and, finally, the sacrifice of the movement’s martyrs. The FFR then announces that the Front has for leaders Mohamed Aoutchiki Kriska and 10 other ‘commissaries’.

The homepage of the FFR, although less elaborate, is very similar to the MNJ’s homepage. However, it has only two entries: ‘the homepage’ and ‘the composition of the FFR’. They are featured on a blue strip barred with the name of the movement: ‘Front des Forces de Redressement’ (Recovery Forces Front), with ‘gloire à nos martyrs’ (glory to our martyrs) in small characters under it. Under the blue strip are two columns. The one on the left is largely composed of the movement’s literature, for the most part press releases and foundational texts, political analyses, and news related to the Tuaregs and the pan-Amazigh world. Some of the texts are illustrated by photographs. The right-hand column features ‘search’ link, a link titled ‘in memoriam: for our martyrs’ followed by a yellow round emblem with ‘Front des Forces de Redressement’ written at the top and FFR below. In the middle of the circular emblem, the red ezza letter is written. Below this is a photograph of Mano Dayak, the late prominent leader of the Tuareg movements of the 1990s and photographs of the two current leaders of the FFR, Mohamed Aoutchiki Kriska and Rhissa Ag Boula.

Another important aspect of the FFR’s website is its audio content. Speeches by the leaders of the movement and ‘calls to the Nigerien people’ can be heard. However, as with the MNJ website, the main shortcoming of the FFR’s one is lack of interactivity. Comments are disabled and only an email address for contacting the organisation is provided. There is no presentation of Berber emblems, Tifinagh characters and Tamachech language.

**Analysing the websites**

For all their failings, these websites have at least partly fulfilled their purpose of reaching both the Tuareg diaspora and an international audience, notably the
international media that can immediately access up-to-date information. For instance, most newspaper articles refer to information obtained from the websites when reporting on events related to the Tuareg rebellion in Niger.

Indeed, the use of the international (especially Western) media is not in itself a new activity for Nigerien Tuareg rebels. In the 1990s they were very successful in disseminating their ideas in France through a wide media campaign skilfully devised and carried out by Mano Dayak, who was killed in 1995. The Tuareg issue in Niger gained full attention and credence after Mano Dayak plastered the Parisian Metro with gigantic placards reading: ‘Faut-il mourir pour etre Touareg?’ (Does one have to die to be Tuareg?). Following his activism, some leading anthropologists such as Helene Claudot-Hawad specialising in the Tuareg world, wrote papers to support the Tuareg cause in academic journals as well as in widely read newspapers like *L'Express* (the article ‘Touaregs’ 27 December 1990). Controversies about the Tuaregs’ situation in Niger (between Helene Claudot-Hawad (1992) and Andre Bourgeot (1992)) followed in anthropological circles which had the effect of popularising the Tuareg cause.

Moreover, while in the past the written literature (in the form of papers and tracts) was tightly controlled within the limits of the national territory, it is almost impossible to control the internet, which has become the primary ideological tool used by the rebels to reach not only the Tuareg diaspora but also Nigeriens in Niger. As Dartnell (2006, 6–7) says,

> The web . . . functions independently of its physical locations. Provocatively, the medium is used by previously unknown, marginal, or illegal non-state actors in specific jurisdictions to articulate views, values, and goals, forming ‘complex non-territorial-based links that defy the organization of political authority in the modern world.’ Non-state actors that were once largely limited to specific spaces are now actively *transnational* due to web media. At the same time, issues that were once contained within territorial space have now become global issues.

The internet, by ‘de-territorialising’ the space of confrontation, ‘circumvents the once-direct state regulation of telegraphs, radio, and television’ (ibid, 9). It thus reduces the state’s ability to exercise its control activities because the actors it is confronted with are ‘online communities’ that are difficult to monitor except by huge logistical means. For example, most of the Tuareg rebellion online literature is written by members of the Tuareg diaspora scattered throughout the world, particularly in Western countries. Most of the websites are based in France and can be accessed by any reader from anywhere in the world including Niger where the government has very limited technical capacity to exercise control over online activities. Some web activists who are not even directly linked to the MNJ use its website. They also operate on various online forums, such as Agadez-Niger.com (set up by a Frenchman and located in France) or Tamtaminfo.com (set up by a Nigerien student living in the USA) that have no direct link with the MNJ but where MNJ sympathisers can disseminate the MNJ’s ideas, MNJ-related topics and discussions centred around the MNJ.

As will be discussed later, this has had a tremendous effect on the Tuareg ethnonationalist discourse. It also helps explain why the MNJ, for example, developed an apparently ‘unitarian’ and ‘civic’ discourse — probably because its audience had expanded beyond the Tuareg community, leading it to be careful not to appear as an ethnocentrist or racist movement.
In short, the first advantage that the internet has provided for the rebels is a political space that escapes the control and direct repression of the regime. Their actions are part of what Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2001) call ‘netwars’, or new forms of conflict in which protagonists use ‘network forms of organisation, doctrine, strategy, and technology attuned to the information age’ (2001, 1). However, this change has not been driven by technology per se, but rather by changes occurring in real life, such as the advent of democracy in Africa in the 1990s. The advent of democracy corresponded to a ‘shift of power’ (ibid) from the hands of a minority to the hands of a larger majority. The advent of democracy was also concomitant with the introduction of new ICTs in Africa, which has only further expanded the possibilities for political actors, although ICTs did not replace previous forms of interaction; they merely expanded them.

Secondly, the internet makes it possible to escape problems related to face-to-face encounters and to ‘neutralise’ the features of individuals and groups. Since users’ identities are not obvious online, they can assume any identity insofar as they create their own space of interaction. People are able to cross social divisions and identity ‘boundaries’ in a space that can be shaped and reshaped in multiple forms. So, for instance, ethnic identities are frequently crossed over online; thus, people who are not Tuaregs claim to be Tuareg in order to give credence to their support of the government without being accused of acting so because they belong to a ‘majority’ ethnic group. Usually, Tuaregs are expected to defend the rebellion while members of other ethnic groups are believed to share the concerns of the government and civil society. When positions taken by participants appear to be inconsistent with ethnic and political stereotypes, their honesty is questioned – as if they should have fixed and determined positions according to their ethnic identity. Indeed, on the Agadez.Niger.com forum, many discussants start by affirming that they belong to the Tuareg community, even if they are not defending the rebellion. It is not uncommon to read ‘I am one hundred percent Tuareg! However, I do not agree with the rebellion’. As they are not visible online, latent racial and ethnic categorisations are submerged.

Similarly, the MNJ and the FFR have developed apparently opposite ideological discourses. Officially and on its website, the MNJ holds a discourse that has all the appearances of civic nationalism, while the principal leaders of the FFR develop an ethnonationalist and ‘differentialist’ discourse that one can interpret, in accordance with Pierre André Taguieff’s idea (1988), as a ‘cultural’, not expressly ‘biological’ racialist discourse. The FFR’s website does not include any explicitly racial vocabulary, but conceives what Taguieff calls a ‘crossing of the cultures’, that is to say, intercultural relations and the amalgamation of different ethnic groups into the nation state as being destructive for the collective identities. This rests on a defence of the cultural differences conceived as irreducible to one another in light of the homogenising effects of the nation state. According to Rhissa Ag Boula, the African nation state is the result of territorial reapportionments, ‘with populations that do not have anything to do with one another at the linguistic, cultural, or economic level; the aim is nevertheless to carve out a nation out of this. It is impossible!’ (Boula 2008). For his part, Issoufou Ag Maha (2008) concurs: ‘Cherishing the dream to homogenise people of different origins and cultures ... will remain a dream’.

The MNJ, on the other hand, claims to challenge the racialist rhetoric of colonial anthropology presenting its position in terms of civic non-ethnicist nationalism.
Thus, in reaction to an interview with Rhissa Ag Boula judged ‘racialist’ and ‘independentist’, Aghali Ag Alambo wrote in a statement dated 23 April 2008: ‘Our identity is: Niger’. He challenged the idea that the MNJ is an ethnic or religious movement and affirmed that his organisation does not pose territorial or racial claims. Although it is mainly composed of Tuaregs, the MNJ also comprises the other ethnic groups of Niger and is not a Tuareg rebellion, as some tend to present it (Alambo 2008). Thus, officially, the MNJ claims neither independence nor separation. However, while its discourse does not formally fit into an ethnonationalist register, in reality it does because the main reason for the rebellion is presented as the persistent and institutionalised marginalisation that certain Nigerien communities – particularly the Tuareg community – are facing. In this context, the rejection of separatism by the MNJ can only be understood if one takes into account the Nigerien and African context. An independentist or separatist claim may have no chance of gaining credence in African opinion and even less so with the UA (African Union) or UN (United Nations). Consequently a tactical step is necessary to lead Nigerien authorities to accept and sanction, in a gradual way, compromises, reforms, and changes that have no apparent link among themselves but that, when accumulated, will lead to a de facto autonomy. The division of the rebellion into several movements can also be understood in the same way because each rebellious faction has attached its name to a main claim so that, when one is satisfied, another movement of rebellion will emerge and formulate new claims.

For the moment, the MNJ does not seem to call into question the existence of the state for two reasons. First of all, it is not essential that an ethnonationalist movement also be separatist. It can totally accommodate itself with the existence of the nation state – at least temporarily – while weakening it by using strong separatist claims that aim to undermine the bases of the nation state. Second, the ethnonationalist model on which the MNJ discourse is founded is comparable with what Guy Héraut, in Qu’est-ce l’ethnisme? (1966), and subsequently Roland Breton in Les Ethnies (1992), called a ‘normative ethnism’ founded on ‘the harmony and the balance of all the ethnic groups’. (ibid, 92). This model draws on various influences, from the Amazigh world congress, a pan-Berber organisation working for the recognition of the political and economic rights of the Berber people in North Africa, to the Parti de la Nation Occitane (The Occitan Nation Party), an ethnonationalist and separatist organisation created in France in 1959 by François Fontan, a theorist of humanist nationalism for whom language constitutes the principal basis of national and ethnic identity. The model calls into question national supremacy and particularly the supremacy of one ethnic group over others. Its logical end is an autonomy whose form remains to be specified.

More importantly, beyond the MNJ and the FFR, it is clear that strong nationalist currents exist in the Tuareg movements. For example, on the Issikta online Tuareg blog (issikta.blogspot.com), which features, on the opening page of the website, a photograph of Sherif Mohamed, the number two leader of the MNJ, one can read this opening statement: ‘The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2007 states that indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination and by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development. It states that indigenous peoples cannot be expelled from their lands without their free and informed consent’ (issikta.blogspot.com).
seems to indicate that the ultimate goal of the Tuareg movement is ‘self-determination’. In any case there exist seemingly dissenting voices when it comes to the idea of an independent Tuareg republic. For example, on the toumoujagha.blogspot.com website, Tuaregs are called to join the ‘motherland to build a future for their own nation and not for countries that bear any interest in the future of Imajaghan (Tuaregs)’ (toumoujagha.blogspot.com). The proposed Tuareg republic is called the Toumajagha republic (the Republic of Tuaregs). However, the MNJ has later claimed to have no hand in this website and that it does not take its promoters seriously.

**The media’s impact on the ethnonationalist discourse**

As previously noted, the specificity of the MNJ and the FFR compared to previous movements of rebellion stems from their use of ICTs to construct and disseminate their protest discourse. Although the MNJ marked its advent with taking hostages and bloody combat with the national army, its main force lies in the effectiveness with which it counters the civic and nationalistic loyalty incarnated by the government while trying to mobilise international public opinion through official statements, analyses, and counter-arguments posted on its website. The discourse of the current rebellion can thus be called an online ethnonationalism because it makes use of the internet ‘as a communication centre, organisational platform, and execution vehicle to promote the nationalism causes’ (Wu 2006, 1).

However, a marked difference exists between this discourse as presented to international and national opinion and the way in which the media interpret the existence, struggle, and armed actions of the MNJ. Although it avoids any reference to race and independence, the international media present the MNJ as a movement primarily motivated by a desire to end the marginalisation of Tuaregs. This was evident in the way in which the international news agencies commented on the MNJ’s first armed operation. This operation, which to date has been the most spectacular the MNJ has carried out, consisted of attacking a base of the national army in Tezirzayt on 22 June 2007. At the conclusion of the engagements, the MNJ announced on its website that it had killed 15 soldiers, wounded 43, and captured 72 others. The information was immediately relayed by international news agencies and later partly confirmed by the government. One of the most important aspects of this operation was the way in which the international media stressed the ‘racial’ characteristics of Tuaregs while letting the audience suppose that this difference with the remainder of the Nigerien population was the heart of their marginalisation. For example, a dispatch from Reuters dated 14 September 2007 and signed by Tiemoko Diallo (2007) stated: ‘The nomadic light-skinned Tuaregs in northern Mali and neighbouring Niger have long complained of being marginalised by black-dominated governments ruling far away in the south’. In fact, since the rebellion in the 1990s, the term ‘nomadic light-skinned Tuaregs’ has been used by most international news agencies to underline a contrast between Tuaregs and the other Niger and Mali populations. Hence, for instance, the *International Herald Tribune*, 26 April 2002: ‘There was always tension between the Tuaregs – nomads of mixed Arab and Berber blood – and the Songhai and other black tribes. Even today, many people in southern Mali refer to the light-skinned Tuaregs as ‘whites’. Resentment
lingers over the memory of the slave trade and the habits of a people for whom banditry was a way of life’ (Gregory 2002).

However, a clear difference exists between the rhetoric of the international media and that of the national media. The minute the Tuareg rebellion declared its existence, most of the Nigerien media started striking up the discourse of civic loyalty centred on the necessity to preserve national and territorial unity and safeguard democratic institutions. Indeed, the invocation of democracy was the main argument developed by the government and national media. For them, the existence of a pluralist democracy in which citizens can freely express their claims makes the recourse to weapons pointless, a view backed by large segments of civil society, political parties, media, and ordinary citizens. In consequence, far from having weakened ‘national cohesion’, the emergence of a Tuareg ethnonationalism today tends to reinforce it – more so when taking into account the geopolitical context characterised by the vicinity of Algeria and Libya – all of which are suspected, along with France, as supporting or having even instigated the rebellion; this provides an easy argument with which the government can discredit the rebels.

Indeed, it can be argued that civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism have become the two sides of the same coin and are mutually reinforcing. This is particularly evident in Nigerien online discussion forums (particularly tamtaminfo.com and Agadez-Niger.com), where partisans and adversaries clash all day long, denouncing the bankruptcy of the nation state, corruption, inequity in national resource allocations to citizens, and ethnic discrimination on the one hand and the orchestrated destabilisation of the country by external forces, threats posed to the existence of the nation and its territorial integrity and the manipulation of citizens to serve foreign interests on the other. Even the mere fact that Tuaregs are regarded by many as a sub-group inside a broader ‘white group’ largely concentrated in North Africa – that is, the Berbers – accentuates the perception of a ‘differential gap’ and the suspicions of disloyalty. In making their case against Nigerien political authorities, rebels in turn affirm that the ‘Nigerien nation’ is nothing more than the control exerted on the country by ‘privileged ethnic groups’ (Hausa and Zarma) to which France transferred power at independence and that the invocation of a national unity is only a myth. This recalls the idea of Smith (1986), who stated that nations are formed around a dominant ethnic group.

Conclusion

Even after 40 years of independence, the integration of the Tuaregs into the nation state remains a problem that is far from being solved in Niger. Indeed, the rebels have found that exit remains problematic because the surface area covered by the so-called Tuareg country corresponds to three-quarters of Niger. While an independence granted or won within the territorial limits of this ‘Tuareg country’ would most probably mean the end of the existence of Niger as a political entity, it would not necessarily lead to a homogenous Tuareg nation. After all, ‘Tuareg country’ is not exclusively occupied by Tuaregs; in fact, this is not true at all. It is also the country of the Songhaı, Fulanis, and other ethnic groups dating back hundreds of years before the territorial reapportionments of colonisation and even before the arrival of the Tuaregs themselves in the area. Indeed, if the surface area occupied by the Tuaregs were to be suddenly proclaimed independent territory, the Tuaregs would ipso facto
find themselves a minority in their own country. If this political and territorial entity were reduced to the area of Agadez, where the Tuaregs are the most numerous, then the vast majority of other Tuaregs would not find themselves included in that territory because they live primarily in other areas of Niger. Consequently, a democratic Tuareg state, if it were ever to exist, would most probably be confronted with the upheaval of the social hierarchies on which the Tuareg community has always been founded because liberal democracy is founded on the idea of the rule of the political majority. However, the experience of democracy in Africa has demonstrated that ethnic majority and political majority are very often the same. What remains is the idea of a federal state or a pan-Berber confederation that includes the Tuaregs. Such an outcome, though, would suppose an independence gained not only at the expense of Niger and Mali but also at the expense of Algeria and Libya – a prospect far from probable and in any case remote. The MNJ is undoubtedly aware of these stakes, which is perhaps why its claims appear to be more civic than separatist or independentist – at least for the moment.

Notes
1. This and all other translations from French by the author.
2. Many organisations of the civil society led by the Coalition des Organisations de la société Civile (Coalition of Civil Society Organisations), a notorious critic of the Tuareg rebellion and what he calls its ‘external sponsors’, carried out demonstrations on 9 September 2007 and again in 2008 to denounce the rebellion and Areva, the French uranium company that has been exploiting the minerals in Niger for 40 years.
3. Here, civic nationalism refers to a form of nationalism characterised by loyalty to the state in which legitimacy is said to derive from the citizenry, democratic governance, and popular sovereignty.
5. Here, ethnonationalism means a form of nationalism that has as its objective the promotion of political, economic, and cultural interests of a particular ethnic group in a context in which the geopolitical stakes play a crucial role in the position taken by the actors.
7. As Jerry Muller (2008) says, ‘Sometimes, demands for ethnic autonomy or self-determination can be met within an existing state. The claims of the Catalans in Spain, the Flemish in Belgium, and the Scots in the United Kingdom have been met in this manner, at least for now. But such arrangements remain precarious and are subject to recurrent renegotiation’.
8. See Note 2.
9. See Note 3.

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