I. CASE BACKGROUND

1. Abstract

Desertification, defined by the UN as “the degradation of land in arid, semi-arid, and dry sub-humid areas,” is a contentious issue. Some scientists deny that the cause is attributable to human actions (such as overgrazing and firewood gathering), arguing that it is caused by climatic change that does not relate to local human activities. This paper will explore the causes of desertification, as well as the social and economic impact on people living in regions that are “desertifying.” The conflicts in Mali and Niger during the 1990s involving the Tuareg will serve as a case study of these social and economic impacts.

2. Description

The Tuareg are a mainly nomadic people who live in the semi-arid Sahel and arid Sahara in an area that overlaps with the modern nations of Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Algeria and Libya. They are known alternately as warriors, traders and pastoralists. In Mali and Niger they are primarily occupied as pastoralists, raising cattle, goats, sheep and camels. Ethnically related to Berbers and often described as “light-skinned,” Tuareg culture dates back centuries. They are often referred to as the Blue Men because the men wear distinctive indigo-dyed robes and veils. Most are Muslim, although the extent of religious orthodoxy varies greatly within the culture, and for the most part the Tuareg are not regarded as strict observers of Islamic custom.
Tuareg society is composed of a multitude of individual tribes with different languages and varying customs depending on location. Traditionally, there was a well-defined social structure composed of three classes: nobles, vassals, and slaves. This last group was historically made up of black Africans; although the French largely ended this practice in the early 20th century, it remains the source of some negative feeling toward the Tuareg today.

Traditionally, loyalty went first and foremost to the individual tribe, since the rulers of each tribe took responsibility for the well-being of their tribesmen. This type of social organization is well-suited to the nomadic lifestyle in the Sahel and Sahara, since smaller groups are more mobile. Beyond the tribe, identity and loyalty would lie with the larger Tuareg population. Because the modern nations of Mali and Niger were not created until their independence from France in 1960, there has not been a long-standing concept of nationality in these countries. Even today, most Tuareg would probably not identify themselves as Malian or Nigerien.

Prior to French colonial rule in West Africa, the Tuareg were a powerful, albeit not united, group. They were known as trans-Saharan traders and warriors, but their defeat at the hands of the French in the late 19th century in Mali and early 20th century in Niger marked the beginning of the decline of their power.

After Mali and Niger gained independence from France in 1960, the Tuareg felt largely left out of the new governments. Complaining about policies by the government in Bamako – especially planned land reform that could infringe upon their traditional areas – a small group of Tuareg in Mali began a guerilla-style rebellion, attacking government targets in the northern part of the country (where most lived). The insurgency lasted from 1961-1964, and was met with harsh suppression from the Malian military, which eventually defeated the rebels. Many Tuareg fled to other countries to avoid the situation, as the military purportedly targeted both rebels and non-rebels during the period. No such violent activity occurred in Niger at the time.

From 1968-1974 a severe drought in the Sahel killed large numbers of Tuareg and their livestock. Bitterness against the government resumed as many Tuareg felt ignored in their plight. Some Tuareg left the rural areas for cities, while others went abroad to Algeria and Libya. Similar migration/emigration occurred during the droughts of the early and mid-1980s. However, the end of the droughts and newly unfavorable conditions in Algeria and Libya in the late 80s, coupled with promises of government assistance, brought large numbers of Tuareg back to their former homes in Mali and Niger. (see Environment-Conflict Link and Dynamics for more details) However, yet again assistance
did not reach the Tuareg, adding to the already substantial distrust of the government.

Dissatisfaction with the government, which had been building for the last several decades in Mali and Niger, erupted in the form of Tuareg insurgency in the spring of 1990. In April and May of 1990, Nigerien officials arrested hundreds of Tuaregs for attacks on official buildings. Several dozen people were killed in fighting in May, and the violence escalated from there.  

Government officials saw the Tuareg as a security threat, while the Tuareg feared torture and execution by the government.

In June 1990 violent clashes between Tuareg rebels and the Malian government began with a Tuareg attack on a police station near the Niger border, where several Tuareg from Niger were reportedly being held. The incident sparked several years of periodic violence between the Tuareg and military in Mali. Furthermore, the Tuareg also had clashes with non-Tuareg farmers, who armed themselves against Tuareg rebels. (see Environment-Conflict Link and Dynamics for more details)
Mali:
  Tuareg vs Government of Mali: 1990-1996 (although some sources contend that the conflict did not end until 1999)
  Tuareg vs non-Tuareg farmers: early 1990s - 1995

Niger

4. Location

Continent: Africa
Region: West Africa
Country: Mali, Niger

5. Actors

Direct:

- Tuareg groups and the Government of Mali
- Tuareg groups and the Government of Niger
- Tuareg groups and groups of sedentary, non-Tuareg peoples in Mali.

Indirect:

- Libya

II. Environment Aspects

6. Type of Environmental Problem: Source, Habitat Loss

Desertification is defined by the UN as “the degradation of land in arid, semi-arid, and dry sub-humid areas.” The cause of the desertification of the semi-arid land in Mali and Niger is a contentious issue. Some experts attribute desertification primarily to human activity, others see it as a natural process largely separate from human actions, and others still believe it is a combination of both. The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) belongs to the first group, as its focus on human activity and land management policies attests. The FAO credits overgrazing as by far the largest source of desertification in Africa. The FAO also says that in Mali, 20-40% of “degraded” land is caused by humans; in Niger the same indicator is 40-60%.
However, other scholars argue that blaming desertification on human activity is scientifically inaccurate. McCann cites several climatological studies that show periodic droughts and desertification of semi-arid land in Africa throughout history. He argues that the cause of desertification is more closely related to rainfall amounts than human activity. He even notes that the notion of desertification as a human-induced process is a form of colonialism and neocolonialism. It was a convenient tool to justify continued colonial rule: since local peoples’ misuse of land caused desertification, colonial rulers needed to remain in power and tell them how to manage their land. Today, it is a way for urban elites to retain and gain further power over rural people. 13

Further compounding the problem of establishing causation for desertification is the fact that the extent of the problem is not fully known. 14 Nonetheless, regardless of the actual cause of desertification, all camps agree that drought greatly exacerbates degradation of semi-arid lands. The droughts in the 1970s and 1980s may have been particularly difficult for the Tuareg to cope with because of the increasing scarcity of land: in the past, droughts may have been easier for nomadic pastoralists to survive because they could simply move to other land. 15

A second factor, overgrazing, most likely does contribute to desertification in Mali and Niger. In the last several decades, land availability for grazing herds has decreased. More extensive irrigation of farm land means that more than one crop can be grown per season; this means pastoralists have reduced time to graze herds on “stubble” of harvested land during the dry season. In addition, some farmers began to fence their land, further reducing the grazing options of pastoralists. 16

7. Type of Habitat: Dry

The Tuareg in Mali and Niger live mainly in the Sahel, the semi-arid land on the southern border of the Sahara desert. The dryness of the Sahel, which averages between 4 and 8 inches of rain annually, makes it difficult to grow crops without irrigation; thus, it has traditionally been used for raising livestock. 17 Nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyles are well-suited to the region; the ability to easily move to find water is almost a necessity.

The majority of the rain comes during four months, from May to early September. The winter dry season brings the harmattan, strong winds from the Saharan desert that move sand and dirt across the region. 18 The winds cause
serious soil erosion if vegetation cover – consisting of grasslands to the south and thorny shrubs, acacia and baobab trees in the north – is not adequate. Thus, the *harmattan* contributes to desertification, and can accelerate the process on overgrazed land.

Map of vegetation zones, from the *Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection*

8. Act and Harm Sites

Act Site: Mali and Niger

Harm Site: Mali and Niger

III. Conflict Aspects

9. Type of Conflict: Civil

10. Level of Conflict: Intrastate, Low

11. Fatality Level of Dispute (military and civilian fatalities)
For Mali, the level is 2 or 3 (between 20 and 200 deaths per year). For Niger, the level is 3 (166–250 deaths per year).\textsuperscript{20} A breakdown of civilian/military is not available; however, because the Tuareg are not classified as military, the number of civilian deaths is certainly a significant percentage of these figures.

\begin{align*}
1(1) &= 1 \\
1(2) &= 10 \\
1(3) &= 100 \\
1(4) &= 1,000 \\
1(5) &= 10,000 \\
1(6) &= 100,000 \\
1(7) &= 1,000,000 \\
1(8) &= 10,000,000 \\
1(9) &= 100,000,000 \\
\end{align*}

\section*{IV. Environment and Conflict Overlap}

\subsection*{12. Environment-Conflict Link and Dynamics: Indirect}

Depleted land resources were a reason for Tuareg resentment of the Malian government, in that the Tuareg felt the government did not respond appropriately to the droughts and basically forced them to leave Mali. This resentment contributed to the conflict between the Tuareg and the government in the 1990s.

Over-grazing of the semi-arid lands bordering the Sahara in northern Mali and Niger, combined with widespread droughts in the 1970s and 1980s, led to the desertification of large parts of these areas.\textsuperscript{21} A large number of the pastoralist Tuareg people were forced to migrate; many went to Algeria and Libya. However, assimilating into the new countries’ cultures proved difficult; Algeria “forcefully expelled nearly 10,000 Touaregs” in 1986.\textsuperscript{22} In Libya, some Tuareg were recruited into special military regiments and fought throughout the Middle East; others found work in Libya’s oil industry.\textsuperscript{23} However, the mid-1980s saw the collapse of world oil prices, which adversely affected oil industry employment. Furthermore, in the late 1980s Libya disbanded its specialized military regiments in which the Tuareg had been involved.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s many Tuareg living in Algeria and Libya returned to their former homes in Mali and Niger, apparently lured by their
respective governments’ plans for assistance (which were at least partly funded by the international community). However, government corruption, inefficiency, or both meant that this assistance never reached the Tuareg, which has been cited as an important reason for the start of the conflict between the Tuareg and the governments of Mali and Niger.  

In Mali, small groups of non-Tuareg farmers took up arms against the Tuareg rebels in the early 1990s. Groups of armed Tuaregs had carried out attacks on supply convoys to Timbuktu in Mali and Agadez in Niger, prompting fear of Tuareg "bandits." The attacking Tuareg would take cover in the massive amounts of dust blown about by the wind, sneaking up on convoys. Although the Tuareg were not known for killing people in convoy raids, the resulting insecurity decimated the small tourist industry in these cities and caused intense economic strife.

Some of these small non-Tuareg groups in Mali received weapons from the government. In 1994 these groups joined together into the larger political organization called the Ganda Koi, which means “land owner” in Songhoi, the language of these farmers. The extent of their violent activity is uncertain, though they were accused of unprovoked attacks against Tuaregs in the north of Mali. While many Western sources emphasize ancient ethnic hatred as a factor in this conflict, other scholars emphasize the economic issue of access to land. With the return to Mali and Niger, the Tuareg again entered into competition with farmers for land. Of particular importance was the issue of property rights: not surprisingly, the Ganda Koi promoted private property, while the Tuareg wanted shared or communal land.  

The diagram below shows the causal links for both the conflict between the Government of Mali and the Tuareg, and groups of non-Tuareg farmers and the Tuareg.
13. Level of Strategic Interest: Sub-state
The situations in Mali and Niger seem to be two separate conflicts, occurring in the northern region of each country. However, the conflicts occurred almost simultaneously in Mali and Niger, and there is some evidence of overlap in fighting. For example, in 1990, Malian Tuareg attacked a Malian police station, supposedly to free Nigerien Tuareg prisoners. Furthermore, Libya was almost certainly involved by supporting Tuareg rebels, so a broader view might call it a regional issue.

14. Outcome of Dispute: Compromise

The peace treaty between the government of Mali and the Tuareg, the Accords of Tamanrasset, was signed in Tamanrasset, Algeria on January 6, 1991. Algeria was a mediator between the two sides. The treaty called for a cease-fire, withdrawal of Tuareg insurgents and reductions of the army in the north, integration of some former Tuareg rebels into the Malian army, increased decentralization of government offices, and greater national investment in northern Mali’s infrastructure.

Although this treaty reduced tensions somewhat, a more comprehensive treaty was signed in April 1992 in Bamako. Known as the National Pact, it addressed issues from “integration of former insurgents into the Malian Army and government, to the creation of a hierarchy of local and regional councils with a real devolution of power, to the allocation of resources for national development, to the creation of various commissions to oversee implementation of the pact.” A large peace ceremony was held in Timbuktu in 1996. Sporadic fighting continued throughout the 1990s, though the conflict between the Tuareg and the Malian government is generally considered to have ended by 1996. The violence between Tuaregs and the Ganda Koi ended by 1995, due to Malian military suppression of the latter’s violent activities.

In Niger, the peace process began in 1991 but was not concluded until April 1995, when the government signed a treaty with the Tuareg rebels. As in Mali, part of the deal stipulated that some former rebels would join the armed services. Also as in Mali, outside negotiators (from France and Algeria) facilitated the peace process.