

Geography In The News™

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THE CHANGING CULTURE OF ISOLATED PEOPLES: THE CASE OF THE TUAREG

The Tuaregs represent one of the world's most exotic, but little known cultures. Most westerners who recognize the Tuaregs know them as the "blue men of the Sahara," referring to their blue robes and veils.

The culture of the Tuareg, as with virtually all isolated cultures, is rapidly changing. Not only is 21st-century technology reaching deep into the most remote corners of the earth, but changes are being forced on minority groups by new economic, social, political and physical forces. Although most of the effects diminish the individuality of these minority cultures, there are a few positive effects as well. Some very articulate scholars are writing about their cultures from an insider's perspective.

In the past most of what was known about the Tuareg came through scholars who viewed the culture from the outside and wrote about it or made documentaries about it. Now educated Tuaregs are penning works of incredible beauty and insight about their culture and their regional landscapes.

A case in point is Ibrahim al-Koni, a Tuareg born in Libya in 1948 who began writing in Arabic at 12, worked at Libyan newspapers and studied at the Gorky Institute in Moscow. Today he lives in Switzerland and has become a renowned author of novels translated into as many as

35 languages. The most recent is *Anubis, A Desert Novel*, translated into English by Dr. William Hutchins, professor of philosophy and religion at Appalachian State University.

In their native Sahara region, one of the world's harshest, the Tuareg have never been very numerous. They are light-skinned descendants of the Berbers of Algeria and they have been fiercely independent, largely disregarding the European-drawn desert boundaries between Saharan countries. About half of the Tuareg population historically was nomadic, grazing animals, operating caravans and occasionally raiding desert travelers. And half were sedentary farmers and merchants. The nomadic Tuaregs controlled the five principal trade routes across the Sahara. Dressed in their indigo blue robes and turbans, which double as face veils, and mounted on camels, they made an impressive and feared sight on the desert landscape.

The Tuareg of the Sahara today are scattered through five different countries:

The Changing Tuareg



Sources: www.uiowa.edu; www.bostonheard.com (Oct. 27, 2004); Al-Koni, Ibrahim, *Anubis, A Desert Novel*, The American University in Cairo Press, 2005.

Libya, Algeria, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. This means that they are minority populations in each, dominated by major-ity populations.

Most of the desert trade routes today are used by large convoys of heavily guarded trucks, removing both opportu-

nity and profitability from Tuareg raids. Many Tuaregs have been pushed into refugee camps by the military and paramilitary militias and by regional drought. Young Tuareg men have even sought job opportunities in the cities of North Africa and even Europe. In Algeria, Tuareg entrepreneurs and the government have realized that the Tuareg's camel nomadism and desert ecotourism can work together.

Most Tuareg are Muslim, but Tuareg folklore enlivens their understanding of Islam and they have strong beliefs in the presence of spirits. They may not fast during Ramadan, as do most Muslims, because they are excused as travelers. Men traditionally keep their faces veiled, although women do not. Even male veiling is evolving from daily necessity to festive wear.

Some of the additional changes coming to the Tuareg may surprise outsiders. There is a high-profile Tuareg musical band called the Tinariwen (meaning empty places), which tours the world. Its

music is a combination of blues and rock featuring electric guitar, electric bass and drums. Its lyrics call for a political awakening, sovereignty and self-determination.

The Tuareg culture has a caste system with a group of nobles and scholars at the top and goat herders and farmers occupying the bottom. Although the Tuareg have a written script, probably descended from an ancient Libyan alphabet, increasingly the more educated are using Arabic or French as their written language.

Writer Ibrahim al-Koni recognizes that the Tuareg way of life is threatened as never before. His literary works deal with Tuareg folklore, mythology and mysticism about life in the desert. His prose is incredibly descriptive, leading the reader to revel in visual descriptions of the colors and texture of the desert—the land

of the "blue men of the Sahara."

And that is Geography in the News™. August 5, 2005. #792.

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