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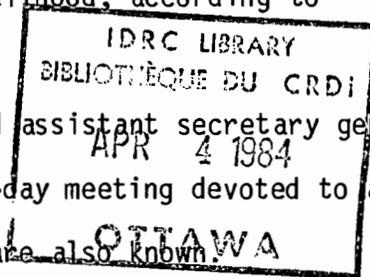
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### PRESERVING THE CULTURE OF AFRICA'S TUAREG NOMADS

By Hama Alassane Askofaré

MALI, IDRC -- The Kel Tamashek people of the central and western Sahara should realize that they will no longer be permitted to live a life of constant wandering and cannot rely solely on their nomadic, pastoral ways to be guaranteed decent living conditions or a future livelihood, according to Kélétigui A. Mariko.

The secretary general of S.O.S. Sahel-Niger and assistant secretary general of S.O.S. Sahel-International was speaking at a six-day meeting devoted to a discussion of the Kel Tamashek or Tuaregs, as they are also known.



The scientific meeting, held in the Malian capital of Bamako, brought together researchers and observers from Mali, Mauritania, Niger and France to exchange information, experiences and opinions on the Kel Tamashek. But its main purpose was the launching of a regional project to preserve the oral traditions of the people. The project was initiated by the Agence de coopération culturelle et technique (ACCT), an international agency for cultural and technical cooperation.

The discussions ended with the participants agreeing on the need to carry out a number of concrete, culture-related projects in the next four years.

Mr. Mariko said that the nomadic way of life is under attack around the world. In Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, East Africa and Southern Africa, governments are attempting to integrate nomadic peoples into the process of socioeconomic development.

He added, however, that given the current degradation of the environment, there is doubt whether the policies of nomadic stabilization espoused by some governments (the creation of settlements, central wells, forage ranches, cooperatives, and so on) are really beneficial.

Such efforts were made in the Sahel region of West Africa in 1905, 1911 and 1917. Overall, these efforts to settle people and their herds failed despite the repressive measures taken. Every time the nomads were able to regroup their herds, they returned to their age-old errant lifestyle.

A number of major international institutions such as the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), UNESCO, and the International Labor Office (ILO) have looked into the possibilities of nomad settlement and the modernization of their animal husbandry systems. Many African and Asian countries have tried to settle pastoral nomads. Apparently, in vain. Why? "Because the environment cannot support the animal population for a full 12 months of the year, every year," explains Mr. Mariko for whom there are no pat answers to the problem of nomad settlement. He believes no single solution will apply everywhere because nomadic practices vary from place to place.

Since the beginning of the century, a number of catastrophes have struck the people of the Sahel. For some, the memory of bloody wars is still fresh. Many, of course, cite drought as the most serious problem. But other great threats include the swarms of locusts and grain-devouring birds, as well as rodents, that attack precious harvests. Infectious animal diseases have taken their toll as well, sometimes decimating animal herds. Small and irregular rainfalls, environmental deterioration, the encroachment of the desert, and disruptions of human making -- all these too have forced the pastoral people of the Sahel from their homeland.

The southward trek of the Kel Tamashek has been going on for a number of decades as more and more northern land is gobbled up by the desert. Only the

people of the oases remain behind, dependent on irrigated farming and a few animals for their livelihood. And with continued drought, the nomads too will have to change their pastoral ways as have their compatriots remaining in the oases. Their future lies in their ability to adapt.

The Bamako meeting provided an opportunity for participants to examine the major aspects of the life of this errant people, including their oral and written traditions.

The Kel Tamashek have their own literature, written in the Tifinagh language which is related to Berber. In addition, there exist Latin and Arab documents on the culture. Participants in the scientific meeting examined ways to make these sources available to those interested and to preserve them for posterity.

Out of the meeting came a proposal that the ACCT undertake the following: training of transcribers and researchers in the Kel Tamashek traditions; creation of standards for transcribing texts and alphabets; production of a catalogue of all written and audiovisual material on the subject (whatever the language of publication). In addition, a database on the subject will be created, and books and cassettes of children's literature will be produced.

It was also proposed that ethnographic glossaries be prepared, along with descriptions of current word usage and a French-Tamashek dictionary, and that early Berber and Tamakesh writings related to modern written Tifinagh be collected in an archive.

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