

Sahel From An Anthropological Perspective: A Study of The Interactions of Races, Religion, and Language

Le Sahel Africain D'Un Point De Vue Anthropologique : Une Etude Des Interactions Entre Les Races, La Religion Et La Langue

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Abstract:

The Sahel region of Africa is gaining increasing importance not only at the continental level but also at the international level, for several reasons, most notably its excellent geographical location. This article will explore the anthropological implications of this geography by examining the interaction of ethnicity, religion, and language. While this interaction has led peoples and nations in other regions of the world to advancement and prosperity, in the African case, and particularly the Sahel, it has led, over time, to the collapse of states and the consolidation of the dominance of one ethnic group with a particular language and religion at the expense of other ethnic groups with different languages and religions. The article concludes that unless these differences are resolved, the status quo will remain unchanged, with no significant change.

Keywords: African Sahel, Anthropology, Language, Religion, Ethnicities.

Résumé :

La région du Sahel en Afrique prend une importance croissante, non seulement à l'échelle continentale, mais aussi à l'échelle internationale. Cela s'explique par plusieurs raisons, notamment son excellente situation géographique. Cet article explore les implications anthropologiques de cette géographie en analysant l'interaction entre l'ethnicité, la religion et la langue. Si cette interaction a permis aux peuples et aux nations d'autres régions du monde de progresser et de prospérer, dans le cas africain, et plus particulièrement au Sahel, elle a conduit, au fil du temps, à l'effondrement des États et à la consolidation de la domination d'un groupe ethnique, doté d'une langue et d'une religion particulières, au détriment d'autres groupes ethniques, aux langues et aux religions différentes. L'article conclut qu'à moins que ces différences ne soient résolues, le statu quo restera inchangé, sans changement significatif.

Mots- clés : Sahel Africain, Anthropologie, Langue, Religion, Ethnies.

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1. Introduction

Addressing the anthropological composition of the African Sahel region first requires discussing some characteristics of the state that are added to the legal organization of authority and sovereignty, namely national homogeneity. This does not mean that the concept of the national or nationalistic state implies a state for one nation or one race. All states comprise a mixture of races, ethnicities, cultures, religions, and languages. However, there is an important justification that makes all countries of the world national or patriotic states, which is the absence of cultural purity or cultural homogeneity. This absence drives countries to adopt a national project for the national state based on the principle that a group of individuals live within recognized and defined geographical boundaries and are members of a specific nation, regardless of the diversity of ethnic groups that make up the population.

As for the Sahel, the opposite has occurred; social differences have significantly contributed to sowing sectarian, ethnic, religious, and linguistic strife, leading to the emergence of identity conflicts in the region, which are characterized by their long duration. This has created an atmosphere of tension that has provided opportunities for various parties and forces to intervene and establish a conflictual or cooperative logic that serves the interests of the concerned parties, without establishing a movement toward long-term stability and security. Based on this, we pose the following question: How can the interaction of race, religion, and language affect the entire Sahel region of Africa?

2. The Ethnicities in the African Sahel Region

Within the Sahelian Countries, there is a diverse ethnic composition, with origins traced back to three affiliations: Arab, Amazigh, and Black African. Arabs and Amazighs are spread across the northern and eastern regions of the Sahel, while Black Africans are located in the southern Sahel. Among the most prominent tribes are the Tuareg, of Amazigh origin, who have intermixed with Arabs due to their adoption of Islam (Ghassan and Others, 2002:19). Their roots go back to ancient times, characterized by being one of the warring groups of peoples when they settled in North Africa during ancient eras, as mentioned by Ibn Khaldun in his introduction, where they were referred to as the Amazigh of the desert. They share this region with many Arab tribes and clans. They migrated to it from the Maghreb, Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, and Yemen, including the Sanhaja, Hawara, and Hilali tribes (Imran, 2002:15).

The tribal structure of the Tuareg is based on five groups, each led by what is called "Aminokal," a title given to the person elected by the Tuareg elders to lead them. They are distributed as follows: Aminokal of the Kidal and Gao regions, Aminokal of Tamanrasset in Algeria, Aminokal of Ghadames in Libya, Aminokal of Niger, and finally, Aminokal of Timbuktu in Mali. In addition to the presence of African tribes of black people who have settled in the region intermittently, we find these tribes spread throughout the southern Sahel of Africa. Generally, the ethnicities across the African Sahel vary as follows:

2.1. Ethnicities in The Republic of Mali

The largest dominant ethnic group is the "Bambara," which means "the lords who refuse to submit to others." This name was given by the European colonizers, and their presence is concentrated in the eastern central region of Mali, covering areas such as "Tita, Debela, Banamba, Bougouni, Sikasso, and Yangolila.." (Hamdi, 2014:03).

The "Bambara" group is the most populous ethnic group in Mali, constituting 31.9% of the total population, distributed across the suburbs of "Bamako," "Sikasso," and "Segou." They use the Bambara language in its Muslim dialect, known as "Bambara-Kobi," in their interactions. They are also geographically distributed across other countries in the African Sahel region, such as Mauritania, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, and Guinea. Additionally, there are other ethnic groups from the black African tribes, such as the Malinke, Sarakole, Senegalese, Dogon, and Bobo, not to mention the presence of Tuareg tribes, which make up 10% to 20% of the total population in Mali (Helene, 2014: 233).

About 50% of the population belongs to the Mandé group, which includes the "Bambara," "Malinke," and "Saracol" tribes, in addition to other significant groups such as the "Goulafi," "Songhai," "Senoufo," "Tuareg," and Arabs. Among them, about 90% are Muslims from the total population (Atris, 2002: 194).

2.2. Ethnicities in The Republic of Niger

The number of ethnic groups in Niger is not precisely known, but it can be relied upon that there are several main ethnic groups, namely: the "Hausa" (Housa) at 53.5% of the population, making it the largest ethnic group, followed by the "Djerma" at 14.7%, then the "Songhai" (Sonohai) at 4%, the Tuareg (Touargs) at 10.6%, the Peuls at 10.4%, the Gourma at 9%, the Kanouri at 4.6%, in addition to Arabs at 0.3%, the Gourma at 0.3%, the Toubou at 0.5%, and we find that 80% are Muslims and 20% are Christians (Naudet, 2001: 02).

2.3. Ethnicities in The Republic of Chad

Chad is composed of numerous ethnicities exceeding twelve, the most important of which are: The Arabs represent 12.3%, the Bougoirmies represent 1.5%, the Fetri-Batha represent 4.7%, the Coranes represent 4.7%, the Hasjarai represent 6.7%, the Caman-Bornou, the IRRo, and the Mayo-Koobie each represent 11.5%, the SARA represent 7.7%, and the Tondjili represent 6.5%. It is worth noting that the Arabs are concentrated in the north, while the Bagaan are concentrated in the south, with the largest group being the SARA, which comprises a quarter of the population and a French minority. The Muslim religion represents 50%, Christianity 25%, and local beliefs represent 25% (Barkouk, 2008: 02).

2.4. Ethnicities in Sudan

The ethnic groups in Sudan exceed 50, generally in the north there are Arabs and in the south there are Black Africans, while Muslims represent 70%, local beliefs 35%, and Christians 5% of the total population (Hamdi, 2014: 04).

2.5. Ethnicities in Mauritania

We find that 80% are Arabs and Berbers within the "Beidan" group, in addition to the black Haratin. These two ethnicities share the same dialect, "Hassaniya." Meanwhile, 20% are black Africans, including the Wolof, Serer, and Pulaar. Arabic is the official language in the Mauritanian constitution, and Islam has been the predominant religion for several centuries (Maslough, 2014: 7).

2.6. Ethnicities in Senegal

We find the percentage of the groups as follows: 26% for the Wolof, 17% for the Gourmantché, 17% for the Sissala, 9% for the Dioula, 9% for the Toucouleur, 9% for the Mandinka, while 92% adhere to the religion, 6% to local beliefs, and 2% to Christianity.

2.7. Ethnicities in Burkina Faso

We find more than 50 ethnic groups, but the religion representation is 50% Muslims, 40% local beliefs, and 10% Christians (Atris, 2002:73).

It is worth noting that the Tuareg tribes are the most widespread in the African Sahel region, with unofficial estimates putting their total number at 3.5 million people, 85% of whom are in Mali and Niger, and the rest in Algeria and Libya. In Niger, they number about 1.5 million, in Mali about 1 million, and in Algeria, Libya, and Burkina Faso around 500,000. Additionally, some are found in southern Tunisia, southeastern Mauritania, and northern Chad (Al-zouka, 2008:37).

3. Religious and Linguistic Diversity in the African Sahel Region

What distinguishes the African Sahel region is its religious diversity, as it encompasses all heavenly religions: "Islam," "Christianity," "Judaism," and some traditional religions. According to specialists, religion has become a factor of division among tribes, whereas it was once a unifying factor among groups. The Islamic conquests established a new way of life, traditions, rules, and foundations for social relations, with Islam now constituting 62.7% of the Sahelian population. Thanks to the results of the journeys of the guides of the zawiyas and Sufi orders, as well as the Maliki jurists, which extended into the desert starting with the journey of Abdullah ibn Yasin al-Sanhaji to the "Lhadala" tribe in the depths of the desert, and continued with the missions of the Maliki jurists to Africa across the desert, most of whom were Amazigh, one of the outcomes of these journeys was the emergence of a new dialect known as "Hassaniya," which is the dialect of the people of the desert from southern Algeria to Mali, Mauritania, and Niger (Al-Qashat, 2005: 19).

The African coast before the arrival of colonialism was characterized by a comprehensive pattern of life, traditions, and language. However, colonialism, through its political means and anthropological research, shaped a new pattern of relationships and established what is known as language policies. The tribal system that governs many countries in the region, which becomes more influential in countries where ethnicity dominates political life, was supported by colonial control that worked and continues to work to spread chaos and division among factions by arbitrarily dividing regions without considering the linguistic-anthropological aspect of the groups. The case of the Tuareg is the best example of this, as they were divided into more than four regions (Bouzid, 2010: 30).

It is noticeable that there are some common features in the tribal nature of all the Sahel countries, where Berbers and Arabs form the Muslims, while Christians are composed of blacks. The differences extend even to language and dialects, especially in Mauritania, Chad, and Niger. This difference can lead, in the case of one party seizing power, to the elimination of the other party, resulting in a confrontation between the authority and the rebels, which is essentially a confrontation between two tribes with different languages or dialects, as is the case in Mali, for example (Vallet, 1975: 43). In conclusion, the greater the number of ethnic and linguistic groups, the higher the likelihood of conflict and instability, as evidenced in the Sahel region of Africa. The following table illustrates this:

A table showing the status of threatened linguistic ethnic groups in Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa			
Southerners In Sudan	1961-1991-2011	Negotiations alongside open shocks until independence	Continuing until independence: The rebellion that began in 1956 intensified when the government reneged on the autonomy agreement granted in 1972, and imposed Islamic law on the southern regions until 2005 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the renewal of autonomy until 2011 for the declaration of South Sudan's independence.
Eritreans In Ethiopia	1961-1991	Independence	was resolved: Eritrea gained independence in 1993.
The Ibo In Nigeria.	1967-1970	Political struggle during periods of democratic rule	Contained: The separatists were defeated and integrated into the Nigerian state apparatus
Oromo In Ethiopia	from 1973 to the present.	limited violence since 1992	ongoing: Some Oromo factions rejected the autonomy agreement signed in 1994 because they seek to establish a separate state
The Afar in Ethiopia	1975 - 1998	The violence ceased in 1998	Most factions announced a ceasefire and agreed to cooperate with the government in its war against Eritrea
Southerners In Chad	1979-1986	Acceptable Agreement 1994-1997	Resolved: Various agreements allowed most factions to form political parties, and some rebels joined the army ranks.
	1992-1998		
The Nuba in Sudan.	1985-	Widespread	Ongoing: Ethnic

	Present	violence	cleansing against the Nuba regions, central Sudan, by the government, which has come to face a front that includes the Nuba and Southerners
The Isaaq in Somalia	1986-1990	Violence ceased since 1991	Contained: The de facto independence of Somaliland
The Tuareg in Niger	1988-1990	Acceptable Agreement 1999	Resolved: Disarmament procedures were completed, and the social reintegration of the rebels began
The Tuaregs in Mali	1988 - 1997 3	Acceptable Agreement 1999	Settled: Partial implementation of most peace agreement provisions, disarmament of rebels and their social integration were completed, and refugees were resettled. However, some unresolved disputes led to the resurgence of rebellion in 2012, which ended with the French intervention and the imposition of a settlement in 201
The Afar in Djibouti	1991-1995.	Rejected Agreement 2000	Settled: The remaining rebel factions signed the autonomy agreement in February 2000, and the main factions that are part of the government negotiated the settlement in 1995
Kassaman in Senegal	1991-1999	Ceasefire Contained Violence since 1999	A ceasefire was reached in 1999 and talks are expected to resume toward a lasting settlement.

The Cabindan in Angola	1991 to present	Limited violence since 1991	Ongoing: It has continued for four decades in the oil-rich Cabinda enclave
The Ijaw in Nigeria	since 1995 to present	have seen limited violence since 1995.	Ongoing: The Niger Delta peoples demand a share of revenues and broader participation, which have transformed from protests to rebellion and from calls for reform to self-rule

Source: Zaggagh, 2003-2004, p.152.

On the other hand, these differences have numerous motivations, the most prominent of which is the nature of the existing political systems. Additionally, there are the climate changes whose effects have extended to several regions around the world. From the phenomenon of desertification that troubles the Sahel countries to the phenomenon of water resource scarcity, which drives ethnic groups to move in search of water. In the process, conflicts may arise between these various ethnic groups, resulting in the disintegration of the social fabric (Sahel and West Africa Club / OECD, 2000: 16).

So, the diverse ecological environment and how to adapt to it lead, in the long term, to differences in material culture and aspects of social organization such as language differences and social traditions, which are considered primary in racial distinction. These differences become dangerous once a conflict arises over determining shares in common or newly discovered resources. Studies have proven that ethnic and linguistic affiliation is one of the most significant moral rallying points, which has largely been established as a principle of political solidarity and mobilizing supporters. This is evident in the ongoing ethnic and racial conflicts in the Sahel countries from Mauritania in the west to Sudan in the east (Traoré, 2007: 05).

The final outcome is that conflicts over material wealth, if influenced by the symbolism of the struggle for racial survival, it remains intense for a long time, even after the issue related to the conflict is resolved. This is observed in the Tuareg crisis, where despite multiple conflict resolutions, the resurgence of disputes over economic and natural resources is simply described as ethnic-cultural conflicts because the warring groups come from diverse ethnic-cultural-linguistic backgrounds (Trémolières, 2010: 18).

4. Conclusion:

The societal composition of the Sahelian countries is characterized by a very diverse and unique ethnic, racial, religious, and linguistic makeup, resulting from historical developments dating back to the end of colonialism. Some view this as one of the entry points to the region's security problem due to the increasing likelihood of ethnic conflicts. In other words, most Sahelian countries are composed of a mix of tribes, and they also encompass a wide array of ethnicities, races, languages, and religions. This has led to crises, conflicts, and civil wars,

weakening social cohesion. This fragmented social nature—ethnically, tribally, racially, and linguistically—has made community integration dynamics difficult, especially in the absence of a unified national political culture. Conversely, this has produced many crises that extend into our present time.

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