

# The Spirit of the Free People

Spirit Possession amongst the Tuareg of the Sahara Desert

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The Tuareg (also spelled Twareg and Touareg) live in and around the Sahara desert of North Africa. They are part of the Berber people, who - together with the ancient Egyptians - are the oldest humans to have settled in North Africa.

The name Berber comes from the Latin word 'barbarus,' which means barbarian, the real name for the Berber people is 'Imazighen,' which means 'The Free People'.

Just as Berber is not the real name for the people, neither is Tuareg. The word 'tuareg' comes from a local word for people who live in the district of Targa, part of Libya. The name the Tuareg use for themselves is Imushagh - almost the same word as the real name of the Berber people.

Although the Tuareg live in a confined area of the Sahara, the Berber people as a whole live right across North Africa to the Atlas Mountains of Morocco.

Originally they also settled on the Canary Islands too, but after the Spanish invasion in the C14th the Berbers there were enslaved, and in all effect wiped out by inter breeding with the Spanish invaders.

The Tuareg homelands range from savannah in the south to desert in the north - where temperatures can reach 54° C (130° F). Violent winds are common, as are sandstorms, making travel extremely difficult. Rain in the Sahara is irregular, and in some places it has not rained for five years or more.

The Tuareg are nomadic, with often large herds of camels, cattle, sheep and goats. They are also well known as caravaners, criss-crossing the Sahara since ancient times, carrying salt, gold, ivory and slaves to the Mediterranean, where the goods continued on to markets in Europe and the Middle East.

The caravan trade still exists today, and the people carry foodstuffs, household tools, spices, perfume and cloth. Historically the Tuaregs were also well known for banditry; robbing caravans and plundering established villages.

Tuaregs founded the city of Timbuktu in Mali during the C11th, but as a generally nomadic people they are more likely found on the move. Traditional Tuareg shelters are small, lightweight tents of leather, or nowadays canvas. An average household can pack all its goods on the backs of two or three camels.

The Tuareg are matrilineal (i.e. the mother's line is the primary line), but they are not matriarchal (i.e. power is not in the hands of the women). Tuareg women enjoy a degree of freedom, and they are allowed to have sexual relationships with men before marriage.

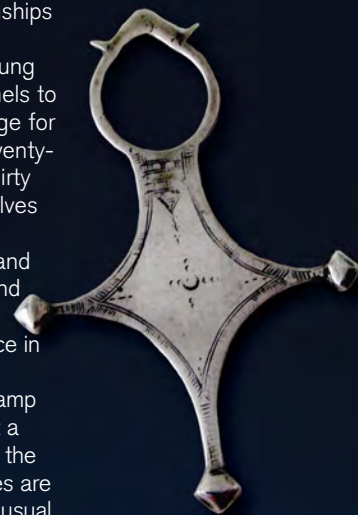
Most Tuareg marry late, young men have to own enough camels to pay a bride price. The usual age for marriage is about twenty to twenty-five for women, and around thirty for men. Marriage always involves a bride price - which varies according to both the beauty and social standing of the bride, and the wealth of the husband.

Wedding festivities take place in the bride's camp, and a newly married couple will live in the camp of the bride's parents for about a year, then usually move over to the camp of the husband. Marriages are monogamous and divorce is unusual and generally frowned upon.

In direct contrast to most Islamic custom, all Tuareg men must wear a veil called a *tidjelmoust*, while the women go unveiled. Tuaregs think it is shockingly indecent for a man to let his

mouth be

Below: Tuareg silver cross, a traditional protective amulet



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seen by anyone to whom he owes formal respect; and he will not show his face to anyone whose social standing is considered superior to his own. Most *tidjelmoust* are dyed indigo blue, along with clothes. Men start to wear (or at least think about wearing) a *tidjelmoust* when they 'begin to dream' - the Tuareg phrase used when boys start having wet dreams.

The Tuaregs have their own language, called *tamashek*, and a unique form of writing, composed of geometrical signs, called *tifinagh*. This script is a direct descendent of ancient Berber script used in Libya in pre-Roman times.

Tuareg culture is rich in visual and verbal arts, and there is a great tradition of both story telling and music. The visual arts are primarily metalwork, and some woodwork and embroidered leatherwork.

Tuareg music has undergone radical changes in recent years, with the emergence of a hybrid style of traditional musical forms fused with rock, blues and reggae, - often known as 'Desert Blues'. This is very popular amongst both Tuareg and Western audiences, and bands such as *Tinariwen* have gained great critical acclaim worldwide.

#### SPIRITS OF THE DESERT

Although the Tuareg were introduced to Sunni Islam around about the year 750 ce, with the migration of Sufi mystics into the area, they still retain many of their pre-Islamic animistic beliefs and practices. This can be applied to the whole area; there is a saying about



Mali, for instance, that 'the country is 80 percent Muslim, 20 percent Christian. but 100 percent Animist'.

Really it could be said that the Tuareg are only nominally Muslim, and they have earned a reputation for being rather lukewarm towards Islamic practices and religion in general; even the important annual Muslim fast of Ramadan is generally not observed. Ritual hand washing, so important before prayer in Islam, is replaced by a symbolic washing of the hands with sand, as water is so precious in the desert.

Great sacred respect is shown towards stones, water, fire and mountains, and also certain caves, pools, and trees. This is because there is a great belief in the *djinn* - spirit beings who live in such places. Most Tuareg will wear protective amulets to ward off the *djinn*, and one of the main reasons a man wears a blue *tidjelmoust* veil is as a protection against the spirits of all kinds.

There are two distinct types of spirits in Tuareg cosmology, the afore mentioned *djinn* and another group known as the *kel-asuf* or *kel eesuf*.

The *djinn* are said to be most often malicious, and deliberately set out to harm and attack people, often in the form of mental illness. Tuareg's believe that people of 'higher refinement' and 'greater moral capacity' have more fragile spiritual constitutions, and so are more likely to be attacked. These people include, women, nobles, young children and the elderly. Tuareg healers do not work with the *djinn*, but they might well be called upon for sorcery. In some respects *djinn* are not spirits, they are seen more as a separate race of beings who live outside our ordinary reality.

The other group of spirits - the *kel-asuf* - are much more readily called upon for help by the Tuareg. Their name means 'the people of the wilderness' and they are spirits who, according to tradition, can be the spirits of the dead as well as nature spirits.

The 'friends of the *kel-asuf*' [healers] enter into a special contract with *kel-asuf* and receive help from them, which enables them to do healings and give advice regarding illness. The gift of the *kel-asuf* also enables them to find lost things and predict future events.

To contact the *kel-asuf* you have to be very clean, sacrifice a

sheep or a goat every seven days and pray directly to the *kel-asuf*, and not use any Islamic blessings.

Contracts with the *kel-asuf* may be inherited from other healers in their family, cultivated with aid of the *kel-asuf*, or purchased from the *kel-asuf* by means of a contract where the healer will do things for the *kel-asuf* in return for them doing things for the healer.

Like most shamanistic traditions around the world, the most prestigious relationship with the *kel-asuf* results from a sacred calling, which - again as in many shamanic traditions - first manifests itself through a serious illness.

One of the big prohibitions of the *kel-asuf* is that the healer can only marry with their authorisation.

Many Tuareg say that the *kel-asuf* are 'like a husband' to a woman healer. This may cause jealousy on the part of the woman's human husband, and it can damage the relationship. For example, one husband divorced his famous healer wife after her 'door closed,' the *kel-asuf* were said to have made the woman's vagina disappear - although in actuality this was more likely the *kel-asuf* telling her to stop having sex with him.

The same is said of male healers, where the *kel-asuf* are like their wives. One male healer - who inherited his skills from his father - was obliged by the *kel-asuf* to limit his relations with women so that his human and spirit wives did not



Above: map showing the homeland of the Tuareg people

become jealous. He could never see women outside of his marriage, and had to wear henna on his hands and feet - a female symbol of fertility - use attractive perfumes, and wear distinctive bright blue clothes as a sign of fidelity to the *kel-asuf*.

Healers have set ritual objects they use in their work. They must have a small mirror, a copper ring, and a non-Islamic amulet. The mirror symbolises the process of divination and is a door to the spirit worlds. It is also a form of spiritual armour, repelling the evil eye and the jealous gaze of others. Copper is said to coagulate blood and heal wounds and so is a symbol and agent of physical healing. When divining, a healer must wear the ring

Below: Tuareg with traditional *takouba* sword. The sword has *tifinagh* script on the blade





Above: a man pours tea in front of his traditional tent home

and amulet while they do a reading - often done by casting cowrie shells and seeing how they fall.

#### WORKING WITH THE SPIRITS

The Tuareg have a tradition of both women healers, called *tinesmegelen*, and male healers, called *boka*.

Women often treat people with plants, as well as by calling on the help of the *kel-asuf*. The main pre-requisite for becoming a *tinesmegelen* is that the woman must be a mother, and ideally be beyond childbearing years. The tradition of this healing is passed down from woman to woman secretly.

When help from the *kel-asuf* - is called upon it is to perform both divinations and healings.

To make contract with the *kel-asuf* for a session the 'friends of the *kel-asuf*' enter an altered state of consciousness - often with the aid of a drum - and following set rules, allow the spirits into them, in a form of trance possession. The healers do not practice shamanic journeying in any way, rather they are taken over by the *kel-asuf*, and it is the spirits who perform the healing, give advice, or make a divination.

The *kel-asuf* can be called upon in both private ceremonies and at larger public rituals; but the spirits are dangerous, and need to be approached with care. They can attack people who are unaware and make them ill. They may also become jealous of living people who are fortunate, highly valued, or have high social standing, so placating ceremonies - often in the form of a sacrifice - are important to keep them onside.

When possessed by the *kel-asuf*, healers are said to be 'in the wild.' The Tuareg also have the expression 'turning around of the head' which they use for this trance state. Possession by a *kel-asuf* can be a mixed blessing. Some people become mediumistic healers, while others decline into a state of illness. Possessed people are also usually said to suffer from *tamazai*, a condition similar to depression. This may require a public exorcism to drive out the *kel-asuf*, so the person is no longer afflicted by them.

The *kel-asuf* can come into a person fully or partially, giving a light or deep trance state. During a

deep possession ritual, the spirit fully takes over the healer, and the human is no longer in charge of themselves at all. However, during a healing or a divination, the spirit does not come fully in and, although the medium's identity merges with the spirit, the medium retains control and awareness.

Possession ceremonies are led by a drummer, with a chorus of female singers. As in many cultures around the world, blacksmiths are important people - believed to hold superhuman powers - and it is they who are often the ritual drummers for the trance possession ceremonies.

#### SEEKING HELP OF THE SPIRITS

The Tuareg say misfortune and illness have a variety of causes. Some of these are personal, caused by the misconduct of the victim, but others are caused by spirit interference. Most moral misconduct is defined by Islamic law. In one case, the mother of a baby girl born with spina bifida, was seen as the cause because she exposed the back of her hair to a male stranger while she was pregnant.

A person is also believed to inherit character, which the Tuareg

call *tesney*, from the parent of the same gender.

Many Tuareg ask for a divination before they undertake an important project, such as travel or the digging of a new well. Divination is also used when a healer cannot diagnose an illness.

Diviners often cast shells or bones, but may well speak to the *kel-asuf* while in a light trance.

They also practise dream interpretation, and dreams are used predict an auspicious day for holding a wedding, distinguish between good and evil, foretell the future, identify a thief or other wrong-doer, and diagnose illnesses. But the diviner must know the patient well, so when a client unknown to the diviner requests a divination, the diviner calls upon a dream themselves in order to divine the client's character, before they interpret the client's dream.

Dream incubation and interpretation are common elements in Berber culture right across North Africa. In some areas it is an accepted tradition that people will go and sleep in a communal grave site or on top of a

grave, so as to get dreams given to them from the spirits of the dead.

The spirits of the dead are said to live close to their graves for many years before passing into an Islamic inspired paradise. This seems to be a synergy of both Islamic and pre-Islamic ideas.

The spirits of the dead are free to roam while still on earth and sometimes bring news to the living and, in return, demand temporary weddings with the living. These messages are often delivered in dreams.

Tuareg often make offerings of dates on tombs of important Islamic teachers, healers and saints in order to obtain blessings and dream messages.

The Tuareg view is that divination and spirit possession should be used for constructive, benevolent purposes to help others. Healing effectiveness requires generosity toward both the *kel-asuf* and other humans, in a wide circle of support. This belief reflects a long standing Tuareg desire to have 'checks and balances' on power; they have great suspicion on anyone with too

great an authority. The friends of the *kel-asuf* occupy a somewhat ambiguous status within Islam, even if the Tuareg are only marginally Islamic, and sometimes they have to work to inspire trust, especially from the more devout in their community.

These diviners and their traditions have been affected by recent social upheavals caused by droughts, and the armed conflict between Tuareg and the central state governments of Niger and Mali. There has also been a rise in fundamental Islam in the area which is intolerant of the old ways of working with the spirits.

But in the deserts, far from the towns and the formal Islamic schools, the *djinn* and the *kel-asuf* still hold sway, and despite a change in the way Tuareg approach Islam, the voices of the old spirits and the old ways will, I feel, always remain strong.



Left and below:  
Tuareg women  
with their  
unveiled faces



Tuareg man  
with agadez  
crosses around  
his neck

Below: two  
teardrop  
shaped amulets  
with magical  
square  
incantations

Right: old silver  
agadez cross



many Berbers and some Tuareg were Christian, and familiar with Christian art. As with the early Egyptian Christian Coptic Cross, there is a circle on the top arm of their cross, sometimes with another cross inside it. The Tuareg cross most likely inherited this Coptic cross design, which in turn was inherited from the ancient Egyptian ankh - the symbol of life.

Another popular amulet is the *tcherot*. This word means 'message,' 'letter,' or 'paper on which something is written' in the Tuareg language.

A *tcherot* is a form of African amulet, generally called a *gri gri*, which are found in many different sub-Saharan countries. Tuareg *tcherot* take the form of a lozenge-shaped rectangle, or square metal or leather box. They are often worn on the chest - rather like Tibetan gau boxes - and they generally have a sheet of paper inside. Written on the paper are often verses from the Quran, or non-Islamic magical symbols, all designed to protect the wearer from *djinn* and *kel-asuf* and to repel the evil eye, curses, hatred, and diseases projected at the wearer.

The Tuareg also have a tradition of 'magic square' rings which contain magical symbols, often arranged in grid form. They often have large front panels, similar to the type of ring known as a signet ring in the West. It is on these front pieces that the magical designs are inscribed.

These rings have a relationship to the traditional square or rectangular Tuareg tent. A tent is like a magical amulet in its own right, protecting the occupants, and different areas inside the tent are ascribed different meanings - for example some parts of the tent are male and others female.

There will generally be magical protection spells painted or cut into the wooden poles of a tent, and these poles divide up edges of the inner space of a tent, marking them like a sheet of graph paper into the cells of an invisible, magically protected grid.

Tuareg rings carry these same ideas, in effect creating a magical tent around the person wearing the ring to protect them from harm.

These same 'magical square'

## TO DRIVE AWAY THE DJINN

### Magical Protection Amulets of the Tuareg

Nicholas Breeze Wood



Because of their concern to be protected from the *djinn* and the *kel-asuf*, the Tuareg have a wealth of talismanic amulets, which they wear to protect them. Some of these are in the form of pendants and others are in the form of magical rings.

Perhaps the most common of these amulets is the *agadez*, which is also known as the *amazigh*, and in

English known as the Tuareg or Berber Cross

The Tuareg say that the centre of the cross represents God, and as Muslims believe we are one with God, humanity also shares this central spot. The four arms of the cross represent the four corners of the world and are said to keep harm at bay from the human wearer at the centre.

The Tuareg Cross is probably based on the Christian cross, because, before the arrival of Islam,

designs can also be found on - often tear shaped - amulets which are worn around the neck.

Tuareg *agadez* crosses and *tcherot* have become popular in the West in recent years, and both old original pieces, and modern silver reproductions can easily be bought online. Talismanic rings are also fairly easy to obtain, although it might perhaps be prudent to know exactly what magic you want 'singing out' on your finger, or around your neck, should you wish to obtain one.



Above: early Egyptian Christian Coptic cross

Top: ancient Egyptian ankh

Far left: Tuareg magical ring

Left: Tuareg tcherot amulet



Above: silver Tuareg rings

Far left: Tuareg tcherot amulet

Left: front of a Tuareg magical square silver ring