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Tuareg Women’s Writing: The Works of Zakiyatou oualett Halatine

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Abstract

In 2013, Tuareg and Malian writer, Zakiyatou oualett Halatine, was forced to flee a conflict that rages on in Mali to this day, and her creative work, Passions du désert, along with a collection of proverbs and a book-length essay, became a means of reconstructing memory and identity of a people ultimately blamed for Mali’s divisions. Zakiyatou’s texts provide us with a rare look at the desert region of Northern Mali from a woman’s perspective. Zakiyatou’s writings are unique in a corpus of Malian literature mostly generated by Southern Malian authors. In many ways, she is the lone literary voice of Northern Mali. She is known for her original style, which infuses untranslatable Tamasheq words and phrases into her text written in French. Her stories are a fusion of contemporary creative writing, musical traditions, and a retelling of Tuareg’s oral legends that define her desert people. This article analyzes Zakiyatou’s texts that decolonize and rewrite Tuareg’s history from a woman’s perspective. This is especially important since women’s voices, although prominent in Tuareg and the larger Amazigh society, tend to be ignored outside, including within Mali.

Keywords: Tuareg, Tamasheq, Mali, proverbs, musicality, decolonization

How does one preserve the collective memory of one’s people while haunted by images of a home and belongings ablaze in Bamako and a childhood home lost forever in Timbuktu? How is life as a Tuareg Malian woman rebuilt in exile when “home” is a place where she may never have the chance to return? Zakiyatou oualett Halatine has only been a published author for the last eleven years, but her writings are unique in a corpus of Malian literature generated mainly by authors from the south of the country. Both an essayist and a creative writer, Zakiyatou1 is

1 Zakiyatou oualett Halatine will be referred to as “Zakiyatou” in this study—using the author’s feminine first name—since the essay relies heavily on a feminine/feminist perspective of analysis. Zakiyatou is often addressed in France as “Madame Halatine,” but it is acknowledged that “oualett Halatine” actually means “the daughter of Halatine,” and thus the choice to write “Zakiyatou” consistently throughout the essay has been made to place the author clearly at the center of focus instead of having her father’s name appear alone. The works cited list, however, maintains “Halatine” as the last name.
virtually the lone literary female voice of northern Mali. In her collection of short stories, *Passions du désert*, she exhibits her original style that infuses untranslatable Tamasheq\(^2\) words and phrases into a text written in French. Zakiyatou had overseen the English translation by Patricia Cummins and Michelle Elcoat Poulton, and not surprisingly, we see the same technique of infusing Tamasheq into *Desert Passions*, signaling that for this author, Western languages are insufficient for capturing the nuances of Tuareg life in the Malian Sahara. As linguist Kwaku Gyasi describes in his numerous studies that analyze African languages appearing in literature written primarily in European languages, Zakiyatou’s technique is a sort of “hybrid code that forces the original French language to refer to the African languages for signification” (146) as observed in the story “La veillée au son du violin” (39-42) in *Passions du désert*. The same “hybrid code” can be found in this story’s corresponding English translation, “An Evening to the Sound of the Violin” (51-54) in the collection *Desert Passions*.

An additional example will be analyzed in depth later in this essay. Zakiyatou’s writing can thus be categorized, as Gyasi notes, as an “experiment of blending African models with European [ones] while subverting or ‘violating’ them at the same time” by using techniques that “interrupt the narration in French and force the reader to reconstruct the text” (2006; 119). Zakiyatou’s use of Tamasheq in her creative writing is an important, if not essential way for her to decolonize her French text while transmitting Tuareg culture and oral literature at the same time.

Another fundamental aspect of Zakiyatou’s collection is that the reader experiences Tuareg contemporary creative writing from a feminine/feminist perspective, giving readers angles that male Tuareg writers like Hawad, to cite one example, have not. Real-life events inspire Zakiyatou’s stories, but many also retell Tuareg's oral legends that define her desert people, and often women are at the center of these. The genre of Zakiyatou’s collection is difficult to characterize, only adding to the originality of the work; *Passions du désert* is neither poetry nor prose nor essay nor simply myth or legend, but it has its flavor, much like we see in the women-centered texts of an author like Cameroonian Werewere Liking who has also rejected Western literary genres and writes in decolonized French that defies standard rules and vocabulary for language to better adapt to a non-European context. In doing so, Liking is able to more readily create her literary genre rich with rituals, symbols, and elements of oral

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\(^2\) Tamasheq is one of the three main varieties of the Tuareg language, and it is the one most commonly spoken in Mali.
literature known as the *chant-roman* or “song-novel,” which is ultimately unique to Liking.\(^3\) Unlike Liking, who coined a term like *chant-roman* (Amela 21) to describe her writing, Zakiyatou has not attempted to put a label on her work; her stories are short narrations assigned a musicality not often seen in literary texts, but this is indicative of the influence of Tuareg oral literature and a performance culture among Tuareg women that is amply illustrated in *Passions du désert*. This study focuses on various elements of Zakiyatou’s collection and parts of her other writings that successfully help to deconstruct and rewrite an identity as violent aggressors and opponents of the state that has often been wrongly cast on the Tuaregs of Mali, whether they are still living inside the country or in exile. The fact that Zakiyatou is presenting feminine and feminist perspectives of Tuareg oralities in a new context is also significant in that she is further distinguishing women’s writing in the north of Mali from what we find in terms of published literature from the south. Still, Zakiyatou affirms that the contribution of Tuareg women to Malian literature is essential.

In this study, the writing of Zakiyatou oualett Halatine will be at the core of defining a more inclusive definition of Malian literature, with Tuaregs having their rightful place within it. Although this may seem surprising for national literature in which the writings of those from the south of the country have always dominated, a discussion of Zakiyatou’s journey and perspectives will justify such a definition. Although the main text analyzed is her collection of stories, *Passions du désert*, analyses of other works will contribute to the discussion and illustrate the importance of musicality in Zakiyatou’s texts. Finally, such writing aims to ensure a future for a group dispersed by exile, violence, and geopolitics for over a decade. Her texts provide hope despite the desperate situation for Mali’s Tuaregs today, and in doing so, she affirms her ties with her group.

**Defining “Malian literature” through Inclusivity**

In literary studies (African, Francophone, etc.), Malian literature has generally been understood as the body of works of authors from the south of the country. The field of Amazigh Studies, which has increased visibility in recent years, features little on the written literature of Tuaregs in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, who are also Berbers (Amazigh). This is most certainly because of the dearth of published texts by Mali’s Amazighs and not because of a lack of interest.

\(^3\) Several of Liking’s works qualify as *chant-roman*. *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* is probably the most well-known.
Researchers who wish to explore the rich history of Malian literature soon discover an overwhelming representation of writings from southern Mali, where 90% of the population lives. In fact, in the most recently published catalog of Malian women writers, Écrivaines du Mali (2022), there are no Tuaregs represented. However, this omission leaves the remaining 10% who live in the Sahara voiceless, and as of 2020, half of the inhabitants of Mali’s desert are Tuaregs (CEFAN). The Malian government today claims Tuaregs make up only 3% of the population of the country—although there are no official statistics to support such a claim—and indeed, this figure is highly disputed (Claudot-Hawad). Arriving at an accurate percentage of Tuaregs in Mali is further complicated by the fact that Tuaregs are often the ethnic group whose members are the most likely to lack official citizenship status. The Sahara and the north nonetheless make up 65% of the surface area of Mali (GIS Geography). Although Tuaregs are clearly a minority in Mali, it is estimated that they currently account for at least 500,000 Malians living in the country today (Perrin 3), and this is still a significant number that does not even account for the tens of thousands of Tuaregs in exile, many having left Mali in the manner in which Zakiyatou was forced to do.

Current statistics of Mali’s Tuareg population differ greatly from those recorded just after the “Tuareg rebellion” of 2012, which indicated at the time that Tuaregs made up 10% of the population of the north (Gourdin 2013; Perrin 2014). Considering these realities plus the history of the Tuaregs in the country, it seems logical that Malian literature should recognize Tuareg writings as part of the fabric of its national literature. Zakiyatou strongly identifies with Tuareg culture but believes in maintaining and supporting Mali as a diverse country.

It can be argued that the current Malian state came into existence due to European colonial powers having drawn its borders and that the notion of Malian literature is thus also an invented one. Tuaregs themselves are semi-nomadic people living not only in Mali but also in Algeria, Libya, Niger, and Burkina Faso, and it must be noted that Mauritania has recently received many of Mali’s Tuaregs. In Mali and neighboring Niger and Burkina Faso, Tuaregs have long been considered hostile to the state by politicians, historians, and the media alike, and indeed, there are no less than four significant and enduring incidences of thus named Tuareg rebellions since independence from the French in 1960. However, as Susan Rasmussen points out regarding ethnicity in Mali, “there is no neat political division according to rigid ethnic categories” (2019; 25).

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Besides the general lack of published literary works by Malian Tuareg women writers, a perceived Tuareg hostility towards the state may be another reason why research of Malian women’s writing rarely, if ever, includes Tuareg writers. There is also the misconception that the north of the country, dominated by the Sahara, is a barren wasteland with little creative activity. Other groups in northern Mali, like the Songhai, seem to also fall off the radar of contemporary literature scholars. However, studies of oral literature produced by Malian women have long recognized the contributions of Songhai women, as evidenced in Aïssata Sidikou’s book, *Recreating Words, Reshaping Worlds: The Verbal Art of Women from Niger, Mali, and Senegal* (2002). However, Sidikou’s book does not discuss Tuareg oralities.

Published literary production by women writers arrived relatively late in Mali, compared to the rest of Francophone Africa—with one exception. The 400-page autobiography of Aoua Kéita, *Femme d’Afrique: La vie d’Aoua Kéïta racontée par elle-même*, was published in 1975 and considered one of the very first texts by a Malian woman writer. Kéita’s work is monumental as it is a rare account of women’s writing of the period between 1923 and 1958 in the Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF), a federation of eight French colonies which included French Sudan known in the present day as the country of Mali. Kéita was employed by the colonial government as a midwife and traveled extensively throughout French Sudan. Kéita was from southern Mali and clearly focused on that part of the country she knew best; Tuareg is not mentioned in her work. Nonetheless, Kéita’s work is pertinent to this study because we can draw interesting comparisons between Kéita and Zakiyatou as pioneers of Malian women’s writing. Kéita’s autobiography documents women’s lives in southern Mali pre-independence from a woman’s perspective. No other document, literary or otherwise, challenges the view on the women of this region. This perspective had been previously chronicled exclusively from a white and primarily male Western perspective and included European authors, anthropologists, and colonial administrators. Thus, Kéita’s work is a rewriting of history, giving voice to those previously unheard. It must be noted that even though there were Malian male authors who wrote about the same period as Kéita—the highly acclaimed author Hampaté Bâ, for one—they did not address women’s issues and status in Malian society either and this is a trend consistent with literary histories of other African Francophone countries with regards to their women writers.

5 Amadou Hampâté Bâ (1900-1991) wrote the novel, *L’étrange destin de Wangrin* (1973) and his autobiography, *Amkoullel l’enfant peul* (1991) and both works covered virtually the same time period pre-independence as the autobiography of Aoua Kéita (1912-1980).
What Zakiyatou’s *Passions du désert* achieves today is similar to the contribution of Kéita’s autobiography to Malian literature almost fifty years ago. Similar to Kéita, who broke a barrier and ultimately allowed women’s voices to shape Malian literature, Zakiyatou’s writings introduce Tuareg women’s texts as part of the Malian literary canon. The time elapsed between the publication of these two pioneering works shows the slow but steady progression of the acknowledgment of women’s writing in the region. After Kéita, no other published women writers in Mali until Aïcha Fofana’s novel *Mariage, on copie* in 1994. This text opened the door for other women writers of Mali to publish creative writing, even if Tuareg women were not among them until 2013 when Zakiyatou contributed to this published literary corpus.

The only southern Malian woman writer mentioning the Tuaregs is Aïda Mady Diallo. Her novel, *Kouty, mémoire de sang* (2002), is a thriller whose protagonist, Kouty, is introduced as a mixed Malian child of a Peul6 father and a Tuareg mother who survives a massacre by Tuaregs, who ultimately are responsible for the deaths of her parents. Although the attack brought death and destruction to many, Kouty’s family was clearly targeted for ignoring the wishes of Kouty’s mother’s family, who were against any marriage with a non-Tuareg. While the overall message of the novel is to destigmatize the intermarriage between ethnic groups in Mali, the novel, in some ways, perpetuates the image that Tuaregs are violent killers who do not seek inclusion in Malian society. Kouty’s parents in the novel are the exception to this, but they do not survive, paying for their beliefs and openness with their lives.

The only other published text by a Tuareg Malian writer is the 2023 autobiography of Fadimata walett Oumar, *Fadimata tan Timbuktu*, written with the support of anthropologist Barbara Fiore, who had also collaborated on a collection of scholarly essays with Zakiyatou. Fadimata7 is also a recognized singer of the group Tartit, known within the genre of World Music. However, Zakiyatou is the only published woman creative writer among Malian Tuaregs, which is why she has been singled out for this study. Both Zakiyatou’s and Fadimata’s texts emerged while these authors were in exile, Zakiyatou in Mauritania and Fadimata in Burkina Faso. A Tuareg rebellion in the north of Mali in 2012 is widely acknowledged as the event that sparked the current conflict, which has been further complicated by French military

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6 Peul is an ethnic group in the Sahel also known in English as the Fula, Fulani, or Fulbe.

7 Fadimata walett Oumar will be referred to by her first name, Fadimata, for the same reasons that “Zakiyatou” is used to speak of Zakiyatou oualett Halatine. That is, to avoid referring only to the fathers of these two writers. “walett” and “oualett” used in Fadimata’s and Zakiyatou’s names respectively hold the same meaning, that is “the daughter of;” but the difference in spelling is maintained because this is how their names are written in their published works in translation.
intervention in 2013, additional rebel attacks, and three coups d’état. Because this conflict is ongoing, most of southern Mali’s authors also write from exile.

**Zakiyatou’s Story**

Zakiyatou oualett Halatine was born in 1956 in Goundam, a small city 90 kilometers to the southwest of Timbuktu in an area directly impacted by Mali’s current conflict. An engineer and former Minister of Tourism and Handicrafts from 2000-2002 under former President Alpha Konaré’s government, Zakiyatou has paid dearly for her open and unequivocal support of an inclusive and diverse Mali that maintains the north and south in one country, a view often construed as politically problematic given that borders in the region are colonial constructs. Her position is both personal and political as she was a Minister in the government of the only president in Mali’s history who made a genuine effort to increase a sense of unity between the north and south and to give more representation to Tuareg citizens, which is, in part, why Zakiyatou was appointed to her position. Before and after her political appointment, she worked on several development projects sponsored by the Malian government and/or development agencies, using skills acquired through her advanced studies in engineering in Ukraine. How does one explain Zakiyatou’s commitment to advancing the lives of Malians instead of singling out her community? Historians Lecoq and Klute (2013) point out that even though Tuaregs live in parts of the Sahara that span five African countries, including Mali, there has never been any joint Tuareg secessionist project, and this may be due to the impact that “national identities have had on the political thinking of the various Tuareg groups in the respective postcolonial states” (432-433). Even the short-lived Islamic state in the north of Mali which took the name of Azawad (2012-2013), only had a “fusion de façade” or merely an appearance of being united, according to sociologist Aly Tounkara, with leadership that was not even exclusively Tuareg (72). In her work, Susan Rasmussen explains that Tuareg cultural revitalization leaders emphasize identity-based on culture and language, not race (Persons 25).

Lines have been blurred further by Tuareg families who have married off their daughters to men outside of their culture with the hope of bettering the family’s socioeconomic status (Rasmussen, Persons 22). While matrilineal influences have traditionally allowed Tuareg women more freedom than women of other ethnicities in Mali (Rasmussen 24), intermarrying has resulted in the Arabization and/or Islamization of some aspects of the Tuareg culture. Living in exile has not changed how Zakiyatou identifies herself. In fact, she claims: “Exile forced me to respond to the question of my own identity” (2023), which is why her writings
are so appealing because the reader becomes privy to the construction of that identity as a Tuareg woman in a multicultural Mali pre-2012. The writing process allows Zakiyatou to define her identity instead of having outsiders determine it, as has frequently been the case over the last decade. Western media journalists but also Malians living far from Tuareg regions have often placed Tuaregs at the root of the conflict in the country.

In her introduction to the English translation of Passions du désert, Patricia Cummins notes that Zakiyatou’s numerous entrepreneurial and cultural projects constituted a “means to promote peace, prosperity, and social cohesion at a time when negative forces were tempting the young and unemployed with drugs, violence, and religious extremism” (14). In Femmes touarègues dans la tourmente, Zakiyatou advocates for a “dialogue intermalien” (10). She has denounced all violent parties, accusing them of hijacking Malian identity: “How do we determine who is Malian today? This is a good question that we are unable to answer when militias, armed groups, and terrorists keep garnering all the attention for themselves” (11). As Zakiyatou does not show unconditional support for one group or another, however, her position has incited mistrust among violent factions of the north and south, which ultimately led to the destruction of her and her family’s home and belongings. An explanation for this violent reaction is presented in Giyatri Chakravorty Spivak’s celebrated essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” That is, colonialism had caused all of Mali’s classes and ethnic groups to find themselves among the dominated, but Malians from the South have themselves held more power in the central government in an official capacity. At the same time, extremist groups in the North have also taken control in critical areas at times. Such a phenomenon, as Spivak describes in a general sense, “could and did create many ambiguities and contradictions in attitudes and alliances” (284). This has resulted in ongoing tensions among ethnic groups in Mali that have notably affected the Tuaregs.

Zakiyatou’s writings are cathartic, and they have helped her to overcome all that has happened to her and sort out the ambiguities and contradictions that Spivak describes. Instead of expressing bitterness, however, Zakiyatou offers a warning in Femmes touarègues dans la tourmente, a response that has been formulated from a proverb: “An eye for an eye, and we will soon all be blind” (9).

In February 2012, Zakiyatou first sought refuge from further persecution in Mauritania like many Malian Tuaregs, hoping to return home soon, but she later took advantage of research opportunities in Norway and Paris. As the situation worsened in 2012, Zakiyatou settled in

8 “Œil pour œil, et nous serons tous aveugles.”
Rennes, France, where she still considers herself in exile. Her projects in 2023 included fieldwork in Mauritania and a lecture in Paris delivered at the Institut des Mondes Africains, where she addressed strategies for reducing economic and social disparities among people—and especially women—living on the African continent. Many of these strategies come from her experience working with women’s organizations promoting entrepreneurship and self-employment and her initiatives for sustainable development in Mali.

_Tuareg Oralities⁹ in Zakiyatou’s Passions du désert_

Zakiyatou does not write about the Malian Sahara as a mere observer; instead, she is a product of it, a true daughter of this desert. While it seems that most of her works—and _Passions du désert_ is no exception—focus on preserving Tuareg culture threatened by war, ethnic conflict, extremism, terrorism, and Arabization that currently plague the country, Zakiyatou’s stories also remind us even if subtly, of a world that was already disappearing in her teenage years by the time she left the north to attend high school in Bamako in the early 70s. Zakiyatou writes in her introduction to _Desert Passions_: “As a young woman, I sensed that the way of life I had enjoyed as a girl, and the traditions and values I associated with the nomadic encampments outside of Timbuktu, were already threatened by ‘modern life’” (18).

_Passions du désert_ was put on paper in Nouakchott, Mauritania—her first destination in exile—even if some of the details described in her writings happened decades before. The work is an invaluable contribution to Amazigh and Malian literature that gives readers a glimpse of life in the desert that contrasts with stereotypical accounts first provided by travel-inspired writing such as the wildly popular adventure novel from the 1980s, _Tuareg_ by Spanish author Alberto Vazquez-Figueroa and then perpetuated by the Western media, especially in films like _Tuareg: The Desert Warrior_ (1984). Western journalists are also to blame, especially those who reported on the Tuareg rebellion of 2012 while playing on the sensitivities of American readers in particular, as one sees in a _New York Times_ article from 2012: “After fighting for Colonel Qaddafi as he struggled to stay in power, the Tuaregs helped themselves to a considerable quantity of sophisticated weaponry before returning to Mali” (Nossiter).

These sources have portrayed Tuaregs as exotic, mysterious, blood-thirsty, and vengeful while glossing over historical context. Susan Rasmussen’s essay on media representations of Northern Malian Tuareg (2017) warns that Western media portrayals of the

⁹ As orality is not a universal concept, the word oralities is preferred here because it better grasps the multicultural context of this region.
conflict in Mali have been “especially dangerous and destructive,” noting in particular that they “render current and recent events in terms of simplistic narratives, sacrificing local and historical nuance for the sake of clarity and brevity for mainstream readers” (78).

While men have traditionally dominated politics and economic affairs, so has the story of Mali’s desert, especially since it has come to light in recent years that the Malian Sahara, contrary to Western popular belief and stereotypes, is not a vast wasteland void of resources. Indeed, the French colonial system had perpetuated this myth by favoring groups living in the south of the country (namely Hausa, Songhai, and Bambara), thereby marginalizing the Tuareg in the north (Rasmussen, Persons 24).

Africanist economist Amadou Sy (2014) points out that pre-1880s populations and clans in Mali had been free to migrate from region to region, which was especially important when war and famine loomed. Still, this freedom of mobility was compromised during the colonial period. For the semi-nomadic Tuaregs of Mali’s desert region, movement was often more restricted during the colonial period, and consequently, their control over peoples in the south was diminished. Lecocq (2004), however, claims that if the French colonial administration had sometimes left the Tuaregs alone in times of peace, it was because the French had believed the desert to be without economic value (89). However, Lecocq also maintains that there was a French “fascination” for the Tuaregs, who were perceived as a people “epitomizing nomadic freedom and chivalry in an orientalist fashion” (89).

Rasmussen points out that this complex history “continues to impact experiences and shape memories” of this region (Persons 25). Nonetheless, the Malian state today, despite all the conflicts, terrorism, and unrest that currently plagues it, seeks to maintain its borders as such, at least for now. Mali’s government is and has been weak in recent years, and it has also been overwhelmingly dominated by representatives from the south who do not necessarily feel an affinity with the Tuaregs of the north and who, in fact, often hold them responsible for destabilizing the country (Kone 54). Anthropologist Kassim Kone, for example, explains that southern Malians tend to link all of Mali’s major political upheavals to the Tuareg rebellions of 1963, 1990, 2006, and 2012 (53). Sociologist Aly Tounkara (2020) describes a much more complex situation of limited access to natural resources combined with the colonial system’s imposition of borders on semi-nomadic people. Tounkara also cites, however, conflicts with other ethnic communities in the Malian Sahara and a restructuring of the social hierarchy among the Tuaregs, along with severe economic crises and hardships throughout the years, as culprits of this destabilization. As of the start of 2024, the 2015 Algiers peace accord with Tuareg separatists in the north had been scrapped by Mali’s military government. So how can
we explain nonetheless the ongoing efforts by all warring parties to respect the territorial integrity of the Malian state? Lecoq and Klute point out that by the start of the new millennium, “the geostrategic and economic importance of the Sahara had increased dramatically” (428). Mali’s desert has been profiting from oil and development projects and, until 2012, from tourism. But there are also entities making money from transiting drugs and migrants across the Sahara to other countries and especially to Europe. Thus, over the last twenty years, Mali’s stretch of the Sahara began losing its stereotype of being a vast wasteland with no economic value.

One of the most interesting aspects of *Passions du désert* is the female Tuareg perspectives of Mali’s desert region that describe an almost unrecognizable space compared to descriptions of the same region by dominant male voices. The Sahara that Zakiyatou describes in *Passions du désert* differs significantly from the one offered, for example, by Hawad, a male Tuareg writer from desert lands, which are now officially part of Niger. In *Sahara: visions atomiques*, Hawad’s desert is plagued by death, destruction, and fire, “tempête de flammes et de laves” (21) or “a storm of flames and lava” that had been initiated by colonialism. Hawad crafted his genre for writing the desert called “furigraphy,” which Maïa Tellit Hawad defines as “a literary and graphic practice that uses words, letters, signs, and lines as ammunition to confront disaster and dispossession” (2023). Although a writer like Zakiyatou provides readers with some moving and more pleasant views of desert life, the realities of the impact of centuries of violence and hardships are also present. Thus, this is not a sugar-coated version of Tuareg’s history. Writing about a place while in exile means capturing it from a distance, resulting in an image of this place somehow frozen in time and therefore uncertain of how it exists today. Thus, it is unsurprising that Zakiyatou concentrates on a more peaceful time in Mali and its desert, specifically the approximately twenty years of relative calm between the end of the 1990s and 2012. Still, also through her rewriting of legends, she brings to life once more times before the creation of the Malian state from the 14th century to 1960. In contrast, Hawad had already left the Sahara before the Tuareg rebellions of the 1990s, and he noted, “When I was born, the chaos had already begun” (2023). Zakiyatou’s memories are exactly the opposite; they include silence and tranquility and carry traditional legends and tales instead of more violent accounts of history. It is also notable that Hawad does not identify with Niger as a homeland (Wise 303) as a means of rejecting the violence that the creation of a state had caused. It is not that Zakiyatou supports the state per se; it is more of a realization that states now define the world, and she is attempting to find her place within it.
Thus, in contrast, Zakiyatou’s identity is tied to Mali, so she advocates for inclusivity in her book-length essay, *Femmes touarègues dans la tourmente* (10). She laments that double standards exist and that they disadvantage the Tuaregs in Malian society (45). Southern Malians decry their lack of representation in a neocolonial state but have historically denied Tuaregs opportunities to govern alongside them. Southerners consider Tuaregs as the majority, but in reality, they are a minority among other minorities in the country. Both writers consider themselves exiled, although Hawad chose to leave, unlike Zakiyatou who was driven out by violence, the destruction of her home, and threats to her life. In a personal interview, Zakiyatou stated that when one lives in exile, there is already a perceived loss of culture (2023). There is also the reality, as Susan Rasmussen pointed out in her book *Persons of Courage and Renown* (2019), that “although many Tuareg residents in northern Mali have repeatedly fled and returned home, their home is no longer the same” (9). Writing down these stories—including some that have only been communicated orally until now—makes up for some of the perceived loss.

About one-third of *Passions du désert* consists of stories imagined by Zakiyatou. The remaining stories of the collection are based on oral literature with a contemporary twist that Zakiyatou brings to them. In addition to casting the desert as one of her main protagonists, she also claims that the stories “magnify women” (10), a notion that goes against recent major trends in Tuareg lifestyles that have seen the roles of women progressively diminished (Figueiredo 35).

Zakiyatou’s work became a means to reconstruct her memory and identity through retelling a region’s history and the history of her people, who overwhelmingly bear the brunt of the blame for Mali’s divisions. In writing down these stories, some of them inspired by myths known to her people, Zakiyatou also contributes to a rendering of a more complete view of Tuareg’s identity and helps preserve their collective memory. In this particular work, Zakiyatou does not overtly defend the politics of the Tuareg nor directly criticize it; instead, her goal is to write about the Tuaregs’ culture and the desert as its backdrop, and she states this unequivocally in her introduction:

>[This book] is an inside look at the Sahara, its people, their environment and their beliefs. It introduces the notion of *ehaf*, social bond between men, between men and nature, requirement and promotion of a sense of responsibility. (9)

In any context of war, women and children suffer the most, and Zakiyatou’s stories focus on the suffering of Tuareg women who nonetheless work tirelessly as keepers of a desert culture and builders of a community. In his book *Mali: analyse sociohistorique des conflits*
Aly Tounkara affirms that Tuareg women play the most important role in transmitting culture through education and the teaching of reading, writing, and music (31). Zakiyatou sees Tuareg women of the north as having much more independence than in southern Mali. However, this has also been threatened in recent years because of the dominance of southern culture in Mali and the Arabization of the Tuareg. Thus, Zakiyatou’s writings also seek to enshrine in writing the freedoms of Tuareg women and even their dominance in certain contexts, lest people continue to forget, including the Tuaregs themselves.

Zakiyatou’s *Passions du désert* does not start with a story or a typical introduction. Instead, it begins with a section entitled “Ehaf,” for which there is no one-word, catch-all translation in French or English. The concept is essential to understanding northern Mali’s Tuareg way of life. *Ehaf* is thus spiritual, but it is not a religion. It is a philosophy, a way of being infused with a sense of solidarity and consciousness about the environment where resources are used sparingly so that descendants do not go without. Zakiyatou presents this philosophy at the very beginning of her work with the hope that the reader will continue to find it embodied in the characters of her stories. But she also wants readers to realize the consequences of not observing the principles of *ehaf*. When I discussed *ehaf* with Zakiyatou in a personal interview (2023), she reminded me of what she thought was one of its most important elements. In popular knowledge, *ehaf* is considered to have the same root as the word *efaf* which means “the nourishing breast,” a connection that links nature, the environment, and human life. Zakiyatou’s emphasis on the root of this word, *efaf*, conveys her desire to transmit Tuareg’s inherent feminist values distinct from the Western understanding of the term but contribute to a transnational conversation on feminism. Zakiyatou writes:

> When you live in the desert, you realize that nature is not so generous. She gives what she wishes, and she takes back what she wants, when she wants it. […] At the same time, she shows us that life is worth the effort, as long as we do not allow greed to destroy what should be left for tomorrow. Once one learns to live soberly, out of necessity, […] the desert becomes a spiritual source. Don’t make the mistake of treating the desert as a dead part of our planet, good for nothing else except a dumping ground for man’s harmful activities: destroying nature, burying waste, developing dangerous and illegal activities that sever those ties between nature and man but also the ties that bind all humans. (13)

Zakiyatou’s three-page presentation of *ehaf* could be interpreted as her underlying criticism of Tuareg rebels’ responsibility for souring the entire group’s reputation. Also, clarifications are intended for non-Tuareg readers who may cling to stereotypes projected by the media and other Western accounts. Zakiyatou states that, inherent to *ehaf*, it is an obligation to leave others in peace. Being Tuareg but also a predator, as depicted in Aïda Mady Diallo’s novel, goes against the notion of *ehaf* (14). Zakiyatou quotes a Tuareg proverb to explain this philosophy further:
“Live in this world and then leave it without a trace,” these “traces” being the destruction of nature. Non-adherence to  
*ehaf* translates into death: “death of humans, of community, of animals, of the entire world” (14). Thus, it is clear that Zakiyatou’s commitment to a multiculturally and diverse Mali with the north and south united in one country is driven by this notion of  
*ehaf* which comes specifically from her culture. Still, it is also a personal vision and a guide for living in a world with others. While this may translate into a common goal, such as saving the desert, this ideal cannot be confused simplistically with ecofeminism in the Western sense, linking the oppression of women and the destruction of nature. Instead, it is a notion that embraces African environmental philosophies.

*Passions du désert* is divided into two distinct parts: “Vies du désert” or “Desert Lives” and “Récits et légendes” or “Tales and Legends,” which is the longest of the two parts. Zakiyatou provides readers with 38 snapshots in all, with six narratives striving to capture elements of Tuareg culture and its relation to the Sahara: “Breath of the Desert,” “Aman Iman! Water is Life!” along with “Waters of Time,” “Exchanges,” which talks about the marketplace, “An Evening to the Sound of the Violin,” and “Tamyakot, Fairy of the Desert.” While some may believe that such titles romanticize the desert, the reality is that these six literary portraits refute notions of a desert wasteland and present vibrant scenes of everyday life instead. In fact, there is only one small reference to a period of hardship during the year when it is essential to manage resources, and that is included in a subsection titled “Water of May” in which Zakiyatou writes: “Thirst, like a wild animal roams, occupies everyone’s minds and all human resources. Nothing else counts other than to get through, resist, and survive until the first drops of the next rainy season” (43). But even this description does not convey a sense of desperation; one senses that despite the difficulty, Tuaregs are traditionally equipped with the knowledge to navigate this dry spell that comes predictably every year. However, there were very real droughts and subsequent famines in this part of Mali, including some that have been recorded into history for their devastating effects, such as in 1973 to 1974 in particular, which Zakiyatou references briefly in the legend of “Talla and Tina” (67-68). In addition, many scholars blame the region’s drought and famine of 2010 for the downward spiral leading to the Tuareg rebellion in 2012. However, in this work, Zakiyatou does not overtly state a cause for the conflict that is still ongoing today, the one that ultimately costs her both home and country of origin, perhaps permanently.

“Breath of the Desert ” is a story about the colors, aromas, and sounds of the desert, all details that assert its vibrancy. Zakiyatou describes a surprisingly active ecosystem with reptiles, gazelles, and numerous varieties of birds all co-existing with humans. Sounds of birds
and animals undoubtedly have a musicality that, later in the collection, she places in complementarity with centuries-old Tuareg musical traditions quite unlike, in reality, those that have only recently come to light on a global scale thanks to a 2012 Grammy-awarded to the group Tinariwen of the Malian Sahara (Amico 11). In “Breath of the Desert,” the songs of one bird, the takako or “hornbill” as translated in the English version, are likened to a jealous rant; the writer assigns the female bird the sound “Eket! Eket! Eket!” and interprets it to mean, sarcastically, “go to her!,” “her” being the takako’s companion’s new lover, to which the male bird responds, “I’m going! I’m going!” (35). This exchange demonstrates the nature of Tuareg's musical traditions to tell stories and elicit listeners' responses. This back-and-forth between performer and audience challenges what Westerners may think they understand to be “Tuareg music.” Tuareg performers note that what European and North American audiences witness on stage or hear on recorded albums has been conceived for them as a performance. However, the authentic Tuareg musical traditions of Mali are something else altogether. In ethnomusicologist Marta Amico’s book, La Fabrique d’une musique touarègue, Zakiyatou’s contemporary, Fatimata walett Oumar, provides a quote that brings more insight to the definition of Tuareg music:

We all make music where we’re from. There aren’t any musicians per se…better yet, we’re all musicians. In our camp, we sit in a circle outside just to have fun. Women play the tindé, men are right there too, and the girl with the most beautiful voice is called upon to sing. We then respond back in song as a group, we dance, we clap our hands, the men circle around their camels, and we keep on going until we get tired. (48-49)

This quote allows us to identify the same musical traditions that Zakiyatou strives to capture in her writing instead of on a concert stage. Amico further explains: “[Back home], her tindé is no longer this mythical instrument invested with the power to recreate the world of the Tuareg on stage. At home, for its owner, the tindé is merely just another ordinary household item with a utilitarian function” (61).

Amico’s quote indicates what Tuaregs consider “musical traditions,” which are different from performances that Westerners see and re-contextualize to fit nicely into the genre of World Music. Amico points out, however, that much of what has been formulated by Tuaregs for the stage and in recordings stem from creations they put together in refugee camps and in exile as a way of preserving the collective memory of their lives in the Malian Sahara (73), which is precisely what Zakiyatou does in her writing in French whose readership is undoubtedly largely comprised of Western readers. But even if these concert performances are not as authentic as Westerners imagine them, the performers are by no means “selling out.”
Zakiyatou also does an essential service as an ambassador for her people, who are often misunderstood. Tuareg musician Fadimata wallet Oumar also explains:

[…] I want my culture to be known, and I want to talk about my people and what is happening to Tuaregs. We have to show the world that we exist and that we don’t want to disappear. It’s for the sake of my people that I am here. (278)

If in “Breath of the Desert,” Zakiyatou attempts to show the musicality of the desert through the symphony of sounds made by birds and insects, she comes back to the idea of Tuareg musical traditions in the story “An Evening to the Sound of the Violin.” The story is set in a traditional camp like the one previously cited by Fadimata walet Oumar, where a woman named Keke is identified as “the best violinist in the region” (51). Curiously, in the original French and English translations, the instrument Keke plays is called the “violin,” yet we know that this cannot be the image of the violin that Westerners typically have, and indeed, it is not. Zakiyatou clarifies what Tuaregs understand to be the “violon”: “Three horse hairs fixed onto a stick of wood, laid across tanned goatskin by strips of leather on a calabash especially selected for that purpose. How do they [ever] manage to reach the very depths of the soul?” (51).

In a personal interview, Zakiyatou was asked about this traditional instrument, and she provided photos that resemble what is described in her story. There is evidently another name for this instrument in Tamasheq, and Zakiyatou confirmed that it is actually called emzad in the Timbuktu region of Mali and that it is played exclusively by women. However, this is not explained in the story about Keke. Zakiyatou elaborated further and said that the word emzad is made up of the morphological unit “em” meaning “mouth” and “zad” which comes from “ezed” meaning “good” or “sweet” in Tamasheq. While there might not be a philological basis to support this notion, it most certainly works poetically speaking; the literal translation of the instrument, in this case, becomes “the sweet mouth.” However, the name “violin” in both French and English was given to the instrument by European explorers and colonists. Zakiyatou admits this has stuck with Tuaregs, who translated it simply as “violin” when speaking European languages.

Indeed, the event in the camp led by Keke’s playing, as described in Passions du désert, cannot be classified as a concert in the Western sense of the word. Zakiyatou writes that Keke has “very little time” to devote to her music (52) as she has an orphaned grandson and goats to look after. While at times during Keke’s playing, men and women sit and listen, most of the time, there is interaction with the music, and thus, even silence can be a form of interaction in this context:
Some people, swept by emotion on hearing the sound of Keke’s violin, sigh deeply to express their happiness. For the old people of Keke’s age, what memories! For the young people, what a discovery! For everyone, what a pleasure! (52)

Zakiyatou then writes the audience interaction into the narrative; sometimes, people speak to others in attendance in their own smaller circles, or at times, someone is heard talking loudly over the music for everyone to hear. But in all cases, the remarks from the crowd bring clapping and laughter. Even when the words seem insulting, it is actually a form of comic relief. “You, Zeina, ugly and lazy, you certainly can’t compare with the sound of Keke’s violin” (53). Sometimes, the person making the remarks addresses the “violin” directly, as in the case of the marabout, Alfaki:

Violin, mysterious and prodigious beyond our understanding, on this night that the Almighty has decided to give light, I declare that from Inwalaten to Egadez, I have never failed to resolve any case of jurisprudence submitted to me! (53)

“An Evening to the Sound of the Violin” is just one of many stories in the collection that bring authentic performance and Tuareg oral traditions from Mali to the reader, despite using French or English to describe them. As Zakiyatou pointed out in a 2024 interview, the performing of the music and the reactions to it are, in reality, a series of individualized experiences; Tuareg musical traditions are thus a series of dialogues and conversations and a vital means of sorting out problems.10 Through descriptions of the music, the reader is transported to the Tuareg desert camp in a way that would be impossible on the Western concert stage.

**Zakiyatou’s Other Works of Note**

In addition to *Passions du désert*, Zakiyatou also published in 2013 the trilingual edition (Tamasheq, French, and English) of *Adages Touareg/Tuareg Sayings*, an incredibly rich collection of Tuareg proverbs and an additional project that was meant to preserve memory and identity threatened by war, conflict, and exile. The way the proverbs were compiled is another example of female transmission in Tuareg culture, with special attention paid to women-centered proverbs. Zakiyatou explains in the book that she selected the proverbs—which she emphasizes are “only a fraction of proverbs and sayings of the Tuaregs” (55)—that were communicated to her by Fadimâta oualett Facki, although very little information is given about the latter. Zakiyatou states that Fadimâta oualett Facki was born in 1922 and that she “is a good link between the two centuries” (55). We understand from Zakiyatou’s foreword that

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10 Interview with Zakiyatou oualett Halatine in Rennes, France on February 15, 2024.
Fadimâta is a highly cultured individual and a walking library gifted with “the knowledge of previous generations” (55). In Zakiyatou’s later work, *Le Tambour suspendu* (2015), we learn more about Fadimâta who was a renowned traditional healer among the Kal Tamasheq (96). Zakiyatou states that Fadimâta was the first Tuareg woman—and for a long time, the only one—to send her sons and daughters to a French school (96). Thus, it is interesting to note that for Fadimâta, tradition and modernity were not opposed. This was apparent in her dedication to share and salvage Tuareg's proverbs and her willingness to send her children to French school. Zakiyatou also mentions that Fadimâta, with whom she seems to have had frequent contact, was a “fountain of inspiration for all those who hoped for a better life” (96).

The sheer number of Tuareg proverbs presented in *Adages* makes it a text unlike no other published before—284 proverbs in all, in three languages, including a version transcribed in Tifinagh, the alphabet used by the Tuaregs of the Timbuktu region, and its Latinized equivalent serving as an understandable phonetic transcription for all so that readers can conceive of the sounds and even attempt to vocalize them. In a sense, Zakiyatou attempts to translate more than just words as she seeks to translate an entire Tuareg philosophy developed under “the sign of the word,” as theories of language by Valentin Vološinov have brought to light. Zakiyatou admits that the translations are imperfect, or more accurately stated, certain things are untranslatable, despite her addition of footnotes and explanations, which are copious throughout the text. If, as Vološinov states, “the word functions as an essential ingredient accompanying all ideological creativity” (15), this translation work is, for this reason alone, daunting and perhaps even impossible. Thus, Zakiyatou’s reader becomes privy to what Vološinov calls the “vehement struggle […] over ‘the word’ and its place in the system” (Vološinov xv). Zakiyatou states that the translations are “as close as possible to the Tuareg text” (11). For example, the literal translation of “Tadhza na ef ighan!” (31), “Le rire d’une tête cuite!” in French (13) and “The laughter of a cooked head!” in English (57), indeed leaves the reader quite intrigued. But Zakiyatou prefers to keep the unique image created by the literal translation of the original Tamasheq, to which she adds footnotes to clarify that this is a “rire jaune” or a “rictus” in the respective Western languages. Again, the fact that Zakiyatou, a Tuareg woman herself, has carefully chosen and translated these proverbs communicated to her by another Tuareg woman of the previous generation makes the collection highly original and unique. This is especially important for non-Tuareg readers since women’s voices, although traditionally prominent in Tuareg and the larger Amazigh society, tend to be ignored outside, including within Mali. The proverbs attest to a rich Tuareg culture and philosophies overall. Respect for women in Tuareg society is evident in some of the proverbs cited,
especially the ones that attest to a specific power through motherhood in order to create roots: “Tamat dihad toray wadegh dihad tatwaraw!” (42) or “The woman belongs to the place where she becomes a mother and not where she was born!” and “Ahadh efef wa ingkas, efoud wa fal issa!” (43) or “The breast from which the child feeds, the thigh on which he rests.” Some proverbs emphasize peace, which is especially significant considering the context in which this book was written: “Wa ky arheegh, war amoss aknass!” (51), which translates as “‘I-do-not-love-you’ is not a declaration of war!”.

In addition to these two creative writing projects, Passions du désert and Adages touaregs, Zakiyatou has also published scholarly studies on Tuareg culture and history and their impact on Malian and African geopolitics. One of her most interesting works is her book-length essay, Femmes touarègues dans la tourmente (2017), in which her views—from a Tuareg woman’s perspective and not necessarily an African or a Western one—clearly emerge. It is not as though Zakiyatou finds no similarities with Pan-African or transnational perspectives. But for her, as she discusses in this book-length essay on Tuareg women in turmoil, there is one ominous distinction that Malian Tuareg women confront, and that is the threat of extinction or dispersion through forced exile—‘une disparition programmée’ or a programmed disappearance of sorts (20).

A woman’s place in Tuareg culture is more readily understood through reading Zakiyatou’s work Chronique Kal Ansar. Le Tambour suspendu (2015). The book tells the history of the Kal Ansar Tuareg, who hails from Timbuktu. Zakiyatou actually writes down this history as told by Mohamed Elmehdi Attaher Al Ansari, one of the last rulers of the Kal Ansar. The importance of a Tuareg woman writing down this history cannot be understated, and it reminds us yet again of the ties between Zakiyatou and another influential Malian woman writer like Aoua Kéita, who wrote her autobiography about the pre-independence period with a focus on southern Mali. Both of these authors are the sole voices, ensuring that history can be told from a woman’s perspective. As Patricia Cummins points out, “[Zakiyatou] presents the challenges that faced North Mali at the end of the colonial period and through the beginnings of Mali as an independent nation in the 1960s” (15). There are very few other written accounts by Tuareg, let alone by Tuareg women.

As she expressed in a personal interview, one of Zakiyatou’s primary concerns in her work is how to undo the de-emphasis of Tuareg women’s power in their society. Patriarchal traditions that dictate expectations for women of ethnic groups in southern Mali have threatened the freedoms and power that Tuareg women have traditionally and historically in their society, and this power is further threatened by the Arabization of Tuareg regions in the
north. Such realities have slowly whittled away at the rights of Tuareg women in Mali (2023). This seems to be a general concern in Tuareg circles: Rasmussen confirms there is nostalgia among the Tuaregs for their nomadic camps in which the “moral center” is the female-owned tent (Persons 21).

In addition to these books, Zakiyatou wrote scholarly research on entrepreneurship in Mali (2008). In 2022, she co-authored (with Barbara Fiore and Ibrahim Ag Youssouf) *Maladies et soins en milieu touareg*, a book on Tuareg traditional medicine and how the latter is used to fight certain diseases in the region. Zakiyatou seems to be a tireless writer, and her readers should expect more works to come, including ones that continue experimenting with genres unfamiliar to Western readers, such as those relying on Tuareg oral traditions meant to elicit an audience’s response.

**A Future for Mali’s Tuaregs in Zakiyatou’s works**

Writing contemporary versions of Tuareg oralities while introducing new genres of literature to the Tuareg and Malian canons is not only part of a personal healing process for Zakiyatou Oualett Halatine, it also reaffirms the existence of a people in turmoil who fear the loss of their culture due to a number of factors, including war, exile, social and political exclusion, and so-called modernization. Literature scholar Metka Zupančič notes that women’s contemporary writing is an intellectual, emotional, and spiritual “privileged space” whose purpose is not only to capture a collective consciousness of a particular era but also to assist in a restructuring of society, to generate new ideas capable of influencing and building relationships anew (57). Zupančič also believes that when an author allows herself to be inspired by the myths and legends of her people, it leads to a process of “putting back together what has fallen apart” (19). Unlike shattered glass, Tuareg culture can be made whole again, and Zakiyatou is assuming some of that responsibility through her writing.

When Zakiyatou was asked in a personal interview if she ever intends to return home to Mali, she responded ‘yes’ but admittedly does not know when that would be or under what circumstances (2023). She travels frequently to Mauritania, the state where she first sought refuge in 2012, but France is currently her home base. Her true home, however, is not Mauritania or France. The Sahara is not one uniform swath of desert, and Zakiyatou’s allegiance is to the part of it that lies within Mali’s borders, where she was born, and she seeks

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to protect this space. The notion of *ehaf* leads Zakiyatou to compose works that express a desire and a need to protect the Sahara and Tuareg lands, as well as Mali as a multicultural and inclusive state. Her writings also allow her to share these spaces with others, even if only in a literary way. Thanks to her years of experience as a political figure, Zakiyatou developed strong views about certain issues and an interest in having her culture recognized and protected. Through her creative writing and essays, Zakiyatou still tries to formulate solutions that lead to conflict resolution. This is yet another means of respecting the concept of *ehaf*, which advocates for ways to leave resources behind so that future generations will not go without, risk extinction, or sink into oblivion.

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