The Relevance of Culture in Politics: The Application of Cultural Studies Using the Strategic Culture Method

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The relevance of culture in politics:

The application of cultural studies using the strategic culture method

by

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American Studies scholars have long been aware that their interdisciplinary studies reach far beyond Americana. The fields of folklore, English, history, political science and anthropology have all been enveloped under the American Studies umbrella. Public perceptions tend to assume that scholars engaged in these fields are limited to work within academia.

These perceptions have led me to explore unique branches of work where cultural studies and knowledge of the humanities can be applied in a practical way. One area where culture has become increasingly important in domestic and international politics. In this paper I will outline how an understanding of culture can benefit governments in policy making, military operations and organizing international aid efforts. I agree with the political theorists who argue that the studies of folklore, culture and politics should be inextricable.

Anthropologists have rarely agreed to apply their understanding of culture and human nature to benefit those in the political sphere, namely those in the intelligence and national defense communities. Their opposition stems from an ethical position that it is wrong to use the study of culture to influence or change a person or group’s culture. Despite this, the application of folklore, anthropology and ethnographic studies have become increasingly more valuable to politicians. A relatively new method of filtering and analyzing cultural data, cultural topography rose to the surface of my interdisciplinary studies.
Policy makers have long relied on scientific studies and analysis as the be-all end-all of political insight. Geopolitics, economics, and other areas of analysis have become the exclusive tools used to help understand other governments, nations and groups. Strategic culture is a theory that expands beyond these existing tools to provide a practical application of cultural studies in a politically significant way.

Strategic culture is conventionally characterized as the set of beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, norms, world views and patterns of habitual behavior held by strategic decision-makers regarding the political objectives of war, and the best way to achieve it… The underlying central assumption embedded within the concept is ‘the belief that traditions, values, attitudes, patterns of behavior, habits, symbols, achievements and historical experience shape strategic behavior and actual policy making’… Strategic culture is an aid to understanding motivations, self-image and behavior patterns of decision-makers – it ‘helps shape’ but ‘does not determine how an actor interacts with others in the security field’¹.

This theory fills in the gaps that previous political theories have left behind. Adding a cultural component to group analysis creates a more comprehensive insight into a group’s culture and helps us become better equipped to understand what these actors may do in the future. In identifying a specific actor or group’s strategic culture, Johnson and Berrett have outlined the Cultural Topography method as an ideal way to gather and analyze the collected cultural data.

The use of cultural studies to aid in political decision making is not new. History has shown us that leaders who have had an understanding of culture were more adept at understanding their enemies and their allies. In the 1930’s, Adolf Hitler’s shrewd perception of the importance of culture led to one of the most successful propaganda campaigns
in history. He not only littered the public with pamphlets and symbols, he went so far as to hire folklorists to rewrite children’s school books.\(^2\) He understood that people’s ideals and motivations come from their shared experiences, cultural narratives, and the way they see the world. And these perceptions can be altered by altering their just one of these areas, like cultural narratives.

Governments from across the political spectrum have utilized folklore as a stabilizing, unifying, and sometimes oppressive tool to support ideological positions and maintain power. Those that we recall most vividly are those that seem the least benign: Hitler’s social scientists used Germanic folk traditions to glorify the myth of Aryan supremacy and build the legend of the Fuhrer. Stalin reshaped existing Russian folklore to exalt the creativity of the peasantry and link the revolution of 1917 with earlier revolts. Haiti’s late dictator, Duvalier, cowed a superstitious populace with voodoo. Governments of Ireland, India, Egypt, Ghana, and Pakistan have sponsored folklore research with heavy nationalistic over-tones and more than a touch of patriotic bias.\(^3\)

In the intelligence community, increasing amounts of acquired data are sometimes meaningless without the addition of cultural analysis. Even work amongst international aid organizations is benefited from the understanding and application of cultural knowledge. When an organization understands the culture of a people, they can better understand how to meet their needs.

For this reason, the method of cultural mapping or topography has become an invaluable method for many public and private organizations at the local, national, and international levels. By gathering cultural data including a group’s folklore, history, social structure, and traditions, one can paint a picture that encompasses more than one facet of that group of people. With this cultural map I can identify the group’s strategic culture
and understand what aspects of a group’s culture help shape their strategic decision making. I seek to apply this method combined with the principles of strategic culture theory, which I will outline, to an international arena.

United States defense organizations are learning that the adoption of a cultural lens when planning military operations provides a better insight into both allies and enemies. This has become particularly relevant in situations where our military is fighting an insurgency on foreign soil, similar to the insurgency taking place in northern Mali. “Given the pivotal role of local popular opinion in this type of military engagement, understanding public culture, the cultures of significant sub-state groups, and how these affect security policy becomes paramount.”

Area of United States Security Interest: Northern Mali

Armed conflicts in Northern Africa have raised security concerns among U.S. intelligence communities. A military coup in Mali began in March 2012 in response to dissatisfaction with the government’s handling of Tuareg rebellions in the north, widespread starvation, and the infiltration of Al Qaeda in the Islamist Maghreb (AQIM) groups from neighboring countries. Simultaneously, the northern Malian group National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) took control of the northern provinces of Mali, Kidal and Timbuctu, citing their secession from Mali and the formation of the independent state of Azawad.

Much like the IRA, this group of Tuaregs is a small but vocal minority that is gaining international attention. This conflict in Mali has also prompted the military inter-
vention of U.S. allies. Due to the sensitivity of the U.S. to the increasing presence of Al Qaeda in Northern Africa, this area of the world is of security importance.

By applying the strategic culture theory to analyze the Tuareg people in Northern Mali I can demonstrate an effective method of more fully understanding the decision making patterns of an unfamiliar group of people. Though I am applying this method to an international arena, it can easily be applied to groups of people within the U.S. as well. This method could be used by politicians in determining the motivations and desires of a voting demographic or in an historical application. Discovering a group’s strategic culture by cultural mapping can shed light on the causes of a dramatic event in a society’s history. The “Cultural Mapping method seeks to explain, “why things which happened were to be expected,” and then “project probabilities for future iterations”. 5

In their article, “Cultural Topography: A New Research Tool for Intelligence Analysis”, Jeannie Johnson and Matthew Berrett define cultural mapping as:

A process or methodology…designed to isolate and assess cultural factors at play on issues of intelligence interest and to distinguish the degree to which those factors influence decisions making and outcomes. Mapping exercises done across time, spanning multiple issues, and on diverse groups within a society may aid in understanding that society’s “Cultural Topography”. 6

The method of cultural mapping for identifying the strategic culture of a group has been applied to security analysis within the political sphere. However, to date, there is no other work that exemplifies the specific cultural questions that I will address, focusing on creating a cultural topography of the Tuareg people, specifically those who live in the
Northern regions of Mali. To evaluate the work that has already been done I reviewed several theses and journal articles that sought to address how the culture of the Tuaregs is impacting their actions. These theses, however, do not use this method of cultural mapping which was developed specifically for the intelligence community.

Cultural topography considers four aspects of culture, norms, values, identity and perceptual lens. I analyzed these sources to gain information that will fit into one of the four classifications of cultural data as outlined by Johnson and Berrett in their article. The identity traits of the Tuaregs will be defined as “traits the group assigns to itself, the reputation it pursues, and individual roles and statuses it designates to members.” This identity will be determined based on both historic and modern descriptions of the Tuaregs. The norms are the “accepted and expected modes of behavior” within the culture. The values of the group are defined as “material or ideational goods that are honored or that confer increased status to members.” And lastly I will explore the perceptual lens of the Tuaregs which is “the filter through which this group determines “facts” about others.”

By gathering cultural data in these four areas, I will be able to create a cultural map of the Tuareg people. This map will allow me to better understand their motivations as well as prescribe policy recommendations that would allow the various governmental departments to interact with the Tuaregs in the best possible way. These cultural analyses will provide a unique example of how cultural studies can be used in politically relevant ways. These analyses are more useful because when used as part of a cultural topography, analysts can make important discoveries about the decision making motivations of each group of people.
This approach is designed to be concise but thorough, including information that may be pertinent to policy makers or project organizers in aid organizations. It begins with outlining key findings, the most crucial and useful pieces of cultural data collected.

Based on the outcome of the mapping exercise, a finished Cultural Topography paper will define for the reader first, which aspects of identity, norms, values and perceptual lens are most important to understand when the United States engages this actor on this issue, and second, the probable influence boundaries of the CCFs [critical cultural factors] identified.11

Then the data is filtered into one of the four categories, perceptual lens, values, norms and identity. After summarizing the specific cultural indicators I will outline the key findings for that particular section, and give policy recommendations based on that information gathered.

To begin creating a cultural topography, I first delved into the history of the Tuaregs and the region in which they live. Although they are a minority in Mali, large numbers of Tuareg tribes are also spread out among other Western African nations.

**A Brief History of Mali**

The Republic of Mali has a population of 12 million people with more than 90% of its citizens living in the southern half of the country.12 The most populated northern cities are Kidal with a population of 25,000, Timbuktu with 32,000, and another 8,000 in the city of Gao.13 Historically, Mali was part of one of the three great empires that cov-
ered northern Africa, “the Empire of Ghana, the Empire of Mali and the Songhai Empire. Each of these empires covered large amounts of Northern Africa. These empires helped mold the identity of Mali (as a nation), which centers on being a part of a greater whole. The national anthem of Mali still emphasizes Mali as part of Africa as a whole instead of on the nationalism of their own people:

For Africa and for you, Mali,
Our banner shall be liberty.
For Africa and for you, Mali,
Our fight shall be for unity.
To make a united Africa,
Together, arise, my brothers,
All to the place where honour calls

Two centuries after the great empires of northern Africa fell, Mali became part of the French Sudan. Mali then gained its independence in 1960, however its borders were much smaller than they had been during the time of the French Sudan. Those living in the south are mostly dark skinned descendants of Africans while northern Mali is mainly populated by the light skinned Tuaregs. The Tuaregs, or Kel Tamasheq, originate from the Northern African Berber people. Although we know that the Tuaregs make up the a significant portion of the population of many northern African nations, their nomadic lifestyles make it difficult to know exactly how many live in any one region.

The Tuareg population is estimated to be between 1.8 and 2.3 million. Today, they are dispersed between mostly deserted territories in Mali, Mauritania, Algeria, Libya, Niger and other Northern African nations, each tribe living with boundaries much smaller than
they had during colonial rule.\textsuperscript{23} “The Tuaregs comprise fewer than 35,000 in Algeria, 70,000 in Burkina Faso, and some 20,000 in Libya; however, they represent at least 840,000 or 7 percent of 12 million Malians and some 1.2 million people or 9.3 percent of 13 million people in Niger.”\textsuperscript{24}

During both colonial and post-colonial times, the Tuaregs have been at the center of numerous conflicts.\textsuperscript{25} Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM, and other terrorist groups including Ansar Dine are now settling in the same region as the Tuareg and are stirring up conflicts.\textsuperscript{26} The Tuaregs are again being accused of participating in these conflicts, though mixed reports make it difficult to determine the truth. Most recently, a military coup in the capital of Bamako gave Islamist militant groups in northern Mali the opportunity to take control of the northern states and declare themselves an independent nation.\textsuperscript{27} The Tuaregs were again in the middle of this conflict.

Early in the conflict, a Tuareg faction called the MNLA (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad) was allied with the AQIM groups in Mali.\textsuperscript{28} In January 2013 the French intervened to drive out the Islamist militants and regain control of northern Mali.\textsuperscript{29} In April 2013 other international troops, including those from Chad began their withdrawal from Mali.\textsuperscript{30} France left a portion of its troops in Mali to help keep the peace and a UN peacekeeping force was authorized to help stabilize the country for the elections in July of 2013.\textsuperscript{31} Just before the July elections, Tuareg leaders signed ceasefire agreements with the Malian government.\textsuperscript{32} This treaty allowed government troops to regain control of northern cities like Kidal in preparation for the elections.\textsuperscript{33} Ibrahim Boubacar was elected as Mali’s new president and asserted his position to unify Mali and
work with the Tuaregs to achieve this end. However in November, an incident occurred where government troops shot at Tuareg protesters in Kidal. Accounts differ as to who started the attack, but Tuaregs used the incident as reason to break their ceasefire. The complexity of Tuareg alliances is illustrated in maps the have been published on various websites (See appendix). Each map shows the same geographic area, however they have been modified to identify a different group as the sole perpetrator of the attacks.

Given how little we know about the Tuaregs, this particular group has become a wildcard in terms of their potential cooperation or resistance to international interventions. The goal of my research is to provide insight into the culture of the Tuaregs, particularly how their culture affects their participation in this current conflict with Islamist militants in Northern Mali.

By creating a cultural topography, I hope to shed light on the effect another war in Mali will have on the region as well as on U.S. interests in northern Africa. As I expound upon the Tuareg’s history and motives I plan to highlight areas that would be most helpful should the U.S. choose to intervene either diplomatically or militarily in Mali.

I also explored several theses that analyzed the Tuareg culture both today and in the past. In addition to academic and media sources I studied several travel logs from the time of colonial French Sudan and used all these to gather an image of Tuareg cultural traits that have been ingrained since the seventeen and eighteen hundreds. These original sources served as the entirety of my research materials. In an ideal situation I would have conducted first person interview with Tuaregs and others in Mali to gain a greater depth of understanding of their motives and cultural traits.
A Cultural Topography of the Tuaregs in Northern Mali

After filtering all the cultural data into each of the 4 categories outlines as part of the cultural mapping method, I reveal key findings about the Tuaregs. These observations are designed to be relevant to the Tuaregs strategic culture. They are also modeled after key policy recommendations that are typically given to U.S. policy makers when analysts present these cultural data in briefs.

Tuareg Identity

Northern Africa has become the latest hotbed for Al Qaeda recruitment. Northern Mali is strategically located near the border of Algeria and is not far from other countries whose political and military instability has caused international problems, such as Egypt and Libya. The Tuareg people of Northern Mali are an underrepresented ethnic group caught in the middle of this tumultuous region. Tuareg history is a long and proud one that glorifies their status as the noble warriors of the desert.

French troops had temporarily regained the regions overtaken by Islamist extremists in the last year, but permanent stability is yet to be achieved. The Tuaregs have become engrossed in this conflict which centers in the northern region of Mali, their main tribal grounds. Their true motives and values are unclear to the majority of those inside and outside Mali. Anti-Tuareg overtures are coming from the Malian government as well
as from neighboring nations who see this nomadic people as the cause of the problems and not the potential solution.\textsuperscript{39} Successful U.S. involvement in this region hinges on our ability elevate the Tuaregs to the role of ally and active participant in international discourses in the region.

Part of the Tuareg’s identity stems from their Islamic faith and one specific identity trait involves traditional dress. “Unlike many Muslim societies, Tuareg women do not traditionally wear the veil, whereas men do.”\textsuperscript{40} The Tuareg men traditionally use blue fabric for this head covering which has lead to them being described as the blue men of the desert.\textsuperscript{41} This simple difference in the Tuareg’s religious practices could prove a critical piece of information for any organization

**Finding: Tuaregs Have the Potential To Provide a Recruiting Ground for Al Qaeda**

After analyzing what cultural factors make up the Tuareg’s identity I resolved three key points that would be important to any agency hoping to understand the Tuareg’s strategic culture. First, The U.S.’s reluctance to communicate with Tuaregs could prove detrimental if Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM, recruitment of Tuaregs continues. Second, Tuareg alliances with extremists groups are temporary and opportunistic but may still hurt regional stability. Third, destabilization in Northern Mali holds the potential to disrupt oil production in neighboring countries and increase training and recruiting grounds for AQIM and other terrorist groups. And lastly, conflicts between the Tuaregs and outsiders will limit international ability to end smuggling, illegal arms trades and human trafficking along the Mali border.
However, their religious tradition may provide a sticking point with some Al Qaeda factions. The tradition of Tuareg men wearing veils instead of Tuareg women would be a point of friction to Al Qaeda groups that wanted to establish Sharia law including the mandatory covering of the heads of women.

**Finding: Tuareg’s Tradition of Ethnic Privilege Foreshadows Continued Conflicts with Malian Government and Potential AQIM Involvement**

Tuaregs were some of the first to settle in Northern Africa and they view their indigenous status as a proof of their superiority. This idea of ethnic superiority has created a rift between Tuaregs and the central government in Mali. Views of supremacy and inferiority coincide with the structure of the Tuaregs highly hierarchical society, which is determined by lineage.

Tamashq society is based on a set of social strata into which one is born…At the top of this society stood the imushagh… or noble warriors…and perceived as racially ‘white’…The first group…distinguished from the imushagh were the ineslemen…: A group of free or noble status, racially described as ‘white’… The imghad… formed a third group. This group consisted of free, ‘white’ people who were not noble, but who tried to live according to the temushagha, the noble way of life… The inadan … or craftsmen, generally simply referred to as ‘black-smiths’…were racially classified as ‘black’, but free. …At the bottom were the iklan: The slaves, divided into various subgroups which were all categorized as ‘black’.

Their societal structure has also incorporated elements from their adopted faith of Islam, particularly the idea of the infidel, or those people who have no faith. It has also
afforded extremist groups, such as AQIM, the opportunity to exploit this difference and gain favor with some Tuareg factions. Their view of ethnic superiority brings a sense of pride that inhibits the Tuareg’s ability to collaborate with the unification aims of the central government.

Ethnic privilege among Tuaregs dates back to the native Berbers taking possession of the lands in Northern Africa before the 7th century. As Berbers the Tuaregs do not see themselves as black or as part of the racial majority in Mali. According to Tuareg tradition, those of Arab descent are considered black. Their indigenous status feeds into their idea that the blacks, especially in the south of the country, have no right to rule over them. Traditions of hierarchy continue between the social classes within Tuareg tribes and it is displeasing to them that the blacks who hold the majority of the offices in the central government do not cater to these social norms and acknowledge their inferiority to the Tuaregs.

The Tuaregs make distinctions between “Koual, black; shaggaran, red; and sattefen, blueish black,” and each of these fits into a particular social group within their culture. These influence Tuareg opinions of the ruling class and most Tuaregs would rather be ruled by infidels than by blacks. Slavery of blacks has existed among the Tuaregs for hundreds of years. Even today, as slavery has officially been abolished, those of the lowest hierarchical class continue to pay an honorary tribute to the nobles of their tribes. Historically, only infidels or non believers could legally be enslaved.

Since the Malian capital is located in southern Mali, where the population is predominately of Arab decent and therefore black, the Tuaregs refuse to acknowledge the
government’s authority. Some militant groups, including AQIM, have preyed upon the Tuareg’s dissatisfaction with their current government by providing support and acknowledging their sovereignty. This has led some Tuareg factions to rely on AQIM for support. Another connection to the AQIM is their shared Islamic faith.

Race plays a role in determining an individual’s place in the Tuareg social hierarchy as well as his or her individual lineage. Each Tuareg tribe is divided by distinct social structure and hierarchical order. This social order is not fully understood to most people outside the Tuareg society, making efforts to identify and reach out to the actual leaders of these clans challenging. Tuaregs follow a social system that one is born into, “‘Who you are’ is defined through ‘whom you are related to’”. The exact name and responsibilities of each social class have changed over the centuries and are debated among the Tuaregs themselves. Known as the noble warrior, the Imushagh is the highest social order and is the most revered group among the Tuaregs. This group is still distinguished by their lineage as part of the former ruling caste, even if they are not currently the leaders of the clans.

Tuareg ideas of superiority are a red line to be aware of. Their strict beliefs in racial stratification could cause tension should the U.S. seek to identify AQIM members in northern Mali. The Tuareg distrust of the central government in Mali should also be considered. If offered control of a particular region (the northern region of Mali) or resources such as livestock or agricultural resources by AQIM groups, their loyalties would not lie with the Malian government. When working in Northern Mali, outsiders should treat the leaders of Tuareg tribes as leaders of their own autonomous group. It is also im-
important to understand that the central government has no effectual power in the North of Mali.

A more drastic and possibly more effective course of action would be to allow the Tuaregs to have an area of northern Mali as their own autonomous state. Since more than 90% of Malians (non-nomadic Tuaregs) live in southern Mali this arrangement may not be an impossible feat.67

Tuareg’s disdain of southerners, mostly those they consider blacks, makes it impracticable for a central government based in the South to maintain any hold over the Tuaregs of the North.68 The Tuaregs have never officially recognized the central government, or even the existence of Mali as its own nation-state, though Tuaregs have been instated in some local government positions in an effort to incorporate them into the state government.69 They do not identify themselves as Malians at all, but purely as Tuaregs or Kel Tamasheq, speakers of the Tamasheq language.70

Tuareg Norms

Many scholars have come to understand that the nomadic lifestyle of the Tuaregs results in a deep appreciation of their land and a spiritual connection to their natural resources.71 Many misinterpretations of this way of life have caused rifts between the Tuaregs and the central Malian government.72 These differences are another example of how even their fellow Malians can struggle to understand their motivations. Some Tuaregs believe that an independent nation would be the best way for them to maintain their lands
and gain the autonomy that they have sought for decades. Their desire for independence has motivated numerous Tuareg rebellions before and after Mali’s independence from France. These factors have created a window of opportunity for extremist groups to step in and exploit the desires of the Tuaregs by offering resources that the southern government is not providing. If extremists continue to provide what international and domestic organizations cannot or will not provide, then the Tuaregs stand to become a major source of manpower for militant groups including AQIM that have already extended their aggression to international areas, most recently the attacks on the BP oil plant in Algeria in January of 2013.

The Tuaregs have roamed the lands of Northern Africa for hundreds of years, disregarding the nation-states established during colonial times. Historically they populated the lands now known as Mali, Algeria and Niger after the Arab invasions in the 7th and 11th centuries. They continue to ignore international boundaries and choose to go wherever they are least disturbed, at times even ignoring the existence of these neighboring states altogether. When one nation applied unwanted pressure to the Tuaregs, they simply crossed the border into a neighboring country. This flip flopping is one of the Tuareg traits that has the potential to cause difficulties in international attempts to secure the borderlands from smuggling as well as human trafficking. According to several sources, illegal trafficking is a common source of income for poor groups in Northern Africa. Smuggling, mainly across the Algerian border has become the natural successor
to the caravan trade. As the Tuaregs traverse the desert they come into contact with militant groups including AQIM groups who use these borderlands as smuggling routes.

I agree that the similarities made between the insurgency in northern Mali and Afghanistan cannot be ignored. These terrorist cells and organized smuggling rings also use the mountains of northern Mali as places to hide their bases of operations, not unlike in the mountains of Afghanistan. The Al Qaeda cells in Mali could be established in the same areas that Tuaregs have been living for centuries. The Tuaregs are familiar with these mountains, which remain mostly unpopulated, and as a result of their familiarity with the region they can provide good opportunities for the U.S. if intelligence agencies desires to gather intel on these terrorist groups and others in the region. The Tuaregs would be the ideal group with whom to cooperate creating an opportunity to gather intel on AQIM locations should the U.S. gain favor with the Tuaregs.

While interacting with the Tuaregs, the AQIM are playing off of their desire for independence to gain the allegiance of some Tuareg factions, including the MNLA and the smaller Ansar al-Din. Several groups have distinguished themselves as the most apt to join forces with extremist groups in the name of independence, most notably the MNLA. The AQIM use the Tuareg’s disenfranchised perspective to recruit Tuaregs and increase resistance towards their government.

The [AQIM] has increased its recruitment of a number of disenchanted and marginalized citizens in the Sahel. Although the actual count of Tuareg members of the [AQIM] remains unknown, the [AQIM] has been able to recruit a number of them because of its goal of filling the social and ideological void left by decades of neglect and mismanagement by the governments of Mali and Niger. The result is that the youth tend to follow any demagogue who promises a
better future than the incumbent leadership. This logic also applies to the Sahel region. In fact, the [AQIM] seems to have increased the number of social services in many parts of the Sahel, thus attracting a large number of destitute youth.\textsuperscript{91}

The Tuareg factions that are most likely to be attracted to the AQIM overtures are those who are members of Tuareg independence groups, such as the MNLA. Though these groups have actively sought Tuareg independence, not all Tuaregs agree with their separatist methods.\textsuperscript{92} However, they are the most vocal and the most active in participating with extremist groups.

\textbf{Finding: Tuareg attempts at receiving autonomy are propelled by the making and breaking of pacts with the Malian government, AQIM and others}\textsuperscript{104}

Their value of independence has led them to make opportunistic treaties creating this well established norm of treaty breaking. Increasing terrorist threats in the region have turned international attention to the agreements made between various Tuareg tribal leaders and AQIM leaders.\textsuperscript{105} With their history of making pacts, sometimes under threat of military action, understanding the Tuareg habit of breaking agreements can help the U.S. understand how to do business with the Tuaregs should intervention in northern Mali become prudent.

Since the colonial invasion of France, where the Tuareg’s initial cooperation was met with policies that marginalized their people, the Tuaregs have been unhappy with being ruled by an outside force.\textsuperscript{106} “Over the course of time the Tuareg tactic had remained constant: negotiate a position that will provide an advantage in future conflicts
and then break the peace accord under when a convenient pretext presents itself.”

Under French colonial rule Tuaregs “remained influential right up until the start of the twentieth century…signing peace treaties with the French in 1905.” Peace agreements were signed between Tuareg leaders and Malian government officials in January 1991, April 1992, and again in 1996.

After the Peace Pact in 1996 many Tuareg rebels were integrated into the Malian national army and the university and civil service. After becoming dissatisfied with the military and government, many Tuaregs deserted the Malian army and went back to the mountains of Northern Mali. Enlisting in the army was another agreement that the Tuaregs did not feel compelled to keep after participation in the Malian army no longer met their needs or expectations. This perpetual infringement of treaties and pacts gives the U.S. a good insight into the possible actions of the Tuaregs and their involvement with AQIM.

In January of 2013 Tuaregs were again changing their strategic allegiances “Tuareg forces [have] broken with their former Islamist militant allies and have made peace overtures to the French and Malian governments”. This most recent change in their strategic alliances can give the U.S. confidence in the fact that if Tuaregs again join forces with AQIM, this may not be a permanent arrangement.

Based on this information I can add to my cultural map the finding that Tuareg Patterns of Breaking Treaties Present U.S. Opportunities. This fluctuating loyalty is crucial for the U.S. to understand if they are to work with the Tuareg’s in the future.
Tuareg disregard for permanent treaties can be a sticking point for local governments but can also be a leverage point for the U.S.. If Tuareg cooperation becomes prudent, the U.S. may craft strategically advantageous treaties with the Tuaregs with the full knowledge that these agreements are seen as temporary. These patterns of instability can be a short-term strategic negotiation tool if the U.S. required cooperation from Tuareg leaders. In the long term, however, the United States cannot count on permanent Tuareg allegiance.

Tuareg involvement in smuggling, kidnapping and human trafficking is one of their perceived norms that cannot be entirely verified. Though it is true that Islamist extremist groups are associated with human trafficking, some reports insist that Tuaregs do not entirely identify with the Islamist extremists.\textsuperscript{113} These reports claim their modes of operation vary drastically from these radical groups. According to these sources, mostly academic, most Tuareg independence groups do not kidnap for monetary gain, but only to draw attention to their neglected state.\textsuperscript{114} However, it is unclear exactly how many clans or groups do or do not participate in smuggling and human trafficking.

Other sources, mostly Internet commentators, bloggers and news media sources claim that the Tuaregs are participating in smuggling alongside AQIM and other extremist groups, citing that Tuaregs are using these activities as revenue generators while other sources state it is clear that “Tuaregs have never kidnapped for ransom.”\textsuperscript{115} These popular media sources paint the Tuaregs as the instigators of almost every armed conflict and terrorist activity in the Maghreb region.
Tuareg fighters were found fighting as mercenaries for Mouammar Gaddafi in 2011 although they were motivated not by the desire to fight, but by the overtures of Gaddafi’s who said, “Libya regarded itself as the protector of the Tuaregs and that Libya had been the Tuaregs’ ancestral home before they spread to…Mali.” Some Tuareg leaders adamantly deny any Tuareg involvement in most of these attacks. However, these leaders do not speak for the entire people, and splinter groups like MNLA and Ansar al-Din have been involved.

These norms of kidnapping and fighting as mercenaries are difficult to add to the Tuareg’s cultural topography because they are not conformed. These stories of extremist behavior also do not include the entire Tuareg people. This uncertainty about Tuareg’s methods of operation can confuse outsiders which will make this norm difficult to react to.

This drastically skewed portrait of Tuareg activities is another reason why the US should make an effort to communicate directly to clan leaders. The most effective course of action would be to gather intelligence locally to determine where the Tuaregs are involved and where they are not. Having an internal view of the Mali and Algerian borders will benefit Tuareg relations by helping to clarify their involvement or alleged involvement in terrorist attacks.

Traditional diplomatic routes would be complicated if the U.S. chose to intervene in Northern Mali. The Tuaregs believe their ethnic group is not only very distinct from the main Malian population, but also completely disconnected from the nation and central government. The threat of Al Qaeda recruitment and their alliances with Tuaregs is
further complicated by Tuareg perceptions that they are outside of Malian governmental control. The Tuareg’s self interest is their most salient motivator and their ideas of superiority help solidify behavior patterns or actions chains.

**Tuareg Values**

The Tuaregs view their land as synonymous with independence. To them land and the resources on that land are the ultimate symbol of independence. As a people who value independence, they desire a return to their own nomadic state with freedom to roam over the lands that historically belonged to them. Their value of independence through access to land has nothing to do with its monetary value, but its spiritual value and its ability to keep them alive.

Natural disasters such as an increasing number of droughts have dried up the limited recourses on land that Tuaregs have been allotted by the Malian government. As droughts decreased the food supply, Tuareg leaders turned to the centralized Malian government for aid, which they were most often denied.

There is also some speculation among Tuaregs that the reason the government fails to allow them autonomy is because “the deserts of Tuareg lands in Northern Niger and eastern Mali are the world’s third largest uranium reserves as well as substantial oil reserves.”

The Tuareg view of the land is also incompatible with national borders and immigration laws. “The construction of artificial political boundaries that define a state’s territory is anathema to communities like the…Tuareg that have ranged
historically over land that today sits astride multiple political states”.

Without their own autonomous state, Tuaregs have been forced to adhere to property and border laws of state governments that they believe do not represent their interests. Incentives from the Malian government have not quelled the desire of many Tuaregs to gain an autonomous state of their own. This also adds credibility to the theory accusing the Malian government of refusing the Tuaregs their own state because the lands on which they live houses huge stores of uranium and oil deposits, leaving no place for the Tuaregs to go.

Finding: Tuareg Values of Nomadic Living and Independence Present Concerns in Securing the Malian Border

By gaining this understanding to the Tuareg’s nomadic lifestyle I was able to further outline their strategic culture. I was led to the conclusion that their nomadic lifestyle creates jurisdictional concerns when attempts are made to control illegal activities along the Malian border. The United States has backed proposals to stop border trafficking in this area, including trafficking of illegal weapons to militant groups. Giving the Tuaregs a distinct portion of land is one of the few options that would appease them and help control their currently unobserved borders of northern Mali. If the Malian government were to allow them exclusive control over the northern states of Gao and Kidal, the Tuaregs would be more likely to observe national laws and statues while applying their own set of regulations. Tuareg history shows that they may be mollified for a time and then choose to rebel again to gain full independence. Nothing less than full autonomy will ever com-
pletely balance out the Tuareg’s value of independence with the Malian governments’ authority.

**Tuareg Perceptual Lens**

Though Tuaregs view themselves as ethnically superior, the view of neighboring nations and the Malian government is opposite. During French colonial rule, Tuareg resistance furthered their reputation for rebelliousness and civil unrest. The French also failed to grasp the structure of their nomadic culture and instead defined them as “unruly anarchists averse to organization and control”. This is yet another example of cultural misunderstanding leading to decades and even centuries of unnecessary conflict. Their constant participation in conflicts created the image they were intensely fierce warriors when they occasion warranted. This image was exemplified by a Tuareg proverb, “Kiss the hand you cannot sever.” Neighboring countries also interpreted their nomadism as proof of laziness, stupidity and lack of refinement. This is the same way Tuaregs view most blacks in Africa, with this lens of inferiority. Instability in the Malian government has also led to a fear of Tuareg rebellions due to the national military’s lack of motivation or resources to deal with future rebellions.

Bordering nations especially see the Tuaregs as a hotbed of civil unrest and violent attacks. After the rumors of Tuareg involvement in the BP plant incident, Algeria professed its disdain for Tuareg contamination:
The Algerian fear of contagion is also well-founded because of the connections established between Algerian Islamic fundamentalists, such as the GSPC (now AQIM), and certain Tuareg rebel groups that share common arm suppliers from Libya and Chadian Tibesti.\textsuperscript{123}

Confusion over Tuareg social and political structures also promotes the image that Tuaregs are a disorganized and primitive people. Outsiders fail to fully understand the Tuareg’s social and tribal structure. The Tuaregs use these misconceptions to their advantage by helping to keep their societal exclusivity. Tribal organizational structure confuses outsiders who attempt to determine which factions of Tuaregs are actually involved in radical and violent movements.

\textbf{Finding: Tuareg’s Perceive Outsiders As Inferior Causing Friction In Diplomatic Efforts}

Tuareg identity is based on their feelings of ethnic superiority, their identity as “lords of the desert, defiant and proud of their culture and traditions had a tremendous impact on…policy towards [them]”.\textsuperscript{124} “According to this vision the Arabo-Berber…living their harsh nomadic life in the Sahara, were naturally of a higher order than the ‘black’ inhabitants of Soudan Francais, and saw themselves as their natural lords and masters”.\textsuperscript{125} Feelings of Tuareg ethnic superiority inhibit the ability of the United States to use traditional diplomatic methods to reach out to this separated group. This attitude fosters an enormous pride among the Tuaregs that can come in conflict with any diplomatic negotiations in which they are not directly involved. As the Tuaregs make an effort to preserve the purity of their race and culture, outsiders are completely shut out unless they require external aid.
Historical examples show how Tuaregs cooperate with inferior groups merely as a means to their own ends. This perspective reflects the way Tuaregs felt about their black slaves as well; they see the “politicians and inhabitants of the South as an overwhelming mass of religiously ignorant and uncivilized black, with whom they had nothing in common and with whom they either had nothing to do or who they had previously dominated.” Tuaregs will ally with whichever group is offering to provide these resources and services.

To use this world view as an asset, the United States should offer aid in the form of infrastructure projects and supplies to the Tuaregs as an act of good will. A seat at the negotiating table would also do a lot to create feeling of trust and respect among the Tuaregs. One potential area of development would be the uranium and oil mines in northern Mali. The central government is limited in its ability to take advantage of these resources, potentially due to the political instability in the region. Providing the Tuaregs with mining facilities, while allowing them to share a percentage of the profits with the government may be an ideal way to promote cooperation between the two groups and place the Tuaregs in debt to the US.

However, if the U.S. were to construct these projects it would be prudent to send small USAID or nonprofit groups as opposed to large-scale aid companies. Any illusion of an American invasion or occupation would likely cause Tuareg resentment towards the U.S. as another colonial power. If the United States were to gain this Tuareg trust, this would be a very beneficial avenue to receive intelligence on AQIM movements in Mali.
Finding: Tuareg’s View Themselves as Disenfranchised Creating the Need for Targeted Diplomatic Communication

They believe the Malian government is actively ignoring their requests for aid and development and the government intentionally neglects them. As the U.S. and other international powers have also failed to show much interest in the plight of the Tuaregs, they continue to feel neglected by the world. This point of view is argued back and forth in many forums but there is evidence to help us understand exactly where the idea came from. During the French regime, overt racisms against all Africans was common in Mali. The French also denied many Tuareg attempts at autonomy during the colonial period and sought to eliminate their racial privilege. After the Tuareg rebellions in the 1960’s the Malian government placed northern Mali and the Tuareg people under strict military rule. Severe droughts in northern Mali in the 1970’s caused many deaths among the Tuaregs and the government did not or was not able to provide sufficient aid to them.

Current international efforts to bring peace to this area are hindered by their lack of effort to understand this Tuareg perception. Tuareg leaders feel they have not been properly included in the efforts to bring peace to the region.

It may not be within the power of the United States to directly improve Tuaregs view of their government. However, the Malian government could benefit from the support of U.S. diplomatic teams to make suggestions how best to interact with the distinct ethnic group within their borders. Instead of ignoring the Tuaregs or attempting to rule them with a heavy hand, the government would benefit from applying negotiation
techniques. If the U.S. chooses this course of action, it would be most beneficial to work from a purely supervisory position and to downplay their involvement to the Tuaregs. They may see this as another attempt at foreign powers attempting to control their region.

Outlook for the U.S. Application of the Tuareg Cultural Topography

Based on the Tuareg’s identity as “lords of the desert” and their value of independence I safely say that the Tuaregs are a group that should not be ignored. Due to their strategic location near terrorist hotspots and their normative behavioral pattern of breaking treaties, the U.S. should proceed with caution if intervention in Mali becomes prudent. Their shifting loyalty is the most worrisome part of their strategic culture. The main motivating factors for them are independence and autonomy. Some Tuareg groups are actively allying themselves with AQIM and this can be stopped if they feel their needs and desires for independence and autonomy can be satisfied through other means. Any aid that can help reverse the effects of the severe droughts in the North would be a valuable asset to the Tuaregs.

If the U.S. were to intervene in Northern Mali to help prevent AQIM from gaining a foothold, they would do well to recognize that the Tuaregs cannot be written off. Giving Tuareg leaders some form of autonomy over their lands or at least allowing them an unencumbered range of land would be the best way to coax Tuareg cooperation should the U.S. need it.

In the event of an intervention the U.S. may encounter hostility if Tuareg leaders are ignored. If the U.S. wants to prevent Mali from becoming an AQIM recruitment area,
the Tuareg leaders must be involved. To prevent Tuareg resistance to U.S. overtures, they should conference with the main Tuareg tribal leaders at the same time as they coordinate with the Mali government. The Tuaregs would respond well to the US’s acknowledgment of the Tuareg’s autonomous tribal state.

Tuareg ideas of superiority are another a red line to be aware of. Their strict belief in racial stratification could cause tension should the U.S. seek to identify AQIM members in northern Mali. Tuareg distrust of the central government in Mali should also be taken into consideration. If offered control of a particular region or resources by AQIM groups, their loyalties would not lie with the Malian government. When working in Northern Mali, outsiders should treat the leaders of Tuareg tribes as leaders of their own autonomous group. The U.S must assume that the central government has no real power in the North of Mali.

Tuareg tendencies to break treaties may be a problem if the US engages in diplomatic overtures with them. However, having knowledge beforehand of this tendency will give the U.S. an upper hand in predicting Tuareg actions. Should the U.S. make a move to help stabilize northern Mali, the Tuaregs could be the best allies in eliminating the terrorist threats developing in Northern Mali.

**Conclusion**

This example of a cultural topography based on the methods of strategic culture can aid in the use of mounds of cultural data collected by anthropologists, folklorists and others. It is clear that this information can be applied more than some may have thought.
The use of cultural analysis can be helpful and academic but I contest that the applications in international development, aid or government organizations can not only save resources but can save lives. Funds can be more properly allocated, counterinsurgency can increase their effectiveness, and international development projects can be benefit more people if cultural factors are taken into consideration. I do not presume to state that culture is the only factor that should be considered when determining policy but I do propose that the increase in cultural understanding can be a great benefit when added to the conventional avenues of information gathering and analysis.

Endnote


5 Johnson, 2.
6 Johnson, 6.

7 Johnson, 6.

8 Johnson, 6.

9 Johnson, 6.

10 Johnson, 6.

11 Johnson, 13.


13 Cissoko, 12

14 Cissoko, 2.

15 Cissoko, 3-4.


17 Cissoko, 8.

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22 Kisangani, 67.


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33 “Mali signs ceasefire deal with Tuareg rebels”.


38 Lecocq, 4.


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41 Cissoko, 59; Simanowitz, 70.


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44 Lecocq, 5-6.

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49 Keeling, 28.

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52 Cissoko, 59; Lecocq, 75

53 Cissoko, 9; Lecocq, 75


55 Lecocq, 75.

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57 Lecocq, 82;
58 Lecocq, 75.
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60 Cissoko, 60.
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70 Kneeling, 29.

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74 Cissoko, 22.

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77 Cissoko, 62.

78 Cissoko, 59.

79 Cissoko, 62.

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81 Cissoko, 63.

82 Cissoko, 65.

83 Cissoko, 66.

84 Cissoko, 68,73.


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Kisangani, 88.

Kisangani, 8, 77.

Rasmussen, 612.; Rasmussen, 9.

Cissoko, 62.

Simanowitz, 71.

Keeling, 29; Simanowitz, 71.

Cissoko, 28; Simanowitz, 71.

Simanowitz, 72.

“The danger in the desert”, 22.

Keeling, 29.

Keeling, 29; Kisangani, 83.

Kisangani, 8, 77.

Kisangani, 77; Simanowitz, 72.
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107 Cissoko, 70.

108 Simanowitz, 71.

109 Cissoko, 30, 32.

110 Rasmussen, “The people of solitude”, 623; Rasmussen, “Re-formations of the sacred”, 638.

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117 Lecocq, 77.

118 Lecocq, 77.


120 Lecocq, 113.
121 Cissoko, 9.
122 Cissoko, 56.
123 Kisangani, 87.
124 Lecocq, 78.
125 Lecocq, 78.
126 Lecocq, 76.
127 Cissoko, 16.
128 Cissoko, 22.
129 Cissoko, 25.
130 Cissoko, 28; Lecocq, 73.
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**List of Figures**

Figure 1. Physical Map of Western Africa, Mali

Figure 2. Map of North Africa, Mali highlighted

Figure 3: Physical Map of northern Mali, Southern Algeria and Niger. This map outlines the Tuareg’s historical region of influence.
Figure 4: Map of northern Mali conflict highlighting cities that have been taken by rebels.

Figure 5: Map of northern Mali conflict highlighting cities that have been taken by rebels.

Figure 6: Map of Mali, written in French. This map highlights the Tuaregs as the sole militants, and does not divide them into Islamist factions.


![Map of Mali, Tuareg rebels as sole militants](image)

Figure 7: This map of the Mali conflict labels the militants as solely Islamists, and does not break them into factions or mention Tuareg involvement.

Carte de la rébellion touareg au Azawad, au nord de Mali indiquant les attaques des rebelles au 5 avril 2012 par Orionist sur wikipédia (CC-BY-3.0)
Figure 8: A Tuareg in northern Mali wears the veil and head covering in the traditional indigo color.