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The Saharan Dromedary as a Sign: The Prominence of Dromedaries among the Nomadic Imuhar Society in the Algerian Desert

Ahaggar yessuf amis wa baydadjen.¹
In the Ahaggar the white dromedary is preferred.

The Imuhar nomads, known under the foreign designation of Tuareg, live in one of the most extreme environments in the world in Libya, Algeria, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. The Imuhar I discuss in this article live in the Algerian part of the Central Sahara and they are highly specialized dromedary and goat breeders. The “red Ferrari” of these nomads is the white, long-legged he-dromedary called the *ebaydag*, which is ridden both by women and men among the Imuhar. With gender-specific accessories, the *ebaydag* becomes a sign of masculinity and femininity. The dromedaries’ speed and strength are not their most treasured attributes, but their elegance and sublimity are signs of prestige to be coveted. Dromedaries, in contrast to most other domestic animals, are signs of social prestige and they fulfill important social functions among the Imuhar society in the Sahara. This article illustrates their significance as creatures of affection among nomads.

The research for this article is based on about twenty months of fieldwork between 2002 and 2011 among the Kel Ahaggar (people of the Ahaggar) nomads in the south of Algeria, especially among the subgroup of the Kel Ahnet (people of the Ahnet) nomads. This group of about 180 Imuhar live to the northwest of the village of Tamanrasset in the Ahnet area. Parents and their children live as nuclear-family units in tents, and they travel with their herds and other tent units in irregular patterns through the extreme environment of the Central Sahara. Wide fluctuations in temperature shape the arid climate here. During winter nights it can drop to below zero, while during winter days it can climb to as high as 30 °C. On summer days the temperature can reach over 50 °C. The amount of precipitation averages no more than 100 mm per year. The Kel Ahnet nomads have been able to adapt their economic activities to these challenging climatic conditions and thus they remain a very vital group of nomads (Fischer 2010).

THE ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF SAHARAN DROMEDARIES

The work of the Imuhar nomads is organized by a gender-specific division of labor. Imuhar women manage the herds of goats, while men take care of the herds of dromedaries. But compared to the goat, the dromedary is not a major resource for subsistence, especially in the south of Algeria, which is not ecologically well-suited to the maintenance of large dromedary herds (Keenan 1977:120). Imuhar nomads mainly sell goats to the sedentary Algerian population in the surrounding villages. They sell dromedaries only sporadically and they represent a kind of savings account for them (Fischer 2008:81). According to the labor division among dromedaries the Kel Ahnet nomads have three categories of dromedary – for breeding, transport and riding.

¹ (Foucauld/Calassanti-Motylinski 1984:130). The transcription of Tamahaq, the language of the Imuhar is transformed in this article to a more readable version without special characters. The translation is from the author.

MILK AND BREEDING DROMEDARIES

The Kel Ahnet nomads of the Sahara own herds of female dromedaries, their calves and one bull-dromedary. Dromedary breeding is a slow process, since the she-dromedary gives birth to only one calf every two years. They normally mate during the cold season, and the she-dromedary has to lie down for copulation, so the act of mating may pose some difficulties for the bull. At night the herds of breeding dromedaries stay close to the tents of the nomads, who bind up the right forelegs of the in-heat she-dromedaries during the night. This brings the she-dromedary to lie down and facilitates the act of mating for the bulls, which is normally seen and heard by the whole group of nomads in the camp. Imuhar generally prefer white dromedaries for breeding.

Mother dromedaries are milked twice a day. The milk is drunk and not used for making butter or cheese as in the case of goat milk. Kel Ahnet nomads tie a cord around the forelegs of the calves, which is then fixed in the soil near the tents while the mother dromedaries roam freely in search of pasture. In this way, unlike the pack dromedaries, the mothers are also bound to the camp.

PACK DROMEDARIES

Imuhar use castrated dromedaries for transport, while female dromedaries are generally not used for this purpose. If nomads do not need their pack dromedaries, they are hobbled with a short rope between their forelegs, freely grazing in the surrounding area. But even with a hobble-rope the pack dromedaries can roam far in good grazing conditions, and one of the nomads' greatest chores is recapturing the runaway pack and riding dromedaries. Although the nomads use male dromedaries of any color and size, they prefer strong, heavy animals with especially large feet.

DROMEDARIES FOR RIDING

These are almost always castrated male dromedaries, because they are calmer than uncastrated ones, which are said to be very fierce and dangerous. Ideally dromedaries that are ridden should have a relatively short body and be deep-chested and tall with small feet and slender limbs (Nicolaisen/Nicolaisen 1997:119). The most popular animal is a white, long-legged dromedary for riding, called the *ebaydag*. Like men, women also prefer to ride an *ebaydag*. Animals that are really suitable for riding are occasionally sold for five to six times the price of a normal dromedary. In the past, dromedaries that were ridden were important in conducting raids. White animals were presumed to be the dromedaries for raiding troops par excellence, so an *ebaydag* can also be associated with a thief or raider (Ritter 2009:399).

Kel Ahnet nomads do not have pure mast-dromedaries for meat production, and they rarely kill their own dromedaries to eat them. Even very old dromedaries fetch high prices in the marketplace and nomads prefer the money to eating their old dromedaries. Only at weddings it is common to eat dromedary meat, which is rather tough and must be boiled for several hours to be eatable. Nomads slaughter dromedaries that have had an accident, and then it is common to share the meat with neighbors. Not only the meat is of use, they even work the skin of the animal to make straps, whips etc.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DROMEDARIES IN SPEECH

The importance of the dromedary in the Imuhar society can be understood from the extensive and detailed vocabulary used to describe the animal. This enables the nomads to speak about their dromedaries precisely and the terms for dromedary can be classified in categories such as sex, age, color, special qualities, training and use, specific situations, number of dromedaries in a herd (Nicolaisen/Nicolaisen 1997:150).

Imuhar nomads have specific notions with regard to speech. Direct speech can be particularly dangerous because it can expose others to misfortune (Casajus 1987a:107, Fischer 2012). Thus they do not like to talk about their property and they also do not like to talk about their dromedaries for fear of the “evil eye“ (Keenan 1977:121). If nomads are asked how many dromedaries they have, it is possible that they will not tell the truth, because they are anxious about misfortune happening to their animals.

Furthermore, nomads often use dromedary terms as synonyms. In various folk songs Imuhar men and women sing about the beauty of the dromedaries they ride (Casajus 1987b:98–100). Often the dromedary is a synonym for a person. If someone compliments a dromedary, they are actually complimenting its rider. This extensive vocabulary and the presence of so many synonyms indicate that the interest in dromedaries is not solely confined to their practical uses (Nicolaisen/Nicolaisen 1997:155).

THE AESTHETIC REQUIREMENTS OF DROMEDARIES

The most popular dromedary for riding is the *ebaydag*. This white, long-legged dromedary is what I would call the “red Ferrari” of the nomads. The red Ferrari, like every expensive car, has an almost universal image of exclusiveness, class, prestige, and elegance. In Europe, in addition, it has the image of speed, vitality, potency and power, emphasized by the color. In Europe, they are owned by mostly men, and the car is often used to draw attention to the masculinity of the driver.

The *ebaydag* is the Imuhar’s most expensive dromedary, which both men and women prefer to ride and even to own. Primarily, an *ebaydag* has to be long-legged, male and white. Generally, Imuhar prefer white to black, the reasons for which are complex. Basically, their perception of white and black can symbolize the juxtaposition between good and evil. White often has a positive while black is often has a negative connotation (Drouin 1987:84, Fischer 2012).

The Imuhar mark and improve their white dromedaries; branding them with various signs. These signs or brands are sometimes found on the flank, the neck or on the heads of the animals. Two parallel lines, for example, stand for the group of the Kel Ahnet nomads, and added lines or points identifying the family it belongs to. Another artificial sign for a dromedary that can be ridden is a copper ring fixed to the right nostril to fasten the reins. Moreover, the nomads boost their dromedaries by modifying their bodies. Mainly for aesthetic reasons, they make cuts on the bridge of its nose and the resulting scars appear as small bumps. There may be just one bump, but mostly a line of three. A hanging fold of skin under the chin also augments its beauty (see picture 56). These body decorations raise the value of the animal and make it much easier to recognize. They represent the engagement between individual owners and their means of transport. Women, similar to men, will own an *ebaydag* if they can afford one. But both sexes like to have these body forms depicted on their *ebaydag*, so one cannot see if the owner is a man or a woman simply by looking at its body. For this information one has to scrutinize the dromedary’s tackle.

THE CAMEL TACKLE AS A GENDER-SPECIFIC SIGN

Gender-specific marking is done by adding extra tackle to a riding dromedary. A typical male accessory is the drinking bowl, called a *tamennast*, which is made from tinned brass. Hung from the saddle by a long cord (see picture 57), the *tamennast* is a useful tool during travel, used not only for drinking but also for kneading dough or as an eating bowl. Other helpful tools are carried in a small bag which also hangs from the saddle.

Apart from the male accessory, one can recognize a male rider especially by the saddle, which for men is placed in front of the dromedary’s hump so that the rider can sit cross-legged with his feet resting upon the lower part of the animal’s neck. The saddle, made by blacksmiths,

is made of wood covered with leather and metal fittings and is secured by long cords tied around the belly and the hind part of the animal. A cruciform pommel and a large backrest are particular features (see picture 57). The saddlecloth for men is traditionally made of cotton and embroidered with colored thread. Especially on festive days they like to add long, black fringes made of goat hair.

Women, in contrast, ride on a palanquin called a *tachawit*, placed like a throne on the hump of the dromedary (see picture 58). The *tachawit* is a very large saddle decorated with a wooden arch on either side. It rests on staves fixed with straps made out of dromedary skin. Women make these saddles in teams, so they do not need to go to the villages where only men go to buy their saddles.² The women add appliqué of special long black fringes with red bands at the ends. They also have a very large, colored, gender-specific saddlecloth, which is also used as a blanket to keep warm. Two large, richly adorned leather bags on the right and left of the saddle are a typical sign of a wife. Only married women own these, in which they keep all their family belongings such as clothing, money, medicine and jewelry. Unmarried young women do not have such bags and keep their belongings in their mothers'. Another piece of tackle that can be sometimes found on both women's and men's dromedaries is an amulet case fixed to the dromedaries' neck, intended to ward off evil spirits from the animal.

THE *EBAYDAG* AS A SIGN OF SOCIAL PRESTIGE

The Imuhar have feelings for dromedaries and there are strong emotional bonds between *ebaydag* and their owners. Unlike other domestic animals, dromedaries have a high social and emotional worth and they are creatures which display affection and are regarded as good-natured by Imuhar nomads. Interest in dromedaries and the notional value of the *ebaydag* is much higher than its actual intrinsic worth. Boys especially grow up with an intimate knowledge of dromedaries and with very little interest in anything else. The games played by boys centre around dromedaries. For example, a goat's jawbone with a saddle and rider is a toy made of blades of grass and remnants of old clothes. A roughly cut stone is also used as a toy she-dromedary and a smaller version is used as her calf (see picture 59). In the same way as boys, girls build a kind of garden where they let their toy dromedaries graze. Building figures such as toy dromedaries from dry dromedary droppings and acacia thorns is a game for children of both sexes. They even know the name of the most famous *ebaydag* in the nomad camp.

It is possible to recognize the social status of a person in Imuhar society by the animal they ride. This is evident from the following three cases.

Tellit is the mother of three children. Not long ago, she and her husband came from a small village to live in the desert with the nomads and to work as breeders. The family was very poor and belonged to the sedentary group of the Kel Ahnet before they arrived in the Ahnet region. In the first two years in the desert Tellit had only a donkey to ride and felt a little ashamed. After two years she got an *ebaydag* and the other women made her a *tachawit*, the above-mentioned saddle for women.

Suda, a widow, has a white dromedary for riding, which is not so long-legged. Also, she does not have a *tachawit*, only a pack saddle.

Halla, a wife with five children, is very proud of riding an *ebaydag* saddled with a *tachawit*.

The ultimate dream of both women and men is to ride an *ebaydag* through the desert, since this animal with its gendered attributes is considered the most exclusive means of travel among Imuhar nomads. Accordingly, it is one of the most valuable possessions an Imuhar can have.

² For a further discussion of dromedary saddles and riding techniques see the article by Walter Dostal in this volume.

The image of the *ebaydag* with specific accessories is comparable with the image of the red Ferrari in Europe. The red Ferrari does not interest nomads, but rather the *ebaydag* is the approved status symbol. It is the husband's duty to make sure that his wife has a good dromedary to ride. Dromedaries even fulfill social functions among nomads, for example a dowry for a bride. They use them for these kinds of social payment and for paying many indemnities. In Ahaggar the indemnity for adultery is fixed at three dromedaries paid by the seducer, while one dromedary is given by an unfaithful wife (Nicolaisen/Nicolaisen 1997:156).

Staying with the metaphor, an Imuhar wedding is like a Ferrari motor show. Everybody shows up with their best dromedaries. Women and men ride their most beautiful *ebaydag* with their exclusive accessories. At a wedding, women ride their *ebaydag* on a *tachawit* in a long parade and try to impress with charm and grace. Every woman tries to outdo the others by showing off their best accessories. Sitting on the hump, a high point of a dromedary, riding on a throne-like saddle, leading the dromedary and lowering her head at the same time, the woman seems to gleam in an aura of gracefulness in the eyes of Imuhar.

At the *ilugan*, a ceremonial ride by men at weddings or on other festive days, women sit close together on the ground, singing and playing drums while the riders pass by. The dromedaries are ridden at a gentle trot with their heads drawn back (see picture 60) and the riders sit straight in their saddles without looking at the crowd of women. Strength does not count at the *ilugan*, but rather elegance and sublimity, and the dromedaries are trained by men and become extensions of their trainers' or riders' personalities (Youssouf/Grimshaw/Bird 1976:802).

Festive events give men and women riders the opportunity to display the beauty of their dromedaries and their own abilities as riders. Even from a great distance a nomad can tell something about the kind of person approaching – the age, and the person's attitude towards the world – from the way she or he sits on the dromedary (ibid.). The beauty of a dromedary, its saddlery and the way it is ridden are all to some extent considered to be the qualities of its rider. At these events men and women try to impress with their white, long-legged dromedaries and compete for prestige. Women and men enhance themselves with an *ebaydag*, one of the famous prestige "objects" among Imuhar nomads. Generally, the nomad's wealth is the dromedary, as an economic expression of his social prestige (Dostal 1989:39).

Prestige is equated with approval, recognition, esteem, defense, acclaim, attention, admiration and respect (Goode 1978). Social prestige is generally connected with occupation (Goldthorpe/Hope 1972), but in a society of only stock breeders such as the Imuhar nomads, the domestic animals become a source of prestige. The conception that prestige is based on the evaluation and recognition by the audience of the bearer's claims (Goode 1978, Simmel 1950) is also to be seen among Imuhar. Kel Ahnet nomads evaluate whether or not prestige is deserved. The idealization of the *ebaydag* means that it is worshipped among the nomads both by women and men, sometimes in poems and songs endowing it with a quasi-mystical status. Prestige is usually demonstrated by material or symbolic rewards which the bearer wears or manipulates (Wolf 1996:665). In the case of the *ebaydag*, the Imuhar boost the dromedaries by shaping their bodies and adding extra gender-underlining accessories. Prestige is usually demonstrated by desired objects. "But we call those objects valuable that resist our desire to possess them" (Simmel 1978:67). Rareness and exclusiveness are the main criteria. Social prestige or esteem center upon the notion of utility. Overall the usefulness of an *ebaydag* is measured in the admiration created.

Apart from the actual economic value, the *ebaydag* constitutes a symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1977), which adds prestige and esteem. Symbolic capital is ultimately a "disguised form of physical, 'economic' capital" (Bourdieu 1977:183). More precisely, capital exists and acts as symbolic capital "in its relationship with a habitus predisposed to perceive it as a sign" (Bourdieu 2000:242). In this sense an *ebaydag*, like a goat, is economic capital, but above all other domestic animals for Imuhar nomads it is also symbolic capital.

CONCLUSIONS

The prominence of white dromedaries among the nomadic Imuhar society in the Algerian desert is highly visible on festive days. Dromedaries give nomads prestige (Bernus 1990:166). Social prestige is linked with the social status of a person in a society. In particular, the white, long-legged dromedary is a treasured prestige “object”. Both men and women enhance themselves with an *ebaydag*. Riding an *ebaydag* with gender-specific accessories emphasizes the femininity of a female rider as well as the masculinity of a male rider. Thus, the value of *ebaydag* as symbolic capital is much higher than their value as actual economic capital. While black dromedaries are marginalized, the white, long-legged dromedaries are idealized. The image and the beauty of something or somebody are in the eye of the beholder. Even prestige is a cultural resource. The preference for a specific color or stature of an animal is culturally constructed and hence in a constant state of flux.

Nowadays, the hegemony of dromedaries as auxiliaries in the Algerian desert is coming under attack from cars. At a wedding the relatives of the nomads from the villages arrive with the newest sign of social prestige, the Toyota Land Cruiser (see picture 61). It is the new and most popular means of transport and, of course, it has to be white. Again, men drape the colored saddlecloth on the car seat, and they hang the traditional leather water bags on the four-wheel-drive vehicle. So far, only men drive Toyotas in Imuhar society and therefore it is still only a sign of masculinity. In contrast, the *ebaydag* can also be a sign of femininity. But this is only the current situation and it remains to be seen what the future will bring for the highly specialized dromedary breeders who can live and work in the desert independent of any fossil energy source.

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