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The political ecology of Tuareg music in the context of uranium mining in North Niger

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This article investigates the resistance of the Tuareg through their music from an ecological standpoint. It proposes to explore how a Political Ecology lens can shed new light on Tuareg music as a form of cultural resistance in the face of uranium extraction and environmental damage on Tuareg land. Using post-structuralist Political Ecology theories, this study examines the power relations within the political-economic nexus of uranium extraction in Niger, as well as the evolution of Tuareg resistance and music in this context. It investigates the discursive framing of environmental subjects in Tuareg battles and the politics that sustain the development of music, uncovering processes of silencing the Tuareg's resistance and essentialising their music. Developing the analysis further through a Political Ontology framework, it explores Tuareg music as a contested space between Indigenous and Western ontologies to examine how the everyday practice of music creates effective forms of ontological resistance and brings about postcolonial critique. The case study demonstrates the potential of a Political Ecology lens to uncover unseen ecological dimensions in artistic productions and better grasp the breadth of cultural expressions as a force of resistance in the context of environmental conflicts.

KEYWORDS

cultural resistance, environmental impact, ethnomusicology, political ecology, political ontology

Introduction

Since the colonisation by the French, the Sahara Desert area in North Niger has been defined by two developments: control of the region over the Tuareg people, the indigenous nomadic tribe of the desert, first by French colonisation, then by the State of Niger, and the growing exploitation of uranium through vast mining areas in this part of the desert. The uranium mines in the Air Mountains region of northern Niger, one of the most important homelands of the Tuareg, have been a significant asset for the regional and national economic and societal development of Niger, one of the poorest countries in the world (Byler, 2017). Despite environmental concerns on the mismanagement of radioactive waste raised by international environmental NGOs (CRIIRAD, 2023; Greenpeace, 2010), the extraction of uranium continues to expand at a large scale, with the State of Niger continuing to allocate new licenses for extraction to international mining corporations (Reuters, 2023).

The Tuareg population of Niger has been controlled by the French army, then the State, and forced to significant social changes, exile, and settlement. The Tuareg, however, have maintained a solid cultural identity, which is primarily expressed and recognised through their music. It has gained international recognition and acclaim on the global artistic scene through its musical genre, branded the Desert Blues (Schmidt, 2018). Grounded in a rich musical tradition, the music genre, a blend of traditional Tuareg musical elements with electric guitars and drum kits, seconds uranium as Niger's most successful international export (Davies, 2019; Morgan, 2013). The music is known to have been catalysed and nurtured by Tuareg political struggles. Many Tuareg have turned to music to express their disarray about the dislocation of their communities and lifestyles, and their musical repertoire has integrated nationalist and political narratives (Moctar, 2021; Morgan, 2013; Orphans of the Sahara, 2014a; Orphans of the Sahara, 2014b; Orphans of the Sahara, 2014c; Szatan, 2021; WFDD, 2023). Tuareg music has become a significant communication channel for community politics.

Uranium mining has been a contentious issue for many indigenous communities worldwide since the mid-twentieth century's first uranium boom (Bersimbaev and Bulgakova, 2015; Malin, 2025). Many indigenous populations stood against the search and mining of uranium on their lands, recognising the harmful impacts on the environment and health brought about by uranium mining activities (Göcke, 2014; Karlsson, 2009). Most of the world's uranium deposits are, in fact, on indigenous lands (Karlsson, 2009). Consequently, indigenous rights movements have emerged as a significant force in the fight against uranium mining, reclaiming indigenous land rights and territorial integrity.

Whilst the Tuareg have fought against the domination of the French colonisers and the State, they have not articulated a clear stance on uranium mining or engaged in structured and visible resistance against the mines on their land. The academic and journalistic literature on Tuareg struggles is substantial; however, environmental concerns or ecology are noticeably absent or limited in the analysis of Tuareg political messages. The reference to the impact of uranium extraction on Tuareg land is often diluted into broader resistance narratives and therefore lacks comprehensiveness. Furthermore, media coverage suggests that the Tuareg are less concerned about the environmental impact of the activity than they are about claiming a more direct and crucial economic share of the exploitation (France 24, 2023; Keenan, 2008; Martin, 1989; Siby et al., 2022). The mining activity, as such, does not appear to be a clear-cut contested topic and cannot be easily read as a message of community activism.

Can we, therefore, conclude that ecology is an *unthought* in Tuareg politics? Can we consider the Tuareg's relative silence as a tacit endorsement of the uranium mining? How to explain the fact that the Tuareg, who are very politically engaged, especially

through the medium of their music, are not clearly addressing the massive uranium extraction and its associated significant impact on their homeland? Considering the importance of resource extraction and its impacts on environmental degradation and land abuse, the article's first entry point is to examine the apparent absence of environmental discourse or ecological perspectives in Tuareg resistance, as well as in their music, which serves as a primary channel of political expression. Why are the Tuareg silent about uranium mining? What are the limits to their agency in terms of ecological resistance? Can a Political Ecology lens help understand the silence of the Tuareg, both on the environmental front and on the cultural scene?

The second entry point warrants close examination of Tuareg music as a cultural expression of indigenous resistance. Existing scholarship on Tuareg music has explored its roles in shaping identity, nationalism, displacement, and commodification; a significant gap remains in understanding how these musical practices are materially and aesthetically entangled with ecological transformations in the Sahel. There has been no solid research on the music genre as a specific form of cultural resistance, neither in the context of social domination nor in the context of the abuse of indigenous rights, which seem crucial to unpack the community, environmental, and land struggles. The ecological dimensions of Tuareg music, its connection to land degradation, pastoral displacement, and resource extraction, have seldom been analysed as integral to its cultural production and circulation. Can a Political Ecology lens help uncover ecological dimensions of indigenous resistance in the music genre beyond the production of political narratives?

These research questions will address the perceived yet arguable silence of the Tuareg and the ecological *unthought* in the context of uranium mining. It aims to understand the Tuareg's resistance and music from an ecological standpoint, exploring how a Political Ecology lens can shed light on their struggles in the face of uranium exploitation and environmental damage in their homeland. It seeks to understand the facets of cultural indigenous resistance in the context of ecological abuse. Examining music as the Tuareg's most potent form of communication, this study will investigate cultural resistance in the context of resource extraction and address the existing gap in the literature. Through a Political Ecology lens, the creation and evolution of Tuareg music is examined in the context of the community's social, political, and environmental struggles and its cultural survival in a post-colonial context.

To situate these research questions within a broader theoretical framework, the literature review engages with a diverse range of academic research, including anthropology, cultural studies, and ethnomusicology. Political Ecology (PE) is presented as the principal analytical lens of the study, developed around two central theories, post-structuralism and post-humanism, as complementary to unpack the subject. It proposes new linkages between PE theories and the literature on music as a medium of cultural resistance, to establish a more comprehensive framework.

The case study is first analysed through the lens of PE post-structuralist theories, which emphasise the role of discourses in shaping power relations. It unpacks the discursive constructions that constitute the socio-environmental-political nexus in North Niger and investigates the discursive framing of environmental subjects in Tuareg battles, as well as the politics that sustain the development of Tuareg music.

Then, by incorporating post-humanist PE theories, the article attempts to reveal how Tuareg music engages in post-colonial and environmental critique. It will depart from the Political Ontology concept, as defined by Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena, hypothesising that Tuareg music goes beyond the production of signifying narratives that directly produce explicit political messages and is fundamentally related to the desert, as a natural and ecological space and worldview.

Literature review and analytical framework

This study situates itself at the intersection of political ecology, cultural studies, and ethnomusicology to explore how artistic practices can articulate ecological worldviews and forms of resistance. While Political Ecology (PE) has traditionally focused on material and territorial dimensions of environmental conflict, its application to cultural and aesthetic domains remains underdeveloped. Likewise, studies of Tuareg music have examined themes of identity, nationalism, and displacement, but rarely its entanglement with ecological transformation.

By mobilising PE as an analytical lens, this research proposes to read Tuareg music as a cultural practice that mediates power, environment, and ontology. Combining post-structuralist and post-humanist approaches within PE, it bridges analyses of discourse and representation with those of indigenous ontology and reality-making. This interdisciplinary framework contributes to expanding Political Ecology beyond conventional boundaries, positioning culture, and music in particular, as an active agent in understanding and contesting ecological change.

Political Ecology and the extractive paradigm

Political Ecology is a research field that examines how politics, economics, and social factors shape environmental issues. It seeks to understand how power relations and social inequalities are entwined into ecological problems and how environmental issues, in turn, affect social and political structures (Bryant, 2015; Membrive and Armie, 2021).

As an analytical lens to understand environmental changes and their effects on people, Political Ecology has brought to the forefront the cultural and ecological values central to conflicts over extractive projects, to unpack the economic, social, and

political conditions that contribute to resource exploitation. There is an increasing number of studies where political ecologists investigate anti-mining resistance movements in developing countries and analyse trends of global extractivism (De la Cadena and Blaser, 2018; Kröger, 2021; Shapiro and McNeish, 2021).

In Political Ecology terms, extractivism is a conjuncture characterised by intensive extraction and dynamics of enclosure and dispossession across the globe (Serafini, 2024). As well as paying attention to situating the battles and understanding the contextualised political economy and the ecological impact of the studied mining sites, academics concur to define resource extraction as a global phenomenon in which the extraction of resources forms «a necro-political complex» (Shapiro and McNeish, 2021). From a Political Ecology standpoint, mineral extraction creates power conflicts and participates in the neoliberal dependence of capital on the Earth's resources. In which extractivism, defined as an excessive form of extraction, is arguably a central «logic of the 21st century» (Shapiro and McNeish, 2021).

Uncovering power relations through post-structuralist political ecology

Post-structuralism emphasises how discourse constructs and sustains power. Foucault's notion that knowledge is produced through discourse highlights how language shapes political and ecological realities (Foucault, 1978; Fendler, 2010). In environmental conflicts, discursive framing legitimises resource control and defines what counts as "truth" (Paipais, 2014; Tetreault, 2017).

Kaika (2003) demonstrated how the discourse of water scarcity in Athens justified inequitable management, while Vela-Almeida et al. (2018) showed how Ecuadorian mining narratives were politically instrumentalised. Post-structuralist ideas uncover manipulation processes in managing natural resources, examining the construction of discourses that serve stakeholders' agency, and revealing the making of power relations through discursive framing.

Music as a signifying resistance medium

Resistance, as a theoretical concept, has evolved beyond its early framing as direct opposition to domination. Following Foucault (1978), resistance is understood as immanent to power, not external to it: wherever power operates, forms of counteraction and negotiation emerge. In this sense, resistance is not merely reactive but a constitutive element of power relations, embedded within the same discursive and material systems it contests. Scott (1985) emphasises the *everyday* forms of resistance, subtle, often unnoticed practices, through which dominated groups subvert structures of authority. Abu-Lughod (1990) extends this notion by recognising

unconventional and unstructured expressions of community resistance as a means to expose and reinterpret power relations. Hall (1997) further situates resistance within the terrain of representation, showing how cultural production and meaning-making become political acts that challenge hegemonic narratives.

Across contexts, music has functioned as a key signifying catalyst for community resistance, nationalism, and the construction of cultural identity grounded in a politics of defiance (Sugarman, 1999; McDonald, 2013; Turino, 2000). Songs encode political meaning and convey collective struggle through aesthetic form, turning sound into a site of social critique and symbolic action (Gibson et al., 2006). In this sense, music operates as both a discourse and a performative mode through which marginalised communities articulate resistance and redefine their social and political realities.

The politics of cultural representation

Stuart Hall's cultural theories of representation (1997) help situate Tuareg music within global circuits of perception of cultural difference and stereotyping. Hall draws on post-structuralist ideas, recognising the framing of Black representations and their intersection with race and difference, dissecting the connotations and denotations associated with narratives and messages related to cultural identities. Hall recognises that binary oppositions used in cultural representations of difference create power dynamics, often favouring one group over another. Yet, Hall suggests that these hierarchies can be subverted, and these power dynamics can be reshaped. Stereotypes can be challenged or reclaimed by those who are misrepresented or marginalised, ultimately challenging the existing power structure (Hall, 1997).

Post-humanist political ecology: indigenous ontologies and reality-making

From resource conflict to ontological conflict

Post-humanist strand of PE advocates for recognising multiple ontologies, diverse ways of relating to land and non-human entities. It repositions environmental conflicts as conflicts of worldviews, not merely as conflicts of resources. Extractivist conflicts are situated within the critical paradigm, which brings forward the entanglement of natural and cultural agents in shaping the politics that determine conflict resources (Escobar, 2006; 2016). The argument emphasises that indigenous communities do not value their land as a commodity; therefore, their battles over resource exploitation cannot be understood or compensated financially. It highlights the significance of the ecological and cultural values inherent to nature or a land subjected to exploitation. Disputes over extractive projects should be understood as a conflict between the cultural and ecological worldviews, ontologies of resisting

communities, and the actors' logic that promotes and justifies the extraction (Escobar, 2006), emphasising the cultural basis of resistance movements (Bobby Banerjee et al., 2023).

Political ontology, the political thought and practice of the "pluriverse"

The ontological turn across various academic research sectors has come with recognising decolonial and post-colonial ways of viewing Nature (James, 2004). It argues that culture carries metaphysical knowledge and visions of the world and that an openness to different cultures implies respect for all kinds of metaphysical views of the world and humanity (Heywood et al., 2017). In Political Ecology, the ontological turn is central to highlighting the ecological value of indigenous knowledge.

Political Ontology, developed by De la Cadena and Blaser (2018), conceptualises these ontological struggles, partly in response to the acceleration of extractivism, which they define as an attack on the "pluriverse," described as «heterogeneous worldings coming together as a political ecology of practices» (De la Cadena and Blaser, 2018). Political Ontology is simultaneously a critique to enable political thought and a practice that resists the ecological and ontological spell. As a political thought and practice, Political Ontology operates through the negotiations, the enmeshments, the interruptions and battles over the attacks and negations of the "pluriverse" (De la Cadena and Blaser, 2018). It is both a critical space for uncovering the entangled ontologies and their dynamics within the contested, colonised space, and a practice for defending it. It is both a political conceptualisation and a reality-making of this conceptualisation (Blaser, 2014) and therefore fundamentally relates to indigenous resistance.

Music as a site of reality-making

Music can perform reality-making as it transforms relationships between people, place, and power. Scholars have shown how sound practices shape space, identity, and belonging (Buchanan and Stokes, 1995; Nash and Carney, 1996; Gibson and Dunbar-Hall, 2000; Brandellero and Pfeffer, 2011; Duffy and Waitt, 2013; Revill, 2015; Waitt et al., 2020; Revill, 2020; Connell and Gibson, 2003). Byler's shows how Uyghur migrants in Urumqi produce a relation to the urban space through rhythm and native song, an everyday strategy of wellbeing and a way of being «in control of their environment» (Byler, 2017). Salhanda investigates the interplay between the imaginings of places through music and spatial politics. The everyday 'music-space-identity' processes territorialise sub-cultural identities and bring forth the politics of space (Saldanha, 2010). McDonald examines how music produces meanings of the self through identification and belonging, as tactics of resistance and embodied refusal. McDonald sees in Palestinian music «the opportunity to re-signify what it means to be Palestinian (. . .), a countercultural strategy with the capacity

to destabilise or re-signify deep-seated power relations» (McDonald, 2013, p.284).

Survivance and indigenous resistance

In indigenous studies, the role of music as an active political force for indigenous rights has been well explored in various geographical contexts and modes of systematic oppression, from colonial occupation to the occupation of lands and movements of indigenous populations (McDonald, 2013; Hancock-Barnett, 2012; Martinez, 2019; Corn, 2010). McKinnon analyses the practice of music in affirming environmental and indigenous rights of Aboriginal Australians (McKinnon, 2010). Hancock-Barnett demonstrates how Mbira's music plays a pivotal role in indigenous resistance through the practice of music, and by which it reclaims physical or symbolic spaces that are bound up in power relationships (Hancock-Barnett, 2012).

Gerald Vizenor's concept of *survivance can be seen as a linkage with Political Ontology* (Vizenor, 1999; 2009; 2019). The term, using the French suffix *-ance*, which means the outcome of an action or a process, intertwines the notions of survival and resistance. The central idea of Vizenor is that indigenous survivance is an active process, thereby encompassing the reality-making efforts of indigenous resistance and presence. It is a practice and not only an ideology, in which cultural performances and practice assert presence and continuity against erasure (Vizenor, 2009, p.89). A linkage can be made between Vizenor's survivance and Political Ontology, whereby the active recreation of indigenous identity through cultural productions is also a means to *make real* the indigenous ontologies.

Analytical framework

Drawing together these two theoretical strands, post-structuralism and Political Ontology, the analytical framework developed for this study aims to bridge Political Ecology with cultural and indigenous studies to examine how music operates as both discursive and ontological resistance. By interlacing these analytical levels, this framework enables a multi-scalar understanding of how cultural expression mediates power, identity, and ecology. It positions music not merely as a reflection of environmental realities but as an active participant in the making of ecological resistance.

Discursive level (post-structuralist PE)

This first layer investigates how discourse shapes environmental awareness and silences within Tuareg political expression. It analyses the absence or presence of ecological narratives in resistance discourses and media representations of Tuareg music, to unpack the discursive constructions and

manipulations at play in the context of uranium exploitation in North Niger and understand the politics of the Tuareg's resistance.

Ontological level (political ontology)

The second layer explores how Tuareg music enacts an indigenous ontology of the desert, grounded in relationality, spirituality, and ecological belonging. It examines the Tuareg's imaginings of places, their entangled relationship with the Desert. It uncovers the ontologies that exist within the contested space of the mining area, and how the everyday practice of music by Tuareg people participates in creating effective forms of indigenous survivance, as defined by Vizenor.

Methodology

This article employs a qualitative case study approach inspired by Yin (2018) for analysing complex social phenomena in their real-life contexts. It examines Tuareg music as a site where ecology, identity, and politics converge in the Sahel, using cultural expression as a lens to challenge environmental and social transformation. The case study design enables a contextualised reading of Tuareg musical practices and their embeddedness in ecological and political systems.

The research is based on desk analysis of secondary sources, including academic studies, ethnographic accounts, policy reports, and media archives. These materials were examined through thematic and discourse analysis to identify how Tuareg music articulates relations among territory and ecological consciousness. The methodology positions Tuareg music not simply as a cultural artefact but as an epistemic practice that mediates ecological and political experience.

The absence of fieldwork represents a methodological limitation, as the analysis relies on existing documentation rather than direct engagement with Tuareg communities. Future research should therefore integrate ethnographic inquiry and participatory methods, such as interviews, performance observation, and collaborative documentation, to ground the argument in lived experience and locally situated knowledge. Such work would strengthen the empirical foundation of the proposed political-ecological framework and test its relevance against community perspectives.

As a study conducted from a distance, this analysis draws on positional awareness to acknowledge the asymmetries inherent in interpreting cultural practices shaped by histories of displacement and marginalisation. The researcher recognises that Tuareg music constitutes both an expressive form and a mode of knowledge production. Accordingly, the analysis seeks to foreground Tuareg artistic agency, approaching the material with critical attentiveness to issues of representation and voice.

Case study

Part 1, discursive level

To situate the Tuareg's struggles in Niger, the exploitation of uranium is examined through a Political Ecology lens to investigate the political forces at play behind the environmental damage. The conditions for indigenous resistance are further explored, revealing processes of discursive construction that perpetuate power imbalances in a context of high geopolitical stakes. Tuareg music is eventually presented in this context as a means to express community resistance discursively.

Environmental battles and uranium extraction in North Niger

Neo-colonialism and global extractivism

Niger is the world's seventh-biggest producer of uranium and is one of the main exporters to Europe (Reuters, 2023). The recent military coup (25 July 2023) sparked concerns about access to important uranium resources and shed light on the scale of the mining exploitation in the country by foreign countries (Bourgery-Gonze, 2023; Cessac, 2023; Leali, 2023; Maad, 2023; Ramdani, 2023). Niger has extensive deposits of the highest-grade uranium ores, processed and exported as "yellow cakes," a key ingredient for nuclear energy.

To understand power relations in the context of uranium mining in Niger from a Political Ecology standpoint, we need to look at the two consecutive and parallel processes that are at play: neo-colonial exploitation and global extractivism, both participating in the capital dependency of the Global North to the resources and raw materials of the Global South.

The "Colonie du Niger" represented a territory under French control from 1900 to 1960, encompassing significant portions of what is now Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad. To gain independence, Niger, like all other French African colonies, voted in favour of the 1958 referendum and agreed to remain tied to France through economic, political, and cultural cooperation, benefiting from its aid and technical assistance (Walraven, 2009). Accessing the recently discovered uranium resource when France had placed nuclear energy as a central pillar of its energy strategy was a non-negotiable component of the decolonisation treaty. The subsequent defence agreement, signed in April 1961, required Niger to supply France with uranium on a priority basis (Martin, 1989). The French Commissariat à l'Énergie Atomique initiated the search for uranium in the mid-1950s and has supported the creation of the Société des Mines de l'Air (SOMAIR), a joint venture between French and Niger agencies. SOMAIR has led and operated the uranium extraction since the discovery in the

Arlit region, in the Northwest of the country. Through this structural arrangement, Niger has *de facto* granted France carte blanche for uranium extraction, ensuring a remarkable continuity of 40 years. French firm Orano, previously known as Areva and Cogema, has been operating uranium mining in Northern Niger since 1967, near the city of Arlit (see Figure 1), through a joint operation with SOMAIR (Grégoire, 2011; Reuters, 2023). Historians have uncovered political manipulations that have allowed France to maintain financial advantages, despite the crises in the commodity markets (Martin, 1989). The patterns of structural dependency and dominance are essentially neo-colonial (Higgott, 1980), with France's excessive dependence on Niger uranium, relying on it for around 70% of its nuclear industry (Ramdani, 2023). The prominent economic, political, and military arrangements in Niger that have allowed such a continuous monopoly of exploitation enact the neo-colonial nexus of relationships known as the *Françafrique*.

The mid-2000s marked a new era in global extractivism and mining worldwide, including in Niger. An unprecedented surge in commodity prices, which scholars have termed the "commodities supercycle" (Kröger, 2021), has been characterised by an increased industrial capacity to mine and extract resources at a new level of speed and efficiency. In the case of uranium, this has also coincided with an increasing urge to transition from fossil fuels, giving nuclear energy a new appeal. The price of uranium reached record levels in 2007, leading to a greater demand from foreign corporations to exploit uranium in Niger (Keenan, 2008). The State of Niger consequently ended Areva's (France) monopoly in 2007 to obtain more profitable deals, awarding major new exploitation contracts (Bezat, 2007). This region of Northern Niger has therefore recently emerged as a central point of interest worldwide for uranium, attracting numerous companies in pursuit of this valuable resource (Keenan, 2008).

Seizure of indigenous land and impact on Tuareg rights

The area of uranium exploitation is situated in the desert region of the Air, on Tuareg land. The Tuareg, composed of ethnic groups of nomads and pastoralists, have long suffered from displacement during colonial rule with new frontiers dividing Sahelian countries, and their inter-ethnic position in the region dramatically shifted by French colonialism. Once dominating the commerce paths through the Desert, the Tuareg found themselves reduced to a minority status within the French colonial territories (Boås and Torheim, 2013).

Since its independence, the State of Niger has attempted to contain and settle the nomadic population, creating community struggles and forcing the Tuareg into exile, notably in Libya. The Tuareg pastoral zone (circled in Figure 2) was one of the largest regions of nomadic pastoralism in the world (République du Niger, 2013). Transhumant routes should follow seasonal

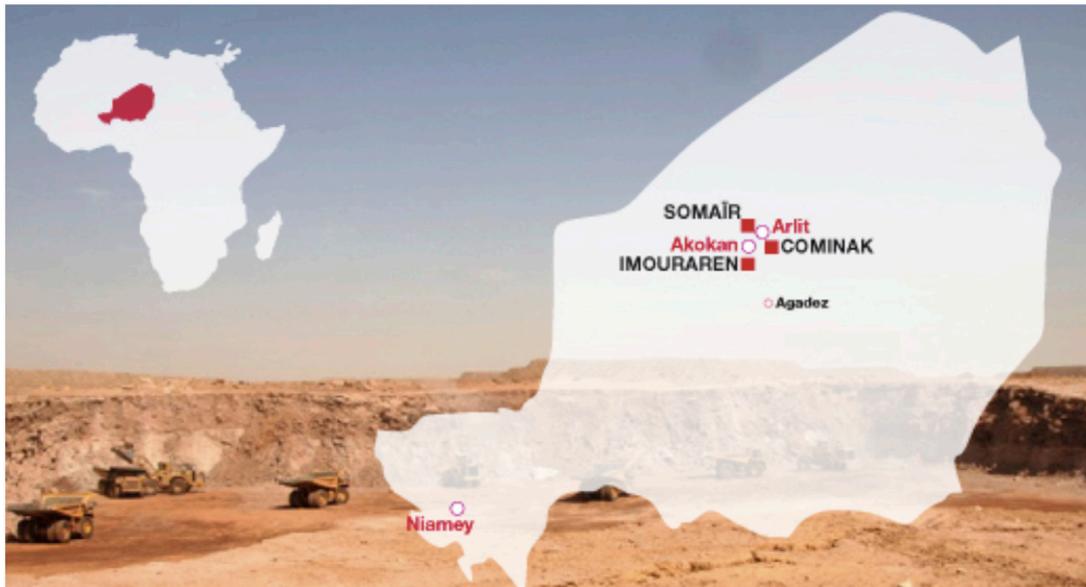
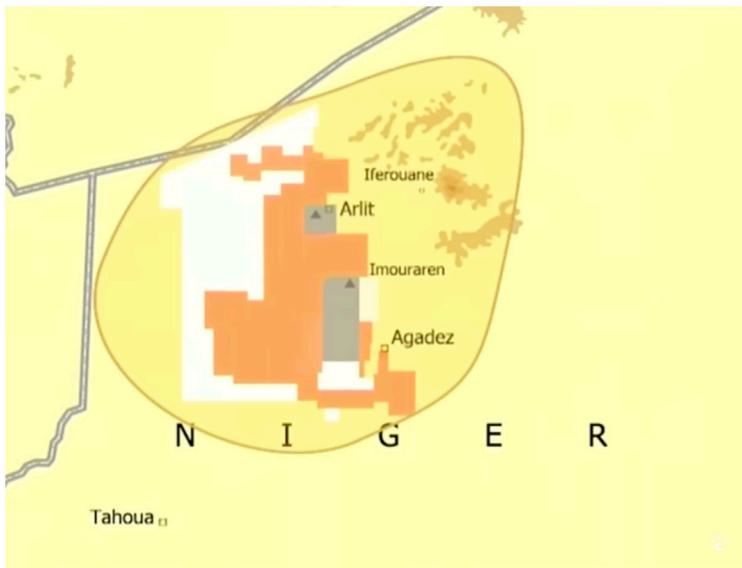


FIGURE 1 Localisation on the uranium mines in Niger© (Halper, 2012).



- The circle zone represents the Tuareg nomadic and pastoral area in the Aïr region in North Niger.
- In grey, mines by French company Orano (formerly Areva).
- In red, newly attributed permits for mining activities by Chinese, Canadian and other international mining corporations.
- In white, the earmarked zone for future mining allocations by the State of Niger.
- Almost all Tuareg pastoral land is now planned for uranium mining.

Map and descriptions extracted from the documentary *Niger, the battle for uranium*, by Nahan Siby, Frédérique Denis and Stéphane Manier

FIGURE 2 Spatialisation of the expansion of the uranium extraction on Tuareg land, extracted from Siby et al. (2022).

changes in pastoral areas, yet they are now strictly constrained by enclosed mining areas. The large uranium mining zones have forced herders and nomads out of their territories, significantly impacting the Tuareg and causing profound disruption to their traditional pastoral and commercial lifestyles. Corporations that

mine uranium enclose and restrain access to large territories, preventing transhumant pastoralism (Cervello and Mariella, 2002). Despite recognition of the loss of this pastoral land, the State of Niger has never supported or compensated Tuareg nomads (Afane and Gagnol, 2014), and the seizing of land

without the informed consent of communities has significantly intensified. Since the commodity and uranium boom, land tensions have aggravated to the point where extraction sites now cover most of Tuareg land, as shown in [Figure 2](#), putting these longstanding grievances on a new scale ([Polgreen, 2008](#)). The extensive appropriation of pastoral land for uranium extraction has severely degraded socio-environmental conditions ([Afane and Gagnol, 2014](#)), rendering Saharan pastoralism all but extinct, forcing the Tuareg to adapt and settle in urban areas. The Air mines have become emblematic of the oppression and exclusion faced by the Tuareg, who are bound to a system that values resource-rich land over their wellbeing ([Amstrong, 2017](#); [Padleckas, 2020](#); [Tellit-Hawad, 2022](#)).

Environmental damage

Health and environmental risks associated with uranium extraction have been recognised since the 1950s and documented in various extraction sites worldwide ([Bersimbaev and Bulgakova, 2015](#); [Moseman and Wainwright, 2023](#)). Three significant environmental impacts come with uranium mining: health impact on workers and neighbouring communities with an increased risk of cancer and lung diseases, radioactive contamination of underground water and soils, and radioactivity of untreated nuclear waste ([Nuclear Energy Agency, 2014](#)). Because of these well-documented risks, uranium mining is subject to the most stringent regulations. However, most uranium extraction occurs in countries less adherent to international standards, leading to a significant disparity in regulatory practices. ([Moseman and Wainwright, 2023](#)). The State of Niger did not have adequate regulations and environmental policies when resource extraction began, and for decades, mines operated without any environmental control. In 2010, Greenpeace reported gross negligence and abuse by AREVA in Niger ([Greenpeace, 2010](#)). As recently as 2023, the CRIIRAD (an independent commission on radioactivity) reported that twenty million tonnes of untreated nuclear waste, including radioactive gas (radon), were being dispersed by powerful desert winds, leading to the pollution of underground water sources ([CRIIRAD, 2023](#)). The State of Niger has been consistently ill-equipped to monitor mining activities and produce comprehensive assessments properly. Consequently, there are few places in the world where the deadly and devastating ecological destruction of uranium mining is as visible as in Niger ([Greenpeace, 2010](#); [Weira, 2016](#)).

Kröger defines extractivism as a destructive and violent form of extraction ([Kröger, 2021](#)). Uranium extractivism represents potentially its most destructive form, with damage and destruction lasting hundreds of thousands of years. Uranium extraction and its waste constitute an excessive form of entropy ([Biel, 2012](#)), destroying the fragile desert ecosystem and rendering Tuareg land inhabitable for generations and beyond.

Hecht describes the framing that has supported uranium mining as the «denuclearisation of uranium» ([Hecht, 2012](#)). She analyses how the uranium market was shaped by the idea of uranium being a profit-generating commodity, in which the mineral is considered an ordinary source material. It has framed the political and moral conditions of possibility for trade, creating a market where it is «possible to imagine buying and selling a material that could, in the right form, pulverise the planet» ([Hecht, 2012](#)).

The impact of uranium mining on Tuareg land is so critical and prominent that it seems impossible to ignore as an abuse of indigenous rights. The next section will unpack the relative absence of explicit environmental discourse in Tuareg politics and rebellions.

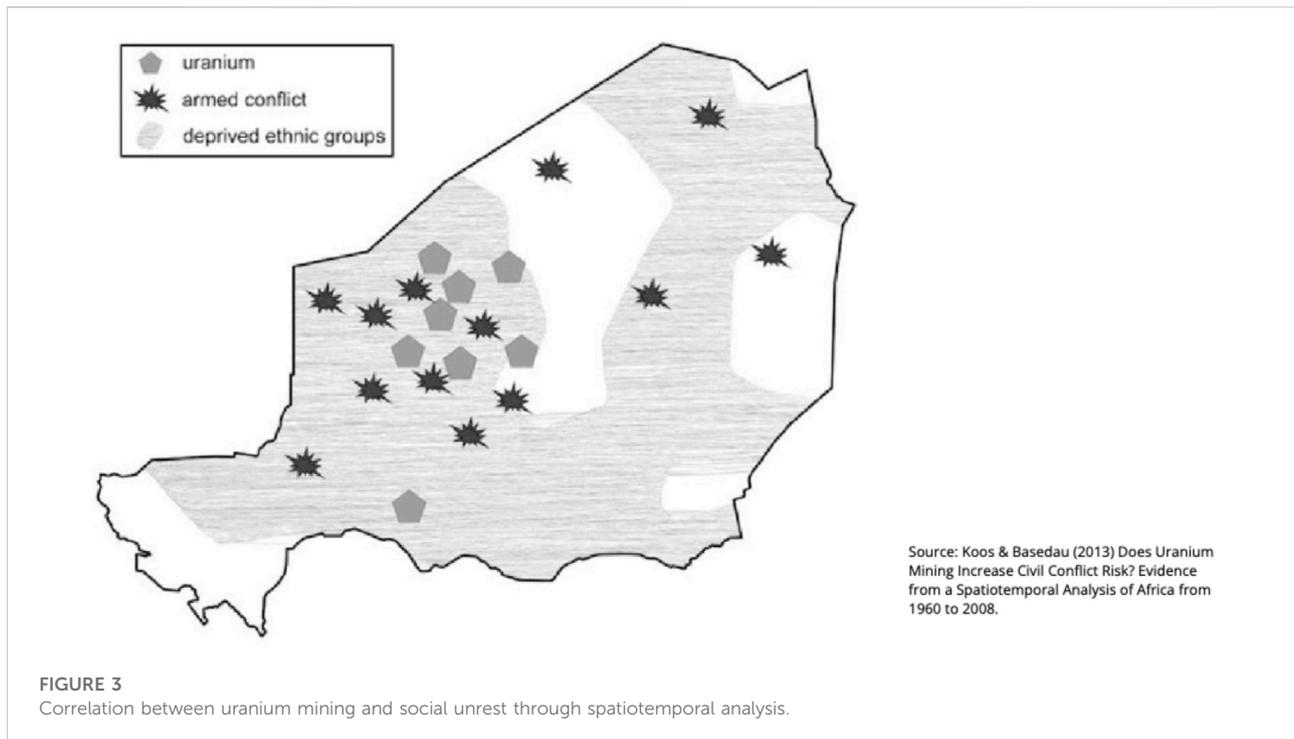
Discursive constructions to alienate the Tuareg from their indigenous rights

Applying a post-structural lens on the context of uranium exploitation and Tuareg resistance enables the analysis of discursive processes at play and uncovers how narratives of Tuareg rebellions have been strategically framed.

Framing and silencing Tuareg indigenous rights

The Tuareg have struggled and rebelled in the region for decades ([Bekoe, 2012](#); [Emerson, 2011](#); [Keenan, 2007, 2013, 2017](#); [Kisangani, 2012](#)). Although the rebellions are multi-layered, with different methods and agendas, a constant motive stated by the Tuareg resistance in Niger has been the violation of the native people's rights by the uranium exploitation of the Tuareg territories ([Keenan, 2008](#)). The Tuareg's resistance encompasses notions of redistribution and recognition, reclaiming ancestral rights to the land, which are fundamental to their herding traditions, as well as to their sense of self and foundational beliefs ([Keenan, 2013](#)).

However, the Tuareg demands have systematically been controlled through discursive channels, leading to their demand being narrowed to the obtention of «a higher share of the revenues from the uranium being extracted» in the region ([Koo and Basedau, 2013](#)). In 1995, a Peace Accord was signed to conclude the first Tuareg rebellion in Niger. The text is a prominent form of discursive control, fundamentally constraining Tuareg resistance under commodification terms ([Agreement - Peace Accord, 1995](#)). As the sole document recognising the marginalisation of the Tuareg within uranium extraction, Tuareg groups are forced to employ the stipulations made in the Peace Accord, which exclude admission of their indigenous rights to the land and the environmental degradation caused by extractivism. The Tuareg are forced to undermine the production process inherent in uranium extraction, through which they are implicated as victims on multiple fronts. In Niger, it is through the commodification of the resource that



the Tuareg can be recognised, in a transactional capacity - and thus limiting the Tuareg's scope of negotiation. Circling back to Hecht's argument on the discursive construction of uranium as a commodity that enables the negation of its fundamental threats, the framing of Tuareg claims on transactional terms negates their indigenous land rights. Therefore, framing the resource as a commodity is a means of silencing Tuareg resistance.

Framing and controlling Tuareg resistance

Tuareg resistance in Niger has been part of a wider desert insurgency, with multiple fronts and rebellions across Mali, Algeria, Libya, and Burkina Faso. In Niger, uranium extractivism has been another root cause of community distress and has led to acts of resistance, some of them violent. Figure 3 shows, through a spatiotemporal analysis, a direct correlation between violent rebellions and uranium mining. Two main rebellions took place in Niger, the first one in the 90s, concluded by the 1995 Peace Accord mentioned above, and a second one coinciding with the expansion of the mines in the mid-2000s, concurrent to the emergence of the 'Mouvement Nigerien pour la Justice', which has led to several direct attacks on the mining companies.¹

The link between the Tuareg revolt and terrorism in the wake of 9/11 and the US War on Terror has swiftly taken hold

in the world media. The simplistic and sensationalist approach that most media take to reporting on African conflicts is revealed by Lee Artz's analysis of press coverage during this time. In particular, the way commercial media frames the Tuareg rebellion fuels fear and serves to justify military intervention in response to the Tuareg uprisings (Artz, 2017). Jeremy Keenan's extensive work on terrorism in the Sahara argues that the US strategy of the War on Terror has, in fact, supported the discursive framing of the Tuareg movement as terrorists (then as Jihadists), creating «the ideological conditions for America's militarisation of Africa» (Keenan, 2007; 2013; 2017). In the terms of Keenan, the Tuareg have thus been «demonised». Portrayed and framed systematically as terrorists or jihadists, they suffer prejudice on the international scene, where their voice cannot be heard anymore.

In Niger, the discursive framing of the Tuareg as terrorists has supported an increased control of the State, justifying military interventions over the region, with a strategy of ethnic homogenisation through divisive policy² (Bekoe, 2012; Keenan, 2013). The framing of the Tuareg as terrorists enacts a discursive negation of the power relations generated by the uranium extraction, in which the mining companies can portray themselves as victims of the Tuareg. This construction

¹ Including the kidnapping of 5 mines employees in September 2010 (Massalatchi, 2010).

² A notification was sent to the UN in 2008 to report acts of genocide.

of victimhood on a global scene of Islamist terror has served to coerce the Tuareg rebellion and alienate their discourse. In a documentary on the mining sites, Tuareg people expressed their disarray in the face of their incapacity to reclaim territorial and environmental rights without being perceived as violent and condemned as terrorists (Siby et al., 2022, min 45). Any claim of indigenous rights and ecological harms by the Tuareg has indeed become inaudible and silenced.

Tuareg music, expression of indigenous and post-colonial struggles

There is one notable exception in which the Tuareg escape negative prejudice: through their internationally acclaimed music, known as Desert Blues. Music has become the central and main channel of cultural expression of the Tuareg, their «media machine» (Morgan, 2014). Whilst Tuareg resistance is ‘demonised’, their music, which has resistance at its core, as we will see, is celebrated worldwide. Approaching the music with a post-structural PE lens, I analyse how it is also framed, potentially to the point of risking losing its significance.

Tuareg music, a musical form of indigenous resistance

Claudot-Hawad, an ethnographer specialised in the Tuareg, situates the contemporary genre of music within a long Tuareg tradition of sung poetry (*Ezalé* in Tamasheq), in which the performer produces metaphorical narratives that convey stories related to the community’s values (Claudot-Hawad, 2010). In traditional Tuareg culture, *Ezalé*’s narratives illustrate the nomadic values of the ancient Tuareg world in a symbiotic relationship with the universe (Claudot-Hawad, 2010).

Claudot-Hawad identifies two major ruptures in the history of the Tuareg spoken world, which have contributed to the emergence of contemporary Tuareg music and shaped its political nature.

The first rupture occurred during the French colonisation of the region in the late 1800s (Keita, 1998). Claudot-Hawad analyses that the poetry from that period is influenced by this radical course of events, with the style taking new forms and breaking away from traditional epic narratives, bringing more satirical and critical literature. The texts incorporate present-day reality, colonial struggles, and broader reflections on the incompatibility between the two worldviews, often played in frontal opposition in the musical repertoire (Claudot-Hawad, 2010). This period also marks the widespread dissemination of the songs throughout the whole Tuareg country as an oral medium (Claudot-Hawad, 2010).

The second rupture results from successive displacements of Tuareg nomads accelerated by a series of crises. The first Tuareg rebellion (1962–1964) and its repression led to the exile of an important community to the Northeast Tuareg country in

Algeria and Libya. The songs from this period evoke daily struggles and convey humiliation associated with exile and displacement. The songs start to become a genuine vehicle of modern resistance against the arbitrary creation of borders in the Sahara as part of the post-colonial creation of African States (Claudot-Hawad, 2010). In the 1980s, the Libyan regime, which was fostering the Tuareg resistance and rebellion, integrated Tuareg into Libyan military training camps. The enclosed context of the camps has fostered community spirit, creating the conditions for the Tuareg to bond, share their struggles and find comfort and expression through the practice of music. The severe drought that affected the Sahel between 1983 and 1985 (Milas, 1984; Peterson, 2021) exacerbated the exodus of populations from the region, leading to an influx of refugees. A vast repertoire of poems and songs, accompanied by modern instruments and the prominence of the electric guitar, emerged from this period and circulated on tapes through Tuareg tents and refugee camps, from Libya to Mauritania (Claudot-Hawad, 2010).

Entanglement of the music and Tuareg spatial and social disaggregation, the “*Ishumar*” music

Tuareg music has evolved from a tradition of epic poems to a direct resistance vehicle as the Tuareg face colonisation and displacement. The language used in the lyrics loses its grandeur associated with the original epic style. It becomes more mundane and modern, evoking daily struggles, a lost homeland, the desire to rebuild it, and the hardships of exile (Claudot-Hawad, 2010). «The genesis of Tuareg guitar music is inseparable from the politics of environmental and economic decline, intergenerational tension, and displacement in the postcolonial Sahel-Sahara» (Schmidt, 2018, p.67). Tuareg music in its contemporary form lends to colonial and postcolonial narratives woven in expressions of power and domination. To this day, themes of resistance remain central to the Tuareg musical repertoire. Tuareg artists, such as Tinariwen or Bombino, use their music to claim Tuareg indigenous land rights and self-determination. (Orphans of the Sahara, 2014a; WFDD, 2023).

«It was an entente between Mali and Niger/They debated how to carve up the Ténéré³/ In the searing heat, clueless about the Ténéré/they debated how to carve it up». Tinariwen, Le “Song of the Wild Beasts”, 2001 (Tinariwen, 2023)

«Freemen who sleep in this world of suffering / Wake up, my people / Straighten up, my people / Confront the difficulties of

3 Ténéré is the Tamasheq word for the desert as the Tuareg homeland.

your current situation / A long road awaits you.» Bombino (Bombino, 2023)

The music style became associated with the displaced population, which was seen wandering in neighbouring towns in search of jobs and purpose, soon to be referred to in the region as “*Ishumar*”, derived from “*chômeurs*”, ‘unemployed’ in French. Since Tuareg were often seen playing music, the term “*Ishumar*” has rapidly been used by the local populations of the Sahel region to refer to Tuareg musicians, and then progressively more broadly to the music genre (Claudot-Hawad, 2010). This terminology shift shows the music’s profound entanglement with Tuareg spatial and social struggles, not only as a form of expression but as an identity. The contemporary form of Tuareg music is deeply intertwined with the community’s struggles and its connection to the land. The music genre is defined as a socio-spatial population movement under the same term: *Ishumar*.

Dilution and manipulations in the global music market

The Desert Blues, commodification of the music as a new genre

Western music producers have rapidly “discovered”⁴ the potential of this music genre, and by the late 1990s, it achieved international success and recognition. In the world music market, Tuareg music has been framed under the term “Desert Blues,” characterised by its electric-guitar rhythms and aching vocals that echo American blues music (Thompson, 2023). This terminology is a Western construct that situates the genre within the global musical market, where the relationship between music and place is shaped to serve the commodification of music. The process of commercialising indigenous music involves modifying and transforming distant musical traditions to suit Western tastes and markets whilst celebrating geographical diversity and remoteness (Connell and Gibson, 2004). The integration of Tuareg music into the global music industry not only implies a de-territorialisation of their culture, but also a further level of commodification. The Desert Blues becomes a cultural commodity which is both commercial and shaped by discourses of place and otherness. The participation of the Tuareg in the industry is the result of power dynamics that contribute to undermining the indigeneity of the music, as a signifying practice (Hall, 1997), and blend it into a global cultural production. Bombino, one prominent contemporary musician from Niger, reflects on «*the biggest threat for a small and marginalised culture like the Tuareg risks getting lost in the homogenization of culture.*» (Bombino, 2023). Participation in the industry risks compromising and diluting the significance of music in market

dynamics. Today, it is arguably claimed that the discursive politicised aspect of the music genre has faded due to the international fame of the musicians, and some scholars argue that the music has lost its political vigour and has become mere entertainment (Cervello and Mariella, 2002).

However, Tuareg music has achieved extraordinary success, accessing an echo chamber on a global scale. Using their media exposure and platforms (Al Jazeera, 2023; Bombino, 2023; Morgan, 2013; Orphans of the Sahara, 2014a; Orphans of the Sahara, 2014b; Pilley, 2021; Szatan, 2021). Tuareg artists serve as «third-party voices», bridging the gap between Western and worldwide media and the realities of the Sahel region (Rasmussen, 2017). Musicians who have gained international fame and have a presence in the media contribute to challenging the perception of the Tuareg and finding the community’s voice and authority on the global stage (Rasmussen, 2017).

«Even if our music gives me a better life and little comfort, so long as my people are marginalised and persecuted, it has no value.» Ousmane Ag Mossa, lead singer of Tamikrest. (Orphans of the Sahara, 2014b)

«Tuaregs will always resist and claim their own freedom, until the day they have their own territory.» Ousmane Ag Mossa, lead singer of Tamikrest. (Morgan, 2013)

Essentialisation and framing the music

Stuart Hall’s politics of representation (Hall, 1997) demonstrates how cultural difference can be emphasised to the extent of essentialism and fetishising. As a genre of World music, the Desert Blues enriches the exoticising European narratives that epitomise Tuareg as the “Masters of the Desert” (Schmidt, 2019). Ethnographer Rasmussen reports on the misrepresentation of Tuareg artists in the media, which blends historical and contemporary cultural representations (Rasmussen, 2017). The «politically constructed mythic-historical representations» (Rasmussen, 2017) participate in the essentialisation of the musical practice to a romanticised narrative of resistance, compromising the genuine active functional process of the music producing effective social change (McDonald, 2013, p.5) and undermining the true symbolic and empathic space created by the resisting culture (Hancock-Barnett, 2012).

The music has also been used on occasion to support local political agendas and has been reframed as “music for peace”. In 1994, Hadjo Emeni, a female musician from Air, performed at the ceremony marking the signing of the Peace Agreement, which concluded the Tuareg rebellion’s control by the State of Niger. (Voix de Femmes, 2002). Parallel to the US militarisation⁵ of the Sahel, US Aid initiated a range of cultural programmes

4 A frequently used term with colonial connotation (Voix de Femmes, 2002).

5 These two examples reveal an essentialisation of women in peace-building practice (Aggestam and Eitrem Holmgren, 2022).

contributing to peacebuilding in the region, focusing on women musicians «We believe that local culture and identity are key factors in making a community more resilient to extremist ideology» (USAid, U. S. A. for I. D., 2018).

As a «third voice» (Rasmussen, 2017), Tuareg musicians have, however, the capacity to offer perspectives and to reframe narratives. As we uncover the mechanisms of framing and essentialism, we should not negate the agency of the Tuareg, unless we frame them again as systematic victims. Despite their international fame and arguably detached nature from everyday life in the Sahel, Tuareg musicians have created an echo chamber that can challenge ethnocentric narratives, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of essentialist attempts (Rasmussen, 2017). The second part of the case study will unpack this agency and its «cultural survivance» (Vizenor, 2009) by looking at the force of the music through a post-humanist lens.

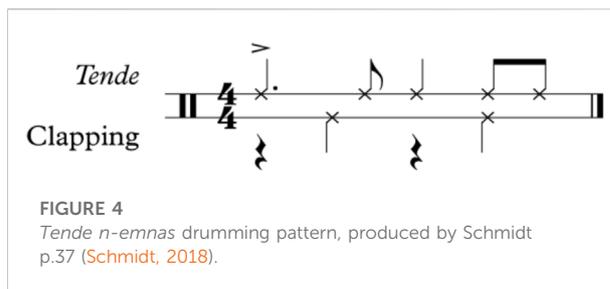
Conclusion part 1

Examining the case study through a post-structuralist perspective on PE revealed processes of framing Tuareg resistance, thereby silencing their Indigenous rights and ecological claims to their territory. The power relations within a complex political-economic nexus in the Sahel served to frame the resistance and music through commodification and manipulation, which explains the absence of visible battles or explicit claims by the Tuareg against the mining activity. Tuareg have been silenced on environmental grounds, and their music as cultural resistance has been absorbed and played down through essentialisation in the world music industry.

The second part of the case study demonstrates that analysing the Tuareg cultural resistance and music through a Political Ontology lens uncovers essential notions of indigenous critique and ontology as an opposition to extractivism on their territory, based on ecological grounds.

Part 2, ontological level

The analysis of Tuareg music through a Political Ontology lens examines the music's relationship with Tuareg philosophy and desert ontology. A closer examination of the concept of *Essuf* and its role in sustaining the music genre serves as a focus for shedding light on Tuareg ontology. The reality-making of the music is then examined to advance the idea of an existential relation to the desert. Music as a contested space between indigenous and Western ontologies will be further discussed to explore how Tuareg music can be understood in terms of Political Ontology, both as a critique and as a practice, as defined by Blaser and De La Cadena.



Desert ontology in Tuareg music

Ténéré in Tuareg music

Tuareg developed music to claim their attachment to the Sahara homeland. Tinariwen, the pioneers of the music genre, initially formed their musical group under the name *Taghreff Tinariwen*, Reconstruct the Deserts. Until now, many groups' names and lyrics refer directly to the Desert, *ténéré* in Tamasheq. *Ténéré* is not simply the abandoned homeland but a place they aspire to return to. The lyrics of this song by Tinariwen convey a notion of homesickness and longing:

«I live in the desert

Where there are no trees and no shade.

Veiled friends, leave indigo [turban] and veil

You should be in the desert

Where the blood of kindred has been spilled

That desert is our country

And it is our future.»

English translation of a 1979 song by Ibrahim Ag Alhabib (“Abraybone”) founder of Tinariwen, cited by Schmidt, p.44 (Schmidt, 2018)

The desert is omnipresent in the music genre, yet it is rarely described as a setting throughout the repertoire. It is, in fact, treated as an agent in relation to humans, rather than a backdrop or a territory. There are indeed almost no descriptions of the landscapes or the geography in the songs, but instead the features of the desert (mountains, sand, wadis, or caves) appear as characters and as personas (Weisberg, 2015). It reveals an entangled view between the *Ténéré* and the Tuareg, a dialectic relationship between the populations, their land, and their natural environment, whereby the natural environment is an actor in itself, on equal footing with its inhabitants.

The rhythm of the music genre is also closely tied to the desert. It has a characteristic feature with a particular pattern of interlocking of the electric guitar's drone string and the drumming *Tende n-emnas* (see Figure 4). This rhythm pattern is also often considered by music critics and ethnomusicologists to be a rhythmic interpretation of the nomadic journey in the desert, reproducing the sound of the caravan's steps. (Morgan, 2013; Orphans of the Sahara, 2014c; Schmidt, 2018).

Despite settlement and the abandonment of nomadism, the *ténéré* remains essential for musicians. Although the desert is no longer a constitutive part of the Tuareg's contemporary lifestyle, it remains a strong spatial connection between the composition of music, the practice of music, and the desert. Schmidt reports on field research in Agadez, Niger, from 2016 to 2017 (Schmidt, 2018, p. 86), noting the musicians' habit of composing music *in situ*, in the desert. Tuareg musicians interviewed by Schmidt explained how they regularly go on expeditions in the desert to play music, alone or in groups, to connect with the silence and the space. They recall the desert as a powerful scene of compositional inspiration (Schmidt, 2018, pp.86–90). In a post-nomadic context, the new generations of Tuareg musicians reinsert the music into the desert and the desert into the music, not only as an insight or compositional background, but as a central part of its narrative. The reference to it in the repertoire is so frequent in Tuareg music today that Schmidt recalls a conversation with the composer Moussa Albadé, who often makes light of the fact that «every song is composed of the word *ténéré* repeated ad nauseam» (Schmidt, 2018, p.87).

«*Ténéré ténéré I am in the desert*

hegh *ténéré* insehgh the desert, myself, and nostalgia

nak id nizgam assine a nostalgia of two things that are in my heart

hanen oulhine assnine. and that hurt it.

Hanen oulhine assnine These two things are in my heart.

edague ikegh narhine Everywhere I go, I feel awful.

falaguadim iyan They're there for someone who is in my

ehan oulhine assnine. heart and who stirs it.

Takalahi Widan Widan is becoming for me a great forest

arrougue nassouf erghan where there are neither trees nor water

warhen ichkan damane but it is full of *kel essuf*.»

Nzggam (“Nostalgia”) composed by Kildjate Moussa Albadé and recorded by his group, TisDass, on the album *Yamedan* (Sahel Sounds, 2015). Transcribed and translated by Kildjate Moussa Albadé and the author. (Schmidt, 2018, p.)

The lyrics presented above illustrate the strong territorial bond with the desert, often associated with a search and feeling of solitude, *Essuf*, one of the central philosophical concepts of the Tuareg. Profoundly rooted in the traditional Tuareg poetic and philosophical frameworks, where the desert represents both a metaphorical concept and a living ecosystem, Tuareg music is founded on principles of interconnectedness and dialogic interaction with the natural environment.

Essuf, indigenous ontology at the core of Tuareg music

Essuf, a pivotal philosophical concept in Tuareg culture, serves as a compelling anchor for a discussion in Political Ecology, particularly in terms of spatial and Indigenous ontology.

Like *Ténéré*, *Essuf* is a recurring theme in the music genre and is instrumental in understanding the Tuaregs' relationship with the desert (Rasmussen, 2017). Notably, *Essuf* is the preferred term for the music among Tuareg musicians (Morgan, 2014). Unlike *Ishumar*, which was a name given by other Sahelian populations, linking the music to socio-spatial struggle, *Essuf* is how Tuareg artists prefer to see their music referred to, connecting it to Tuareg philosophy and indigenous ontology.

Essuf is understood both as ‘the wild space’ and a state of solitude; it is, therefore, both a natural and mental state. As a natural space, it evokes a sense of remote vastness. However, it is also a wilderness under threat, a space threatened by destructive activities from outsiders motivated by greed (Rasmussen, 2008), and, in that respect, is associated with environmental concerns. As a mental space, *Essuf* relates to Sufi theosophy, where it constitutes a spiritual practice aimed at accessing ‘placelessness’ and oneness (Weisberg, 2015). In the like of artists or intellectuals who have sought remote locations to find inspiration and create, *Essuf* is the desert within oneself where one can retreat to create (Weisberg, 2015). *Essuf* is a state of desolation, both environmental and mental, «a place of alterity where one takes refuge, torn between two choices or universes that are different and irreconcilable» (Rasmussen, 2001).

For Rasmussen, the very presence of *Essuf* at the core of the music is not only permitting us to read it on a symbolic or ontological level, «it is exhorting us to do so, even cautioning us not to do otherwise» (Rasmussen, 2001). *Essuf*, and by extension Tuareg music, realises the Tuareg ontological renegotiation with the desert, re-creating the absent and lost territory within oneself.

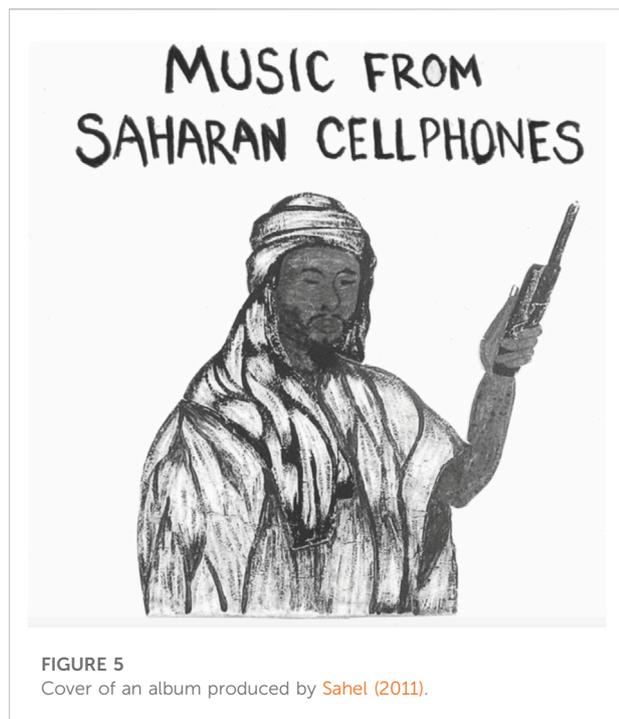


FIGURE 5
Cover of an album produced by Sahel (2011).

Cultural survivance and indigenous resistance

Reality-making and music practice to re-signify what it means to be a Tuareg

Tuareg music is remarkable not only by its international success but also by its vitality. The practice of creating, practising, or listening to music is central to understanding the Tuareg contemporary lifestyle. From the beginning of the music genre, it was rapidly widely shared through music cassettes before booming on cell phones (Schmidt, 2019) (see Figure 5). Not only were Tuareg listeners actively engaging with it, but many were keen to take the *guitara* and practice themselves. From the 90s, «young Tuareg men⁶ throughout much of Niger are seemingly always with a guitar» (Schmidt, 2018, p.81). From its early role in building community resilience in the context of displacement to direct engagement with rebellions, Tuareg music has evolved to become an essential everyday contemporary practice. The music has become constitutive to what Schmidt called the practice of «the creative waiting» in *fadas* (Schmidt, 2018, p.70). *Fadas* are the community spaces in Niger where men gather to escape boredom and socialise, an integral feature of Niger's urbanity (Masquelier, 2019). For the “*Ishumar*” Tuareg,

6 Whereas Tuareg music has initially been led by male musicians, it is important to note that the music is also practiced by women and girls and the music genre has notable female figures, in the like of Les Filles de Illighadad.

the *fadas* have been crucial in settled Tuareg communities, accelerating the centrality of Tuareg guitar music in public space. Schmidt argues that everyday “musicking” is so ingrained in the Tuareg culture of waiting that the very practice of music defines the social space, creating symbolic meanings and societal values tied to their sense of community and identity. While the act of playing music to pass the time is quite banal, it takes a defining form in the context of the Tuareg's profound social changes and transitions. (Schmidt, 2018, p.70).

Tuareg music, embodied as an everyday “music-space-identity,” brings about politics and the reclaiming of indigeneity (Saldanha, 2010). Music plays a significant role in defining the Tuareg community's identity. The practice of music, as embodied experiences, has become central to making sense of the world through the self, with processes of identification and belonging. It is a signifying practice in its highest-level sense, re-signifying what it means to be a Tuareg (McDonald, 2013).

The vitality of Tuareg music facilitates the ‘survival’, using Vizenor's concept, of activation of indigenous knowledge, culture, and ontology (Vizenor, 2009). The evolution of the music genre reflects a constant re-negotiation of meaning that transcends and reinforces its ontology. In doing so, it renegotiates the relationship with place, implicitly reaffirming land and indigenous rights.

An environmental critique in the contested colonised space of the desert

To understand how the Tuareg indigenous ontology, fiercely enacted in their music, gives rise to an environmental critique, it is essential to revisit the hegemonic Western ontology that supports extractivism, particularly human interventions in the desert.

The Western ontology creates concepts and discourses on nature and materiality whereby humans are vowed to tame nature, justifying the exploitation and commodification of its resources without limits (Serafini, 2024). In desert environments, Western ontology views the desert as a void, negating its ecosystems and inhabitants, and treating nature as non-existent. Deserts have often been chosen for hazardous activities around the world, especially for nuclear weapon development and testing. Between 1960 and 1966, seventeen atomic bombs were tested in the Algerian Sahara, a Tuareg territory under French colonial rule, resulting in irreversible environmental damage in the region (Hennaoui and Nurzhan, 2023).

It is essential to highlight that colonial, social, economic, and political structures in the colonised Global South have led to the Western ontology becoming a hegemonic worldview. Extractivism cannot, therefore, be considered solely as an economic or environmental issue; instead, it is the pinnacle of a coloniality of power deeply ingrained in knowledge systems and consciousness and far beyond the sole extractive industries (Serafini, 2024). Therefore, indigenous resistance and opposition to extractivism do not only materialise in environmental claims but also in ontological terms.

In that respect, the Tuareg ontology and its philosophical concepts directly contradict and oppose the Western ontology of the desert. The extraction of uranium in Northern Niger is, in effect, a contested and colonised space, and an attack on the Tuareg ontology. Examining the Tuareg resistance through a Political Ontology lens reveals that it encompasses fundamental notions of being and belonging, and that these conflicts of worldviews shape the power relations and battles with the State and extractive companies (Rasmussen, 2017). Tuareg music cultivates culturally and geographically specific poetics that are in opposition to the dominant ontological paradigm. And by doing so, it calls into question the legitimacy of neo-colonial power. It expresses political and ontological resistance, representing a central medium for sharing and deepening a reclaimed ontology of the desert, informing and shaping ecological imperatives. Tuareg music is critical for uncovering the entangled ontologies and their dynamics within the contested colonised space. As defined by de la Cadena and Blaser, the Political Ontology of the Tuareg, enacted in music, is both a critique that enables envisioning another view of the desert and a practice of reality-making that defines the Tuareg's existential relation to their land.

Responding to this article's research question, Tuareg do not formulate claims over mining in terms that can resonate with Western ontology. But ecology is far from *unthought*; the Tuareg ecological thought is profoundly articulated within their indigenous ontology and fiercely expressed through music, claiming a profound entanglement with the desert and a call for ecological balance.

Discussion

A new perspective on the case study through a Political Ecology lens situates Tuareg music as an effective form of indigenous resistance against the extensive uranium mining activity in Northern Niger. Uncovering the processes of systemic silencing, it revealed the agency of the Tuareg in escaping negative discursive constructions, transcending instrumentalisation in the music market, and developing an indigenous and reclaimed Political Ontology of the Desert. Tuareg music encompasses the modality of politics and concerns itself with reality-making, defining its existential relation to the desert. The Tuareg ontology, as enacted in their music, counters the ontology that drives modernity and supports mining, redefining Tuareg music as a significant vehicle for cultural resistance, profoundly connected to the environment.

Political Ecology is about investigating power relations in environmental abuse. This case study rebalances power relations. Acknowledging that ontology is power, and that success is power, this analysis suggests that the Tuareg have the power, through their music, to displace environmental and indigenous resistance from the geopolitical scene into a broader cultural echo chamber.

Following Stuart Hall's argument (1997), the Tuareg's participation in the arrangement of global music marketing and their access to a worldwide media scene are, therefore, forces to reclaim indigeneity and redefine it on their own ontological terms, in an ecological balance with the desert, ultimately challenging the existing power structure.

This article aims to sharpen our understanding of the potential of Political Ecology as a lens for uncovering unseen ecological dimensions in artistic productions. It argues for a broader recognition of music and arts as ecological practices, one that reflects and shapes relationships between people, land, and environment. By revealing the silence surrounding uranium extraction and its cultural implications, this study invites renewed reflection on the intersections of art, ecology, and decolonial thought in contexts of environmental exploitation. Future research could expand and develop a dedicated PE framework for artistic productions and cultural practices by engaging more deeply with Political Ecology in meaningful dialogue with cultural and aesthetic studies. It would lead to a more radical approach to the contribution of the arts and culture to ecological and environmental conflicts, going beyond the simple production of signifying narratives or imaginings to serve as agents of change, deconstructing power dynamics, and engaging in postcolonial critique.

This study is based primarily on secondary sources and textual analysis, constituting a methodological gap which limits its capacity to capture the lived, sensory, and performative dimensions of Tuareg musical practice. While the desk-based approach has enabled a comprehensive synthesis of existing literature and discourse, future research should build on these foundations through field-based and participatory methods. Future field-based and participatory research involving musicians and communities could capture the lived and philosophical dimension of musical practice, enabling a deeper understanding of how Tuareg music engages with ecological realities on an experiential level. Such an empirical investigation could further test and refine the proposed Political Ecology framework, contributing to a more grounded understanding of cultural practice in the Sahel.

Situating Tuareg music within a Political Ecology framework underscores the value of cultural and artistic analysis in understanding human-environment interactions. By bridging indigenous knowledge, aesthetic expression, and ecological critique, this study contributes to a broader dialogue on how culture can expand the scope of decolonial environmental thought.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

LM conceptualised the study, developed the interdisciplinary analytical framework integrating Political Ecology and cultural analysis, and designed the methodological approach. LM conducted all the literature review, textual and discursive analysis, and synthesis of secondary environmental and cultural sources. LM interpreted the findings through ecological, ontological, and cultural lenses and was responsible for drafting, editing, and finalising the manuscript.

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