

THE WEDDING RITUAL AMONG THE KEL FERWAN TUAREGS

In a paper previously published in *JASO*, I gave an analysis of the name-giving ritual among the Kel Ferwan, a Tuareg group of northern Niger.¹ I would now like to follow this up with a description and analysis of the wedding ritual among these Tuaregs. First of all, however, I must give a few sociological details about these people, by way of background to my study.²

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¹ D. Casajus, 'Autour du rituel de la Nomination chez les Touaregs Kel Ferwan', *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, Vol. XIII (1982), No.1, pp.57-67.

² For further details, see D.Casajus, 'La Tente et le Campement chez les Touaregs Kel Ferwan', *Revue de l'Occident Musulman et de la Méditerranée*, Vol. XXXII (1981), pp.53-70.

I

The Kel Ferwan form a confederation of tribes roaming the plains surrounding Agadez. One of these tribes might be called 'noble'; the others are 'commoners'. The wedding-ritual is always the same, whether of the noble tribe or of a commoner one. The Kel Ferwan are nomads living in camps composed of a man and his wife, their divorced or unmarried daughters, their sons and daughters-in-law and, of course, all the young children of the couples living in the camp. Each married couple lives in a tent with their young children. The important fact is that this tent belongs to the woman, she having received it from her mother when she married. More precisely, when one of her daughters marries, a woman gives her part of the components of her own tent and keeps the rest; the missing components are then made up again by slaves or blacksmiths.

When a young boy enters puberty, he no longer consents to live in his mother's tent, but makes a precarious shelter of branches, which he might share with other boys of the same age. He will not live in a tent again until he marries - that is, when he is twenty-five or thirty years old. Even then he will, in a sense, be only a guest in the tent he enters at that time. In the case of divorce he will again be deprived of a tent, and will revert to the precarious position of an adolescent, to the detriment of his social position. A widower, even if he is an old and respected man is, as far as a tent is concerned, in the same position as an adolescent.

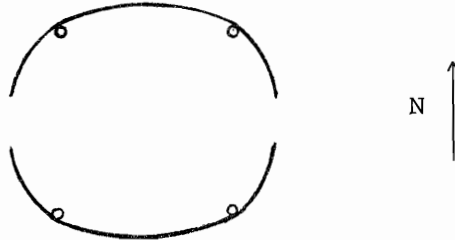
Girls, on the contrary, are married at a very early age, around fourteen years. Their first marriage is often short, ending in divorce, but they are not deprived of their tent once they have possession of it. Once divorced, a woman comes back to the camp of her father with her tent, and there she can use her tent in whatever way she wants.

A woman has the same status in her own tent as she has in her mother's: she is at home in both. Conversely, a man is a guest in his wife's tent, although when he was a young boy he held the same position as his sister in his mother's tent. The Tuaregs comment on this in saying that 'a woman's tent is her mother's'. It does not mean that a woman's tent actually belongs to her mother, but that in her own tent she has the status she had in her mother's tent. The fact that a woman's tent is partly made of elements from her mother's tent is a way of emphasizing this social phenomenon.

It is, therefore, understandable that the Tuaregs regard a tent as a female domain, in relation to which a man is in some sense a stranger. The woman is said to be the 'tent-custodian', and sometimes she is called a 'tent' (*ehan*). A man might speak of his wife as 'his tent'. To marry, for a man, is 'to make a tent' (*āgu ehan*) or 'to enter a woman's tent'. The womb is also called 'a tent'. Women of the tribe can collectively be referred

to as 'those-of-the-tents' (*tin-inan*). It should be emphasized that this close association of woman and tent is not due to some substantial identity between them, but is the consequence of the fact that throughout a woman's life her status remains the same vis-à-vis the tent, whereas it is the lot of a man to move from one tent (his mother's) to another (his wife's) in which his status is quite different. Being linked to two almost identical tents, a woman is linked to *the* tent, one could say to the Tent.

The Tuaregs also say that the tent is similar to the cosmos. Their tents are arched, mat-covered constructions. The vault of the tent is compared to the sky-vault, and its circular shape to the circle of the world,



The four principal posts are regarded as being similar to the four pillars sustaining the sky-vault. No human being has ever seen these pillars, but it is said that God, in order to teach men how to build their tents, placed four stars in the sky in the same positions (NE, NW, SW, SE) as the four pillars (these stars constitute what we call the Pegasus square).

Two rectangular mats are placed on either side of the tent, allowing it to be open to the west and to the east. The normal entrance of the tent is on its western side. It is possible - but not at all usual - to enter the tent by the eastern side. One does not enter the tent by the northern or the southern side, except, as we shall see, during the wedding ritual.

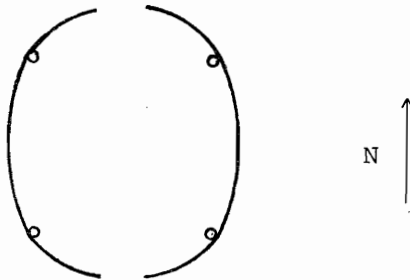
During the day, the two lateral mats can be lifted in order to permit some airing, but at sunset the northern side must be thoroughly closed. It is said that to the north of the tent live the *aljinan* or *kel esuf*, the 'spirits', and they become particularly dangerous at sunset. *Aljinan* (singular - *aljin*) comes from the Arabic *jinn*. Tuareg *aljinan* are in some respects similar to Arab *jinn*. The northern side of the tent is, therefore, its dangerous one. It is also its male side, the southern side being female. In bed, the spouses lie in a west-east direction, the husband being to the north, the wife to the south. He thus protects her against the *jinn*.

II

The wedding tent, which after the marriage will be the tent of the newly-married couple, is put up near the camp of the bride's family. This, I think, shows that it is in the process of moving into another camp. On the day of the ceremony the bride spends the day in a tent of her family's camp. The bridegroom stays in his own family's camp or in a bivouac at some distance from the bride's camp. All the guests - those of the two families - will spend the day in or near the bride's family's camp. The bridegroom is assisted by a best man who accompanies him during the entire ceremony, while the bride is assisted by a bridesmaid. Apart from the best man, only some friends and cross-cousins spend any part of the day with the bridegroom.

The first ritual act is that of henna-coating. The bride and the bridegroom, each in their own camp, have their feet and hands coated with henna. After this a bull given by the bridegroom is slaughtered near the bride's camp, and then cut up by the blacksmiths of the bride's family. Some songs and dances accompany this sacrifice.

At sunset the bridegroom, preceded by his own blacksmiths, is led to the wedding tent. Some female relatives of the bride, on the western side of the tent (the side normally entered), pretend to prevent the groom from entering. This tent is not put up in the usual way. The two lateral mats are placed in such a way that the two entrances of the tent are not situated to the west and east, but to the north and south,



As his friends pretend noisily to negotiate with the women at the western entrance of the tent, the bridegroom and his best man discreetly enter the tent by the northern side. Since there is a horizontal beam on the southern and northern sides of the tent, the bridegroom is obliged to enter it by crawling on his hands and knees. Once he has entered, his friends laughingly say to the women: 'Well, he is inside now, we are afraid there is no longer any use in negotiating.'

Before the arrival of the bride, her young friends - girls only - attack the tent where the friends of the bridegroom are crowded. They try to snatch something belonging to the bridegroom (for example, a ring, a bracelet) or to touch the top of

his veil. It is said that if they succeed in these activities, the bridegroom will become a henpecked husband. But the friends of the bridegroom assist him and threaten the girls with their swords and riding crops. It should be noted that the men on the one side and the women on the other are mixed, regardless of kinship relationship. This contrasts with the beginning of the ceremony, where all the guests are strictly separated in groups - bride male guests, bride female guests, bridegroom male guests etc.

Very late in the night - sometimes just before dawn - the bride is led to the tent in procession, leaning on an old woman. The procession circles anti-clockwise three times around the tent, and the bride is finally led into the tent on the southern side. This entrance is made after negotiations, at the end of which the bridegroom's friends are supposed to give the bride's friends some presents.

The guests then depart, leaving the couple alone. It is said that, when they are alone, the bridegroom *must* be the first to speak if he does not want his wife always to be the first to speak in their future life together. The marriage is not consummated before the third night. On the first night the bridegroom must behave as if he were the mother of the bride; on the second night, as if he were her little sister; and on the third night, as if he were her male cross-cousin: only then does he become her husband. (There is a joking relationship between cross-cousins, and the ideal marriage is between them). This means, of course, that the bridegroom must be gentle and motherly on the first night, and cheerful and willing to help on the second night; but it is remarkable that he must act as if he were a *woman* - sister or mother - during these two nights.

Before sunrise, the couple return to their camps, going back to the wedding tent at night. For seven days the tent will be empty during the day and only occupied by the couple at night. On the seventh day the side-mats are ceremoniously put back in the right position, and the tent is dismantled. The two spouses then move with their tent to the husband's family camp.

III

The bridegroom enters the tent by the northern side, which is both the male side and the side of the *jinn*. Let us consider first the fact that it is the male side. A woman gives birth on the southern side of the tent. A boy is thus born - as is a girl - at the southern end of his mother's tent. The name-giving

ritual³ feminizes a new-born boy. In particular, one of the two names he receives is chosen by his mother and is often a feminine word. In his mother's tent a small boy does not actually appear as a boy, and at puberty, when he begins to become a man, he leaves this tent. By entering the tent on the northern side, the bridegroom affirms himself as a husband, the man of the tent. The bride, on the contrary, enters the tent by the southern side, the side where she was born. Even if this tent is new for her, her status will remain the same as the one she had in the tent where she was born; her place of entrance marks this continuity.

On the other hand, the bridegroom is a guest in the tent he enters as a husband. This explains why he must wait for three nights before consummating the marriage. When asked about this custom, informants compare it with the following one. When a traveller comes to spend some days at a camp he must first spend three days (in Tamacheq, three nights) just outside it. During these three days the inhabitants of the camp do, of course, observe all the necessary requirements of hospitality. Women prepare food for him and men bring him tea. After these three days he takes his luggage and is admitted into the camp itself, where he can then share the same plate as the other men.

The fact that the bridegroom must act as a woman during the first two nights does not actually mean that he is in some sense feminized or that something feminine in him has to be expressed. On the contrary, it is because he is, for the first time in his life, acting as a man in a tent, that the female character of the tent is made apparent in this way. Acting as if he were a woman is the recognition he has to pay to the female character of the tent. It should be noted that all such restrictions imposed on him are, in a sense, counterbalanced. He has to make sure he will be the master of the tent: he must not have any of his jewellery snatched away, he must be the first to speak when he is alone with the bride, and so on. Something, therefore, is left to chance. His status in the tent is not quite secure.

Let us consider now the fact that the side by which the bridegroom enters the tent is also the side of the *jinni*. Informants compare the unusual orientation of the tent to the orientation of graves. There are two entrances to the wedding tent, one on the northern side and the other on the southern side. Although the bed itself has its usual orientation (west-east), informants compare the orientation of the entrances with the fact that the dead lie in their graves in a south-north direction.

Most informants merely comment on the henna-coating by saying that it is a pious custom recommended by the Prophet Mohammed. Henna coating is, indeed, quite common in the wedding ritual of other Berbers and among Moslems in general. However,

³ See D. Casajus, 1982.

some informants, after I had been in the field for years, discretely took me aside to tell me that the henna-coating in the wedding ritual had to be compared with the fact that the dead also had their hands and feet washed with henna. The orientation of the entrances (and the consequent fact that the bridegroom enters the tent by the northern side) and the henna-coating are thus evocative of funeral rituals. There is even a proverb saying that there are two wedding rituals: one in this world and one (the burial) in the next.

The reason for all these evocations of death is that, when entering the wedding tent, the spouses are, in fact, entering the tent where they will die. For the bridegroom it is a new tent, but not for the bride. One could object that upon marriage a woman enters the *camp* where she will die; but the Tuaregs consider that one dies in a tent and not in a camp. There are two reasons for saying this. First, except for those who die in war and are buried on the battlefield, a dead person receives the funeral rites in a tent. Of course this tent is situated in a camp, but here the second reason becomes apparent. Tuaregs say that after death, men (and women) become *jinn* who will always haunt the tent where they died. This tent is inherited matrilineally and so moves from one camp to another. One can thus say that for the Tuareg it is the tent and not the camp which is of greatest importance.

When entering the tent by the northern side, the bridegroom announces that he will some day, as a *jinni*, try to enter this tent by the same side. Of course, the bride will also try to enter the tent. But the marriage makes no difference for her as regards her relationship to the tent. The tent she enters upon marriage is essentially the same as the one in which she is living. However, divorce is frequent, and a man does not necessarily die in the tent where he married for the first time. Furthermore, it is at the occasion of his first marriage that the ritual is performed the most scrupulously. But he will have the same status in all the tents he will live in henceforth, one of those being the tent in which he will die. *He is not exactly entering a new tent, but a new status in the tent. He will still have that status in the tent in which he dies.* We have seen in our introduction that the tent, built on a cosmic model, has, in a sense, an eternal character. Now we encounter this eternal character again: the tent is the last place where human beings live in this world and the next.

According to informants, the wedding ritual is a prefiguration of death for the bride as much as for the bridegroom. If the ritual does not deal with each of them in the same way, it is because they do not have the same relationship with the tent in which they will die. Similarly, the henna-coating is for each of them - but in a different way - an evocation of their death. For the bride, coating her hands and feet with henna is quite normal, whereas marriage and death are the only occasions on which a man is coated with henna. Similarly, entering the nuptial tent is for the bride no different from entering the tent in

which she was born. Unlike the bridegroom, she has always been in proximity to her own death.

There is one last point to make here: at the same time as he enters the tent as a husband, the bridegroom effectively announces that he is entering a tent he will haunt (or a tent equivalent to the one he will haunt). One can now understand how the northern side of the tent is both his male side and its *jinn*-side.

The symbolic 'death' of the bridegroom has a further specific meaning for him. We remember that before she enters the wedding tent, the bride circles it three times. The bridegroom lies still and silent inside the tent. He is surrounded by his young friends. Each time they circle the tent, the friends of the bride address the men inside with the traditional Moslem greeting. The men do not answer the first time, and the girls are supposed to ask themselves: 'Are they all dead in this tent?' However, the men answer the second time, in a very low voice, and the third time they answer quite openly. Notice that this hint of death now concerns only the bridegroom and his friends. Furthermore, these three circuits around the tent are compared by informants to the following custom. When one passes the grave of a holy man, one should circle it three times in order to receive the *albaraka* of the saint lying there. *Albaraka* derives from the Arabic *baraka*, and means 'divine blessing'. A man has not, of himself, any *baraka*. He can only be the means through which Allah chooses to display His *baraka*. Here, the bridegroom is again considered similar to a dead person, even to a dead holy man. In this comparison, of course, the bridegroom's friends are in the tent with him when the bride circles around it, and are thus associated with him. But during the ritual they are called the 'bridegrooms' (conversely, the bride's friends are not called the 'brides') and so considered as similar to him. It is only insofar as they are similar to him that they have access to the same dignity as him. Some of his temporary saintliness spreads around him and reaches them. *Baraka* is in some ways synonymous with fertility. So the bridegroom, although he is 'as dead', and although he does not act as a man at this time, he is the means through which Allah gives fertility to the tent and to the bride circling it.

The analysis of songs accompanying the slaughter of a bull can reinforce this interpretation. I shall not enter into details here. Let me just point out that, in these songs, the bull is regarded as similar to the bridegroom and has a divine character. This is not as surprising as it might seem at first, for it is yet another indication of the bridegroom's symbolic death. The bull is similar to the bridegroom and has a divine character; this does not mean that the bridegroom has any divine character, but simply that he is the instrument of Allah, the means through which Allah has chosen to display his *baraka* to the tent.

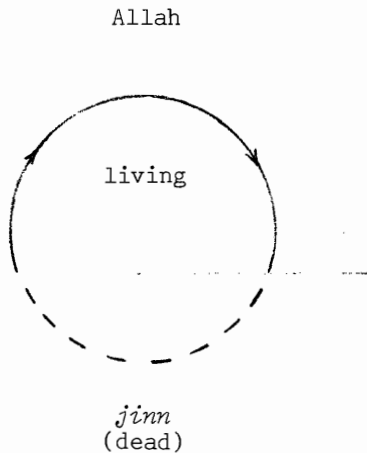
We can conclude this specific point as follows. The wedding ritual announces to the bride and bridegroom that they will die

in the tent they are entering. For the bridegroom, this assumes an especially dramatic meaning. Moreover, in another part of the ritual the bridegroom is regarded as similar to a dead holy man. This has the consequence of bringing fertility, or life, to the tent. Here the bridegroom has a quite passive role, like holy men, whose *baraka* spreads passively from their graves.

This can balance our previous statements. The bridegroom is a guest in the tent he is entering, and he is strongly reminded that he will die in this tent, which is a little humiliating for him. The fact that he has to enter the tent almost crawling emphasizes this humiliation. (The bride does not have to crawl but is carried inside). At the same time, however, this symbolic death gives him the opportunity to bring Allah's *baraka* into the tent. His death is in a sense necessary for the tent to reproduce itself. It is the reason why, though the bride is entering a tent which is already hers, she can only enter it *after* the bridegroom.

Here arises a problem. We have on two different occasions spoken of the dead. We have seen them as *jinn*, malevolent spirits wandering in deserted areas, and we have seen them as holy men, intermediaries between Allah and human beings. In two different episodes of the ritual the bridegroom has been considered similar to each of these two kinds of the dead in turn; this is contradictory, unless we can find further explanations.

I have shown elsewhere⁴ that at their birth, also, the Tuaregs are similar to the *jinn*. They thus come from the world of the *jinn* and return to it when they die. The human condition is viewed in this way, as a sort of circular travel from the world of *jinn* and back to it. We can symbolize this travel as follows.



⁴ *Ibid.*

Part of the circle is drawn as a dotted line because there is no belief that men are reincarnated, as is the case in other societies. Even during their lives, men are very close to *jinn*, having to make efforts to distinguish themselves from them and to escape their malevolence. But there is a space transcending that dramatic confrontation between living and dead (*jinn*), and it is Allah who occupies it. If the human condition is an eternal confrontation between living and dead, Allah, who is eternal, has no part in this confrontation and transcends it.

It is sometimes offered to humans to partake of this transcendence. This is the case, very temporarily, for the bridegroom; it is the case for some holy men; it is also the case for all the dead, during the days or the weeks following their death. In fact, as long as the dead are not forgotten and some of those living remember their name, one cannot be sure that they actually are *jinn*. One cannot say: 'So-and-so is a *jinni*.' One can only say in a very general way: 'Dead people are *jinn*.' Only anonymous dead are certainly *jinn*. There is no genealogical memory, and only when the dead men enter the anonymous mass of ancestors are they likely to become *jinn*. Some holy men, because of the pious memory the living have of them, escape this oblivion. Perhaps they are *jinn*, but who knows? Certainly, however, when one pronounces their name or circles piously around their graves, or practises certain sacrifices near their graves, one does not view them as *jinn*.

I still have to comment on the mock struggle around the tent between men and women. The principal form of exchange inside the tribe is marriage. Marriage can be considered an exchange in which camels (bridewealth) are given by one side and a tent, a woman, sheep and slaves (dowry) are given by the other. War, and especially feuding, can also be considered an exchange in which men riding camels bring slaves and cattle back to their tribe. War can thus be viewed as an extension outside the tribe of the exchange within it. From this point of view, there is some analogy between war and marriage, and the mock struggle between men and women around the tent is a hint of that analogy. As I have said, men and women face each other, regardless of their kinship relations, as if they were strangers, just as warriors face one another as strangers on the battle-field.

But of course the analogy cannot be complete. In point of fact, the mock struggle around the tent hints at war in a very special way. Men frequently attacked camps during feuds, entering the tents and snatching jewellery from the women inside (and sometimes worse). In the case of the mock struggle, it is women who are besieging the tent and trying to grasp the jewellery of the man inside. I have said that women are the tent custodians, but in this ritual, men act as if *they* were tent custodians. There is at the same time a hint of the feud and a complete reversal, which corresponds to the reversal actually existing between war and marriage. Men killed in war are buried

on the battle-field. They do not return to their country to haunt the tent of their wives. Marriage introduces a man into the tent in which he will die. It supplies the tent with future dead. War, on the contrary, takes men away from the tents. In war, men take death outside and are taken away from the tents. We could say that men receive death through marriage, if not from women, at least from the tents. This is probably what informants are referring to when they explicitly compare the bridegroom entering the wedding tent with a man entering a hyena lair.

To conclude, let me point out that this short study is, at a quite modest level, a confirmation of one of Robert Hertz's intuitions. In my attempt to understand the wedding ritual of the Tuareg, I found myself compelled to speak of death as well as marriage. In this paradoxical situation one is reminded of Robert Hertz's words: 'Death is not originally conceived as a unique event without any analogue'.⁵ Certainly in the Tuareg case marriage is the first step towards death.

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⁵ R. Hertz, 'Contribution à une étude sur la représentation collective de la mort' [*L'Année sociologique*, 1907], in *Death and the Right Hand* [trans. R. and C. Needham], ed. R. Needham, London: Cohen & West 1963, at p.81.