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WHY DO THE TUAREG VEIL THEIR FACES?

IN ORDER to illustrate the utility in anthropology of the concept of levels, I have deemed it appropriate to return to the origin of the notion in Dumont's work, rather than merely applying a schema. Dumont first uses the word in his discussion of the relation between status and power in Indian civilization (1966: 107). Whereas castes are ranked according to purity, *varna* are ordered by an entirely different principle. In the *varna* model, the Kshatriyas follow Brahmans and precede the Vaishyas, even though some customs of the warrior castes are less pure than those of the trader castes. The observer may perceive a contradiction in this situation. According to Dumont, this contradiction results from the fact that the main values may vary in their expression. If the value of purity always prevailed, the Kshatriyas would not be superior to Vaishyas. However, other, less eminent, values can counterbalance purity. A society may in certain contexts emphasise values which in other contexts it subordinates, a possibility which leads Dumont to speak of levels. A level, as he seems to use the term, is a set of contexts in which a given order of values is expressed, and the level is opposed to other sets of contexts expressing other values.

Dumont's interpretation of levels and values guides the present study of the Tuareg institution of the veiling of men.¹ The following analysis concerns

I am most grateful to Brenda Miller, who has translated the French version of this paper into English.

1. Murphy (1964) has proposed an interpretation of the Tuareg veiling, but this is not the place to discuss this analysis. I shall say only that it uses a very broad notion of 'social distance', which does not take into account the ethnographic specificity of the institution. In particular, it does not explain why the women do not veil themselves, even though they must, like men, keep some 'social distance'; nor does it explain the links between the veil and manhood, or between the veil and the *kəl əsuf* (see below).

material collected in a group of northern Niger tribes, the Kel Ferwan.² Male veiling is of central importance to the Tuareg, who define themselves as 'those who wear the veil'. They attribute two contradictory origins to the custom. This paper aims to explain this contradiction. I will turn first to a description of veiling and its ritual context, where another 'contradiction' corresponds to that in the mythical origins of the veil.

The Rituals

The rituals cannot be understood without referring to the conception the Tuareg have of the dead. The dead have a twofold nature. The Tuareg say that after their death, men and women become what they call *aljinn* (from the Arabic *jinn*) or *kəl əsuf*. *Kəl əsuf* are malevolent spirits who roam deserted areas.³ A dead man, as a *kəl əsuf*, always haunts the tent in which he died and received funeral rites. But one never says, 'The late so-and-so is a *kəl əsuf*'; one only says in a vague and general way, 'Dead people are *kəl əsuf*.' Only the anonymous dead are clearly *kəl əsuf*, or at least only they are viewed as such.

Genealogical memory does not extend very far, and the names of the dead are forgotten after one or two generations, whereupon they enter the mass of anonymous *kəl əsuf*. However, because of the pious memory the living have of them, some holy men escape that oblivion. Far from being considered *kəl əsuf*, they are presumed to be the means through which God displays his blessing, his *albaraka*. Any man who circles around the grave of such a holy man is likely to receive such a divine blessing. These holy men may, perhaps, take on the appearance of *kəl əsuf* and leave their graves nightly to haunt the tents of the living, but at least when one evokes their memory by piously circling round their graves, one does not regard them as *kəl əsuf*. During the years or months following their burial, the other dead are likely to display divine blessing to a lesser degree, but unlike holy men, their names are quickly forgotten and they lose this quality.

Thus one can conclude that oblivion turns the dead into malevolent spirits, while those whose names have not (or not as yet) been forgotten are on the contrary benevolent ancestors. It is not clear whether or not the latter sometimes appear as *kəl əsuf*. A statement such as 'so-and-so is a *kəl əsuf*' is meaningless. On the other hand, a new-born child is considered similar to the *kəl əsuf*, and even as being one of them. The name-giving ritual is intended to draw him from the

2. For a general description of the Kel Ferwan Tuareg, see Nicolaisen 1963.

3. The Tuareg *aljinn* or *kəl əsuf* have some features in common with the Arabic *jinn*, as described by the Koran and classical authors (see for instance Al Mas'oudi 1962, vol. ii: 451). But they differ in that the Tuareg say that the *kəl əsuf* are the dead. I shall be using the plural form *kəl əsuf*, 'those of the *əsuf*' (the singular is *ag əsuf*, 'son of the *əsuf*'). *əsuf* means first the 'deserted areas' which the *kəl əsuf* are always roaming, and also 'loneliness' and, approximately, 'spleen'.

realm of the *kəl əsuf* he comes from, and to place him in society (see Casajus 1982).

Thus the human condition is viewed as a sort of circular journey, out of the world of the *kəl əsuf* and back into it again. The attribution of a name draws men from this world and its obliteration returns them to it. In this journey, men are never far from the *kəl əsuf* and always have to guard themselves against them (see Figure 1). Education chiefly consists of learning to deal with proximity to the *kəl əsuf*. An old man is supposed to have greater ability to deal with that proximity than a young man, and greater ability still than a child.

These brief remarks will enable us to account for some aspects of the wedding and name-giving rituals. The wedding ritual mainly focuses on the wedding tent, which will become the tent of the newly-married couple. This tent belongs to the wife, since tents are transmitted from mother to daughter, and a woman's tent and that of her mother are considered more or less identical, almost as being a single tent (for more details, see Casajus 1981). Women are sometimes called 'the tents', and a man can call his wife 'his tent'. When a young child enters puberty, he no longer consents to live in his mother's tent and has to build some precarious shelter in the bush. He will not live in a tent again until he marries, and then his status will not be the same as it was in his mother's tent; he will only be a guest and will always run the risk of being deprived of a tent should there be a divorce. Marriage can be considered as the moment when a man enters a tent belonging to a stranger. In fact, to marry, for a man, is 'to make a tent'. Marriage can also be considered as the passage of a woman from one camp to another, since the camp is a patrilocal unit, but we will see that it is the former point of view which prevails.

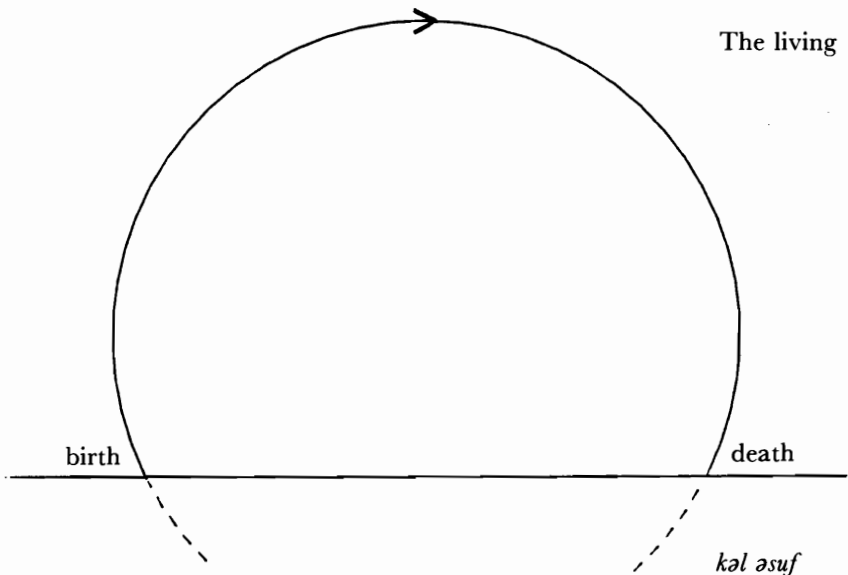


Figure 1

The north side of the tent is considered masculine. It is also the side by which the *kəl əsuf* can attack. The south side of the tent is feminine, and is also the side where women give birth to their children. The wedding tent is not erected in the usual way, the entrances being not in the western and eastern sides, but in the northern and southern sides. The bride enters by the southern entrance and the bridegroom by the northern entrance. Informants compare the unusual orientation of the entrances of the wedding tent to orientation in the grave, where the dead lie in a south-north direction, and they compare other episodes of the wedding ritual to certain funeral rituals. These evocations of death illustrate that, when entering the wedding tent, the bride and bridegroom are entering the tent in which they will die and which they will haunt after their death.

This evocation does not have the same meaning for the bride as for the bridegroom. He enters a tent which for him is a new one, while the bride enters a tent which is identical to the one in which she was born. There is a transition for the former, but not for the latter. This seems to explain why the bride must enter the wedding tent by the southern side and the bridegroom by the northern side. The former enters the tent by the side where she was born, an indication that her status will remain the same as that she had formerly, in the tent of her birth. The bridegroom, also born on the 'feminine' side of the tent of his birth, enters the wedding tent by its 'masculine' side, illustrating that for the first time in his life he will be in a tent as a man. The northern side of the tent is also the side threatened by the *kəl əsuf*, and in fact the bridegroom is entering the tent he will haunt. His wife will haunt it too, but in her case the marriage makes no difference—she is not *entering* it in the same sense, that is, for the first time.⁴

Men and women do not have the same status in the journey which leads them from the world of the *kəl əsuf* and back to it. The closeness between a man and the *kəl əsuf* is made apparent at least once in his life, at the very moment he enters the wedding tent; for a woman, this closeness remains more discreet.

In the journey which brings men back to the realm of the *kəl əsuf*, every man is in a sense an intermediary between the *kəl əsuf* and his son-in-law.

$$\begin{array}{l} B \Delta = \emptyset B' \\ A \Delta = \emptyset A' \end{array}$$

A and B will die in the same tent, or at least in two tents which are considered identical, the tent of B' and the tent of A'. B will die in and haunt a tent in which A will later die. In this sense, B shows A the path he will have to follow. This point is emphasised by some details in the wedding ritual.

I have stated that some dead men are the means through which God gives his blessing to the living. By their mediation, the living partake of a reality which has nothing to do with the confrontation between society and the *kəl əsuf*. In the same way, although the bridegroom is considered similar to the *kəl əsuf* in one

4. It is true that she is entering a new camp, but it is the tent that must be referred to because it is the tent, not the camp, that she will haunt (see Casajus 1983).

episode of the wedding ritual, in another episode he resembles the dead holy men. In the latter he lies still and silent in the wedding tent, whereas the bride circles around it. He is the means through which God gives his blessing to the wedding tent and renders it fertile. God is also supposed to intervene in the choice of the new-born's name: a Muslim cleric chooses the name, with the help of God. The very attribution of the name is supposed to draw the child from the realm of the *kəl əsuf*. Men, being so close to the *kəl əsuf*, cannot choose the name by themselves; only God, who is eternal, can do so, since he has no part in the confrontation between the living and the dead. In all three situations a reality which exists beyond this confrontation manifests itself and makes possible the journey I have spoken of. It allows children to be born, it allows the tent to be fertile, and it allows certain dead men to become benevolent towards the living. God allows life to spring from death, but only in so far as he is a remote and transcendent divinity.

The Veil

The wearing of the veil is first of all considered to be a way of showing what the Tuareg call one's *takarakayt* (reserve) and *asshak* (dignity). *Takarakayt* mainly governs the relations between a man and his son-in-law or father-in-law and is associated with connotations of fear. *Asshak* is a closely similar, but wider notion, consisting principally of a parsimonious use of words. Tuareg are men of few words, and they express themselves only by hints and understatements. Informants sometimes say that a man veils his forehead by *takarakayt*, and his mouth by *asshak*. Furthermore, the veil is also a means of protecting oneself from the *kəl əsuf*; and finally, it is a sign of piety. Women too are expected to show reserve and dignity (though to a lesser degree perhaps) and to protect themselves from the *kəl əsuf*, and they are also supposed to show some piety. But they do not veil themselves in the strict fashion that men do, only hiding a part of their hair. Thus the Tuareg do not attribute the same value to the female veil as they do to the male, and indeed men are generally called 'the veils'. This brings us to ask what there is about a man that imposes upon him a greater display of *takarakayt* and *asshak*, as protection against the *kəl əsuf* and as a sign of piety.

Let me first point out that *takarakayt*, as I have already indicated, is linked with affinity. Every man must adopt the veil at about twenty years of age, when grown up and likely to marry, since only a man who is already veiled can marry. The moment when a man adopts the veil is marked by a seven-day period of claustration, as is the wedding itself. This and other evidence shows the link between the wearing of the veil and the status of husband or potential husband.

The mouth must be strictly veiled. In particular, a man is supposed to hide his mouth from his female cross-cousins because, it is said, it is not appropriate to show one's mouth to a potential wife. Here again, the veil is linked with the status of potential husband. But why such stress on hiding the mouth and what connection might this have with this status, and with manhood?

To understand this, we have to know that when a young man begins to have nocturnal emissions (the Tuareg say, when he 'begins to dream'), he must begin to think about wearing a veil. The word for sperm is *imendghas*, but frequently the terms *aman*, 'water', and *aman n elis*, 'man's water', are used. In some myths, water and sperm are likened to each other. The theme of women impregnated by water occurs frequently in Tuareg and Berber mythology (see Ibn Khaldoun 1978, vol. i: 205, 278). *Aman* can refer to several kinds of liquid, including saliva, though the specific word for saliva is *iladän*. This indication allows us to make an association between veiling the mouth and virility. Although the indication in itself is a weak one, it cannot be neglected because semen and saliva are comparable not only in that they are both kinds of 'water', but also in that both, as well as water itself, may conceal *käl əsuf*, or at least be closely associated with them. In some myths telling of women being impregnated by water, it is the *käl əsuf* that provide the impregnating power. Similarly, muttering appropriate words over the food and drink someone is about to consume serves to incite the *käl əsuf* to act against him. In this context, the *Käl əsuf* are not only associated with saliva, but with the spoken word as well, since speech is considered a vehicle for their action. It is now possible for us to understand that as well as symbolising a kind of refinement, moderation in speech, which is a sign of behaviour dominated by *asshak*, shows concern for not exposing one's fellow man to the evil of the *käl əsuf*. Finally, the mythical hero Amerolqis illustrates a certain association between sperm, speech and the *käl əsuf*. The Kel Ferwan are familiar with the name Amerolqis, although they are less familiar with his deeds than are other neighbouring tribes (see Aghali and Drouin 1979). Amerolqis is said to have invented poetry, and it is the poetic word more than any other which implies the action of the *käl əsuf*. Amerolqis is also said to have had such powerful virility that his semen could flow over the ground or in the waters of rivers.

A man therefore wears a veil as though, once his sperm is ready to flow, any analogous flow of saliva or spoken words from him also has to be feared, all of which have in common the fact that they bring about the action of the *käl əsuf*. It is not so much that a man's mouth has something to do with his virility, rather that the closeness of the *käl əsuf* is apparent in both. We have already noted a man's closeness to the *käl əsuf*; as he enters the wedding tent from the northern side, he is seen as being similar to them. A young man whose virility is awakened, and even more so a man who is of an age to consider marriage, are nearing the time when their closeness to the *käl əsuf*—which for a woman remains discreet—will be apparent to all; it is this imminent closeness that must be veiled. Certainly, speech and saliva are dangerous elements in both men and women, but a woman is not obliged to keep her mouth veiled because as far as she is concerned the danger is not made more potent by the appearance of proximity to the *käl əsuf*, as it is in the case of a man.

While women are the custodians of tents and are sometimes called 'those of the tent', men are called 'veils'. The veils men wear symbolise the fact that they do not have a tent of their own, that they are born on the southern side of one tent and will one day enter the northern side of another. They begin to wear a veil occasionally when they leave the first tent (their mother's tent), but adopt it

permanently when they are old enough to enter the second tent, which is generally that in which they will die.

The older a man becomes, the more he counts in society, and the less chance he has of being associated—as is a new-born child—with *kəl əsuf*. Only if he uses his speech and virility improperly is he as dangerous as they are. Words spoken with care, saliva that is not spat out (as in the magical practices mentioned above) and semen which is not allowed to flow carelessly, as Amerolqis is said to do, are in themselves not dangerous. They are present, however, ready to flow, and carry the weight of a latent danger from which one must protect one's fellow man. In the final analysis the veil a man wears is a means of saving him from anticipating his future destiny in a negative way.

This may appear to contradict the statement that the veil protects its wearer from dangers to which the *kəl əsuf* may subject him. Proximity to the *kəl əsuf* means both fearing them and being feared by others. As a symbol of a certain closeness between a man and the *kəl əsuf*, the veil is designed to protect him from them, and to spare others the dangers that may come from him. Perhaps we may suggest a systematic approach similar to the one the Tuareg themselves propose. The lower portion of the veil protects others by ensuring that a veiled man's words are not spoken carelessly, while the upper portion of the veil protects his hair from being within the reach of the *kəl əsuf*, since it is by the hair that the *kəl əsuf* often try to come in contact with men. This would appear to be in keeping with the fact that *asshak* (which compels a man to veil his mouth) involves speaking with reserve, and *takarakayt* (which compels a man to veil his forehead) is above all associated with connotations of fear.

It is understandable that a man must veil himself in the most strict fashion before his son-in-law or his father-in-law. My father-in-law, who will die before me in a tent close to the one in which I will die, stands between me and the *kəl əsuf*. In looking in his direction I am, as it were, looking in the direction of the *kəl əsuf*. With regard to his closeness to the *kəl əsuf*, I am protecting myself with the veil, and vice versa.

The Veil and Joking Relationships

Although a man wears a veil in front of his son-in-law or his father-in-law, he may appear unveiled before his male cross-cousins. Cross-cousins have a joking relationship and one of the most common forms of joking is pulling off a cross-cousin's veil. This clearly contradicts the foregoing, and examination of it should therefore be situated in the context of the various forms of joking between cross-cousins.

A cross-cousin can also be pushed to the ground; his grave may be stepped on, and on the day of his funeral, his family may be asked to postpone the burial. Informants have made it clear that no one has ever dared to engage in the latter two types of 'joking'. However, they state that they are nonetheless acceptable,

and readily mention them to illustrate just how far joking among cross-cousins can go.⁵ If the above reasoning is correct, that is, that being veiled means concealing the fact that my future destiny is to become one of the *kəl əsuf*, then becoming unveiled, which my cross-cousin can force upon me, must mean displaying that destiny. It is this consideration which appears to be the common denominator in joking behaviour among cross-cousins: to push a man to the ground is to put him in close contact with the *kəl əsuf*, since the ground is their domain. Similarly, the dead who appear as *kəl əsuf* are those who, instead of remaining in their grave where they can potentially diffuse their *albaraka*, come out among the living. Thus to postpone the burial of a cross-cousin is to make him resemble the dead who have left their grave, the *kəl əsuf*. To step on his grave—instead of piously walking around it as one does around the grave of the dead who dispense *albaraka*—is again to make him resemble the dead who do not dispense *albaraka*, again, that is, the *kəl əsuf*.

What is unveiled amid laughter among cross-cousins is veiled by fear in interactions between a son-in-law and a father-in-law. This can be understood by the fact that two cross-cousins are born respectively of a sister and her brother, the latter having to leave a tent close to her and enter another in order to take a wife (and who therefore appears similar to the *kəl əsuf*). They originate from a man who moves from one tent to another, and thus makes his closeness to the *kəl əsuf* apparent. The implication of their mutual joking seems to be: 'What good is there hiding our common closeness to the *kəl əsuf* from each other? We know how close we both are to them. Doesn't the very fact that a man makes the closeness apparent by changing tents during the course of his life explain the fact that we are cross-cousins?' Clearly a father-in-law knows as much about this as does his son-in-law, but he is not his equal in this matter. Cross-cousins joke among themselves like equals in the face of the *kəl əsuf*. It is because one is closer to the *kəl əsuf* than the other that the father-in-law and the son-in-law hide this closeness from each other.

The Muslim Veil

We have seen that the veil recalls the closeness between men and the *kəl əsuf*, or rather, that men do not move toward the *kəl əsuf* in the same manner as women. Certain myths, admittedly collected in Ahaggar, Algeria, seem to confirm these analyses to a certain extent, since they all present variations on the following themes. Women were impregnated by the *kəl əsuf*, but the children they gave birth to were so ugly that they veiled their faces. These children were none other than the first Tuareg, and the Tuareg practice of veiling the face dates back to that time (Lesourd 1954: 33; Hama 1967: 125). We have stated that men also veil their faces as an expression of piety. When informants comment on this

5. Other types of joking exist, but because of their lesser importance we can neglect them here.

aspect of wearing a veil they speak about other traditions that differ greatly from those mentioned previously. According to these they veil their faces to imitate the Prophet Mohammed, or King Solomon (*ennebi Sulāyman*, the 'prophet' Solomon), whom they consider to be Mohammed's spiritual predecessor.

The fact that the veil can have two different and even contradictory putative origins is a mythical expression of a 'contradiction' which has already been revealed in this paper. When the bridegroom enters the wedding tent by the northern side, he resembles the *kāl əsuf*. When he is lying inside the tent, he resembles those dead who are remembered for their great piety. Few men conduct their lives with the exemplary piety which spares them from being forgotten, the lot common to their fellow men. But when in the wedding tent all men are as much the instrument of God as the venerated dead, even though few will be counted among the pious after their death. The veil is a symbol both of the closeness between men and the *kāl əsuf*, which becomes apparent when they enter the wedding tent, and of the dignity which, once lying in the tent, they share with the most pious of the dead. A man who is of an age to marry must veil that closeness and demonstrate that he will soon reach that dignity. The double nature of the status of husband which is comparable to the double nature of the veil is an expression of a more global situation. If the movement of men is possible from the realm of *kāl əsuf* and then back to it—rituals bear witness to this—it is because society sometimes has access to a space that transcends that movement. The veil reminds men of the inexorable nature of that movement, and of the opportunity they are sometimes given to attain another reality.

The wearing of the veil therefore has two references. One must be considered superior, since it is only because men sometimes have access to a space transcending their ordinary condition that they can continue to live despite the malevolence of the *kāl əsuf*. The human condition must deal with both references. We may speak here of levels, since the values, or at least the preoccupations involved in the two references, are different and even contradictory. In certain circumstances men must deal with their closeness to the *kāl əsuf*. In other circumstances they must deal with God. The best illustration of this double requirement is the situation of the bridegroom who in one episode of the wedding is similar to a *kāl əsuf* and in another episode becomes an instrument of God. References to the two levels are concentrated in the wearing of the veil, which explains its two contradictory putative origins. When the veil refers to proximity to the *kāl əsuf*, it reveals an unworthy origin. When it refers to a space beyond the confrontation of men and *kāl əsuf*, it shows a glorious origin. But even in this case, the inferior level is not forgotten. For the Tuareg, King Solomon is an exemplary Muslim, but in many Arabic legends, of which the Tuareg are also aware, he appears to be close to the *jinn* (Basset 1888). The importance of the notion of transcendence should therefore be stressed—in India too *dharma* occupies a transcendent position—and we should be sure that when we speak of 'levels' in any given situation, some form of transcendence is involved.

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