

**Kohl, Ines:** *Beautiful Modern Nomads. Bordercrossing Tuareg between Niger, Algeria, and Libya.* Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2009. 142 pp., photos. ISBN 978-3-496-02821-5. Price: € 35.00

This interesting study of a Saharan Tamajaq-speaking people, most widely known as the Tuareg, who are traditionally socially-stratified, seminomadic stockbreeders, and Muslims, situates them in modernity. The book focuses specifically upon one important group within, but also on the periphery of Tuareg society: a cohort consisting of several recent generations locally perceived as youthful and rebellious, popularly glossed as *ishumar*, who intermittently travel between countries around the Sahara seeking remunerative work and satisfying sociality. These youths' migrations differ from their culture's more long-standing practices of nomadic livestock herding and caravan trade. They have been displaced from their traditional livelihoods back home by upheavals of drought and armed conflicts in northern Niger and Mali. Swept from their homes, fleeing unemployment, and in some cases, political violence, they practice various types of labor migration, itinerant trading, and other seasonal work in the informal economy, often continuing to wander across the desert border areas between their home countries and Libya and Algeria, and sometimes settling down there for varying and unpredictable periods. They are not, however, lacking in identity or affiliation, for they also produce a rich popular culture of their own, for example, a genre of poetry, song, and guitar music expressive of their experience, a distinctive "twist" on conventional Tuareg dress, and a simultaneous pride in and questioning of some older cultural values.

The experience of this group emerges in this sensitive ethnography as much more than an economic quest of labor migrants (though that, too, is important). For even as they become uprooted, these "bordercrossers" recreate enduring and satisfying social ties and cultural identities during their journeys. Kohl, with the assistance of her local consultant and spouse, Akidima Effad, approaches the subject with respect and empathy, but does not over-romanticize it. The book is the product of several years of residence and research in Libya and Niger, and draws on memories and narratives of the travelers, as well as visits and participant observation in more settled households.

The book shows contradictions and challenges inherent in the nomadic lifestyle of the Tuareg who are constantly on the move between countries, cultures, and identities. Some aspects of their situation recall, for this reader, that of the Roma (Gypsies), who are compelled to wander, albeit in a sense quite distinct from nomadic pastoralism. Kohl argues that these bordercrossing Tuareg are in a marginal yet mediating position, in their peripheral but also transcultural lifestyles, moving between different streams of cultural influence. Their new mobility is marked by dispossession, vulnerability but also opportunity at a crossroads of time and space, demanding resourcefulness and creativity. Longstanding Tuareg cultural aesthetics for example, emphasizing beauty in dress and grooming remain important, but they also become modified to suit current economic conditions. Similarly,

interiors of new residences in some ways reflect older nomadic arrangements of space and architecture, but in other ways, they are transformed to reflect new lifestyles. On the one hand, this way of life requires foresight, but on the other, there is also a focus on "living for the day," enjoying the immediate pleasures as these come their way. For example, no expense is spared on beautiful accessories, regardless of how meager or uncertain one's income. Yet these more global Tuareg do not merely produce a hybrid of the cultures of home and abroad. Rather, they constantly rearrange their surroundings to suit different purposes. Theirs is also a new kind of settlement: where and how long one remains in a place, and attachment to a house are not essential values, but depend on nation-state politics and personal needs. Thus, the book offers rich insights into Tuareg and other cultural identities as processual, practiced, and in flux.

The book also reveals much about Africa in general. The Sahara, notwithstanding its sporadic droughts, locust-invasions, famines, and wars, is not an isolated or desolate emptiness or barrier. Rather, it is a crossroads and meeting-place – somewhat like an ocean with ports of call. Some of these "modern nomads" also become, for varying time periods, settled in expatriate communities who marry and have families, but they tend to become only partially integrated into their new communities – not as immigrants in the conventional sense but as guests on an indefinite visit. The external living conditions and the personal sentiments of these Tuareg are vividly described in the book, and richly illustrated with relevant photographs. Their condition is precarious, at times dangerous, but also hopeful. In this, the bordercrossing Tuareg are compelled to constantly improvise and reassess their strategies, resembling the figure that Lévi-Strauss called *bricoleur*, a kind of "general handy-person," who makes most of the tools at hand rather than operating from a priori theories or rigid ideologies.

This book is an important contribution to contemporary Tuareg ethnography. The data convincingly support the author's identification of the *ishumar* as a salient social group with a sense of self-identity and a culture. Still, some issues merit further study. One wonders whether there is always as much solidarity as portrayed, and whether there is more conflict than portrayed, and what sort. For nowadays there is greater heterogeneity and variation, both among the Tuareg bordercrossers and among the Tuareg "at home," than was the case earlier, just prior to and during the two recent Tuareg rebellions (1990–96 and 2007), when many outside observers tended to conflate all youthful exiles and refugees with the Tuareg rebel fighters, and assumed a unity produced by the combat experience. Precisely how representative of Tuareg society as a whole are the *ishumar* today? In this account, there are only hints of some diverging interests among the bordercrossers, for example, economic competition between those of smith/artisan background and those of aristocratic descent. What happens to the ideal value of reciprocity under these circumstances? Also, what are some attitudes expressed by other Tuareg (not just by other ethnicities and state policies) toward these bordercrossers? Indeed,

“modern nomads” are not the only “modern” Tuareg nor are they replacing them; other Tuareg are also constructing their own versions of modernity.

Other issues raised concern the broader context. The use of direct quotes throughout the text has value but also limitations. These personal narratives are crucial in order to convey the subjective viewpoints of the narrators. But this reader would appreciate some wider contextualization of these quotations; for example, why only Tuareg, not other African travelers, were permitted to enter Libya. Indeed, the Tuareg experiences in Libya appear to be more positive, and some historical and political background on this would explain this to nonspecialist readers. Other questions pertain to gender. Although both women and men appear in this account, many, though not all, of the voices here are male. Although it is true that initially the *ishumar* experience was male-dominated, nowadays women are increasingly among them, and many Tuareg women have always enjoyed high social prestige and economic independence. What are some effects of different cultural gender constructs on relations between the sexes?

In conclusion, this book is highly insightful and would be most rewarding to read by scholars in African, Saharan, and Middle Eastern Studies, social/cultural anthropology, cultural studies, and globalization studies.

Susan J. Rasmussen

**Kürti, László, and Peter Skalník** (eds.): *Postsocialist Europe. Anthropological Perspectives from Home*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2009. 326 pp. ISBN 978-1-84545-474-6. (EASA, 10) Price: \$ 85.00

It is the ambition of this volume to theorize postsocialism *from within* (6). To this end, the edited volume offers eleven contributions by anthropologists from Central and Eastern Europe (some of whom are returnee anthropologists) who had lived through and studied social change for many years. These scholars bring new perspectives to the debate around postsocialism by virtue of the fact that they are engaged in what Muršič calls “permanent ethnography” (201). Seeking to dispel the myth that Eastern European anthropology is parochial and centered on folkloric research, the volume showcases rich ethnographies that spell out the connections between local and global processes and provide insight into new social hierarchies and marginalities. The editors argue that “Western” anthropologists have often overlooked or even dismissed local scholars’ analyses of postsocialism. Muršič argues that while local scholars are enjoined to express themselves and their views, when their contributions fail to remain within certain parameters, they become “incomprehensible” to Western scholars, which in turn confirms the stereotype of “backward” Eastern Europeans (200).

The contributors to the volume challenge the concept of “postsocialism” by demonstrating, first of all, how the configurations of change may vary substantially from country to country, so that speaking of a single “transition” may not be all that useful. In their introduction, Kürti and Skalník also remind us that local populations mobilized for change starting in the late eighties, and thus

played an active role in bringing about the process of transition. There has been a tendency in Western academia to portray local populations as “victims” of transition, as well as to focus on the negative impact of capitalist developments. Instead of concentrating exclusively on the injustice and social schisms brought about by the encounter with capitalism, the contributors examine some of the positive effects brought about by capitalism, including improvements to everyday life by foreign companies that have operated, if not perfectly, at least ethically (see the contribution by Kürti). The volume also seeks to move away from what the editors point out as a tendency among Western scholars to see all social problems as caused by the transitional period. The chapter by Nagy, for example, explores how social problems such as poverty and homelessness did exist under state socialism and are merely taking on new forms under capitalism.

The chapters in the volume provide different perspectives on the way the socialist past enters the present. For example, Červinková writes about Czech military cadres and their continued identification with Soviet technology in the context of NATO military reforms, while Skalník examines continuity in the political culture of Czech citizens. Stoiciu notes that Romanian workers in multinationals invoke the sense of security they felt when employed by state-owned enterprises. Although the editors of the volume wish to challenge the notion of a “socialist *legacy*,” the kind of language used by some of the contributors in talking about continuity, e.g., “identity,” “culture” or “political culture,” “mentality,” seem to suggest instead essences or engrained dispositions that hinder people’s ability to move on. Perhaps more critical use of these terms, or the use of concepts that suggest process and negotiation, would have offered a stronger challenge to the notion of “legacy” while also doing justice to the contributors’ rich accounts of change.

Some of the contributions remind us of the important fact that the socialist experience in Eastern and Central Europe is the experience of *negotiating* socialism, so that the practices that enter the present in one form or another may at times be those associated with resistance to socialist rule. As Bitušková and Košťalová observe in their chapter on Slovakian women and political participation, Western feminists who came after the collapse of the socialist bloc were intent on educating local women about the domestic sphere as a realm of patriarchal exploitation. These feminists were unaware that the home meant something different to women in Eastern Europe and that it was construed as a realm of relative autonomy and relative freedom from the intrusions of the state.

The contributors to the volume also ask how the experienced (and imagined) *presocialist* past enters the equation, especially in countries that experienced a relatively short socialist period. In his article on property relations in Poland, Buchowski reminds us that the Soviet period might not have been the most meaningful in terms of shaping Polish attitudes toward property ownership. He claims that when it comes to land, the “transition” in Poland is not about bridging the gap between collectivism and private property, but rather about a *return*, at the