The Road from Abalak

Heat, Wind, Dust, Fear

PETER CHILSON

Early on Christmas morning I stood with hundreds of people on a roadside in Abalak, a town in southern central Niger, West Africa, on the edge of the Sahara. I remember the peculiar fine dust, like talcum, that arrived on a cool wind and dyed the air a dirty gray. The harmattan, the Saharan winter wind, had been blowing from the northeast since November, hard enough to fill the sky with dust but not strongly enough to carry sand. Fine grit coated everything, including the fatigues of the soldiers who were running about, guns slung across their backs, shouting orders and directing traffic.

I was trying to hitch a ride in a supply convoy of civilian vehicles and heavy trucks that the army escorted twice a week to Agadez, one of the Sahara's oldest cities and long a center of the trans-Saharan caravan trade. Now the city was under a sort of siege. Agadez sits in the traditional territory of Berber nomads, the Tuaregs, who were fighting for a country of their own in the desert. This siege was not so much physical as psychological, rooted in history and the suggestion of threat brought on by the dust that veiled so much—buildings, vehicles, people, even the land itself. In this part of West Africa, the harmattan signals a season of war, a time when attacks are expected on the Agadez road under cover of dust.

The convoy would travel 150 miles up Niger's National Highway 2—an asphalt road, six meters wide, obscured for much of the way by drifting sand. About a hundred vehicles were preparing to depart on this road, and I saw much worth plundering: trucks full of grain, trucks loaded with

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onions, petrol tankers, government cars, private cars, bush taxis. Hausa merchants, women as well as men, walked about in heavy camel's-hair robes. Scattered among the vehicles was an army escort of six white Toyota Land Cruiser pickups with machine guns mounted on the roofs, and a light tank painted desert khaki.

Abalak is an African road town, part farm village, part military base, and after decades of drought it has also become a refugee camp as well. Hausa farming and merchant families, Arab and Tuareg herders and merchants—unable to understand each other's languages—watched one another here in the streets and from the compounds of their baked-mud houses and goatskin tents, living in uneasy mutual dependence on land fast losing its ability to support them.

Here's a cartographer's technicality. Abalak isn't even in the Sahara, but in the north central Sahel, a narrow belt of arid savanna along the Sahara's southern edge, stretching from Senegal on the west coast to the continent's center. The Sahel, what's left of it, is inland West Africa's agricultural heart and an ecological border region (*Sahel* means border in Arabic) where desert and savanna meet in physical single-mindedness. Heat and wind, the Sahara's greatest exports, drive against a flatness whose colors—the gold and brown of sand, the maroon of laterite rock—clash only with those summer days when the sky is brittle blue and the wind blows softer and hotter.

Here's a reality. As an agricultural region, the Sahelian savanna is nearly irrelevant, having been overpowered by the Sahara. The grasses are mostly gone, and so are the trees. Villagers plant dwarf prosopis, a thorny Sahel native known as mesquite in the American Southwest, to shore up eroding washes and to stabilize dunes. Prosopis is often the only visible vegetation. In Abalak it's hard to distinguish desert, the sandy, rocky plains to the north, from the savanna to the south—similar land of only marginal vegetation, where grasses, bushes, acacia, neem, and palm trees are a bit more common. "There's nothing here," wrote a French officer from his post four hundred miles southeast of Abalak in 1944, "but bush and sand."

Across this terrain, wind moves dust and sand with magical power. Sixty years ago in the Libyan Sahara, many hundreds of miles northeast of Niger, German and Allied armies attacked each other under the escort of these storms. And for centuries, West African dust has fallen on Western Europe, in raindrops colored white or red by fine grains of quartz and red jasper that the desert's rare but violent downpours grind off buttes, hillsides, and mountains. Wind does the rest.

Indeed, the wind has done its job so thoroughly that there's little dust left in the Sahara. The light stuff, the actual dust, blew off long ago, leaving 3.5 million square miles of sand and rock laid bare by the wind that blows year-round off the desert onto the Sahel. There the wind picks up half

a billion tons of dust a year, the Sahel's remaining topsoil, consuming thousands of square miles as the Sahara marches south: a desert's ecological annexation of a savanna.

For centuries, travelers have struggled to describe the singular ability of these lands to rise and swallow them. This is the English explorer James Richardson's description, written in 1846, of a camel caravan navigating the Sahara a few hundred miles south of Tripoli:

> We followed the tracks of the few of our party who had preceded us. . . . But one night of strong wind usually covers up the track, and though the sand does not move in billows, it flies about, first from one side and then the other, and fills up the foot-prints of men and animals. There is no doubt but it requires the most practised eye of the camel-driver to find his way through these regions, and yet, for my life, I could not see that the people experienced difficulty.

Richardson was describing a sandstorm whose heavier particles move in low, dense clouds, usually below the knees, but sometimes at chest level or a bit higher. Sand is too heavy to fly high or stay aloft long. Dust storms are different. They rise to altitudes of fifteen thousand feet, appearing to saturate the atmosphere. A. Starker Leopold, son of the naturalist Aldo Leopold, has clarified the sand-or-dust-storm distinction in his book *The Desert:* "Since dust is so much lighter than sand, the wind can raise huge clouds of it, clouds so dense that in the storm center it is as dark as night."

Harmattan dust blows in on softer, more constant winds, filling the air with a haze for weeks on end. But dense storms of the violence Leopold describes often precede monsoons of the Sahelian summer. Giant cauliflower clouds rumble across the land, churning up sand and dust with a force that makes you think the earth itself is dissolving. Driving rains follow like guerrilla raiders, wiping out crops, filling ravines with rushing water, and then vanishing.

I first experienced such a storm while serving in the Peace Corps in Niger in 1986. From my seat on a bus on Highway 2 near Abalak, I watched dark blue rain clouds form above the brown line of late-afternoon horizon. Then, as if growing fur, the horizon changed to a blurry band, and then to a billowing mass. In open desert, where landmarks are few, African drivers tell direction by reading the color tone of the earth, and by instinct. But dust storms stop even the best drivers. In minutes, the dust overcame our bus and turned afternoon to night. The driver pulled over. When the storm passed, three hours later, real darkness had fallen.

During the nearly five years I spent in Africa, dust became part of my point of view, something to take note of with a glance at the sky throughout each day. After I'd seen just one storm, I couldn't shake that pulsating vision of climate and earth advancing on me like some cosmic army.

I'd hitched a ride into Abalak on a Toyota minibus the day before the supply convoy was to leave. Both sides of the road through town were crowded with vehicles and with men huddling around small fires. I hung around a long time, talking to drivers and looking for a place to sleep. Finally, late in the evening, a man directed me to a "hotel" on the outskirts of town. It turned out to be a bar in a dusty yard surrounded by cinder-block walls. A boy sold bottles of beer from a damp pit covered with wet burlap. The only customer was a truck driver I'd seen hours earlier by the road beside his rig, an eighteen-wheeler carrying onions. He raised his bottle to me as I entered the bar.

"Very nice coat," he said in French, referring to the heavy nylon windbreaker I was wearing. "Will you give it to me?"

I smiled, set my baggage against the wall, and bought two beers from the boy, one for me and one for the driver. I took a seat across from him on one of many straw mats spread on the ground. We sat with our beers cradled in our crossed legs, arms folded against the cold. He wore a battered brown wool sports jacket over several T-shirts; under my windbreaker I had on a sweater. We both wore cotton turbans around our heads to protect against the wind and dust. He was drunk and had trouble keeping his turban wrapped tightly. We talked about onions and Agadez. I learned that he was Nigerian and was hauling onions from the Kano region. We switched to English, but the conversation kept stalling. He sipped beer and stared at the ground.

"You look worried," I said.

He looked at me and spat in the dirt, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "American?"

I nodded.

"You must be a tourist."

I was making this journey with the hope of writing about the Tuareg rebellion, but if I admitted that openly, I might be removed from the convoy and perhaps arrested. The government didn't like the negative publicity of the war. So I smiled at the driver's surmise and did not object.

"I make this trip four times a year," he said, "and now is the worst time to be on this road." He slapped his upper arms with both hands crossed, making a flapping sound and raising a cloud of dust, as if to check whether the stuff were still there. He shook his head. "They hide in the dust. The rebels could be watching us the whole time, traveling behind the convoy, or in the bush beside the road, and we would never even know."

Weeks earlier, he said, a group of Tuaregs in a white Peugeot station wagon had ambushed part of an Agadez convoy on a day thick with dust. In the haze, no one noticed the car climbing onto the road and entering the convoy near the rear, ahead of a half dozen cars and trucks. The Peugeot appeared as if dust had created it. The occupants wore turbans and the uniforms of Niger's army. The car slowed in order to separate the

vehicles in the rear from the rest of the convoy. The rebel driver suddenly turned the Peugeot to block the road. The others got out and fired shots in the air and into the lead truck's radiator.

The rebels hurt no one. They stuffed their plunder in the Peugeot and a minibus that they'd commandeered, then disappeared in the dust. They left a few bottles of water for the passengers. An army patrol rescued them hours later.

"How do you know all these details?" I asked.

He glared at me. "How do I know? How?" He touched his chest with the open palm of his hand. "Because that driver is my friend!"

I shrugged. "Sorry. Of course, you know the road well." I paused a moment, remembering that I still had no ride to Agadez. "Do you think you might let me ride with you?" I asked.

He frowned and raised a finger, shaking his head. "No, no! On another road, yes, but here you will be too much trouble. I am sorry, no." He hung his head. I didn't push the matter.

For centuries, Tuaregs have roamed the Sahara, surviving off the trade of camels, goats, slaves, and from piracy. They would appear out of the dust like gritty spirits—men distinguished by their loose robes and tightly wound turbans, often colored indigo blue—to extort their needs from camel caravans and lone travelers. Or, for a price, they would escort a caravan to protect its safety.

Only a few caravans, remnants of the ancient trade between North Africa and the sub-Saharan lands, still cross the Sahara. Traditionally, caravans transported cloth, precious metals, and perfumes to the south, returning with black African slaves and salt. To plunder that traffic outright would have meant killing off a means of support in a land of meager resources: desert suicide. So the Tuaregs have lived by a balance of guerrilla war and petty thievery that gradually bled caravans and other tribes of food and livestock. Outright plunder and murder happened more rarely.

Tuaregs didn't attack openly, preferring instead to mix with their prey in small numbers at first, posing as harmless herdsmen and planting rumors of discontent. They let fear work from within, an ideal tactic for attacking large caravans that customarily spread out into small groups with no coordinated means of defense. This vulnerability exasperated James Richardson, who in 1846 traveled by caravan a third of the way across the Sahara into what is now western Libya. Near the start of the trip, just south of Tripoli, he described in his journal how the caravan was organized. "Each group is its own sovereign master," he wrote, "and will have its own way."

But Tuareg bands also scuttled well-defended French military expeditions, which they attacked aggressively. The French, after all, threatened the nomad way of life through military action and pressure to take up the relatively sedentary work of farming. The Tuaregs challenged France's hold on inland West Africa for fifty years, until they suffered a decisive

defeat near Agadez in 1919. They've been warring on and off ever since.

After I left Niger in 1993, several Tuareg groups made peace with the governments of Niger and Mali, but other groups refused to negotiate. The culture of piracy and fear lives on. The U.S. State Department, in a consular information sheet issued last year, warned that the region around Agadez and the Aïr Mountains had "experienced increased criminal activity by armed bandits. In these attacks, groups of foreign travelers, including Americans, have been robbed of vehicles, cash and belongings and left stranded in the remote desert. The government of Nigeria is taking steps to address this problem."

"This is the desert," the driver in the Abalak bar had told me. "Tuaregs will always own this road."

About midnight the truck driver stumbled off to sleep in the cab of his vehicle. The bar owner let me spread my bedroll on a mat in the compound. I lay awake a long time, thinking of James Richardson atop his camel, cursing the wind, dust, and heat, a man well aware of what a fine target his caravan made as it approached the Aïr Mountains northeast of Agadez.

Back on the road early in the morning, I couldn't find the driver and his truck. He'd probably been moved to the rear of the convoy, or had turned back. I tried to buy passage to Agadez in one of the Peugeot station wagons lined up along the road. They were bush taxis, but the drivers wouldn't take my money. A "European passenger," they said, made their cars better targets for the rebels. But the driver of a government bus, a white and orange Mercedes, sold me a seat.

The challenge of getting to Agadez, and my growing worries about rebel Tuaregs, made me feel a sort of kinship with Richardson—another traveler in fear. In March 1850, Richardson was forty-four and newly married when he attempted a second Sahara crossing. He left his wife in Tripoli and set out for the unexplored Lake Chad region, where he hoped to find the "source and causes" of the Arab slave trade so that England might destroy it. Richardson, an evangelical minister, had made the abolition of slavery his life's work. A year and more than a thousand miles later he died, having crossed the desert and reached the Sahel, but not Lake Chad. What killed him, apparently, were heat exhaustion and the climate's gradual wearing on his health. And, I believe, the journey's psychological impact.

Richardson covered much of the distance on camelback in an Arab merchant caravan. His journals—published by his wife in 1853, under the title *Narrative of a Mission to Central Africa*—include nervous observations of landscape, climate, and Tuaregs, as if he felt it might be perilous to ignore any of them. Not far south of Tripoli, Richardson wrote, "the caravan was in motion fourteen entire hours, over heavy sand, with hot wind breathing fiercely on it." Farther south, he marveled at a "dust devil"—"a column of

dust carried into the heavens in a spiral formed by wind, whilst all around was perfect calm." Weeks later he stabbed a thermometer into the sand under blasts of the late summer *gheblee*, called by the Arabs the "hot wind," and measured 130 degrees. He observed how camel drivers found the desert route by looking for camel dung, "which rolls about the surface of the sand." Further on, he wrote of "clouds of sand-dust. . . . The fine particles cover and pervade everything, and getting between the skin and the flannel, produce an irritation like the pricking of needles." All the while he watched for Tuaregs, "easily distinguished by their habit of wearing a . . . muffler, with which they conceal their mouths [from dust] and all the lower part of their face. This custom gives them a strangely mysterious appearance."

Richardson thought he'd bought the caravan's security in the Saharan town of Ghāt (now in Libya, on the Algerian border, five hundred miles north of Agadez) by hiring an escort of Kailouee Tuareg tribesman—only to find the caravan threatened by Tuaregs of other tribes. Small groups tailed them, begging for food as the caravan neared the Aïr Mountains. "Three mysterious Haghars [Tuareg tribesmen] still continued to follow us," Richardson wrote, "declaring that they had no evil intentions, but were merely poor wayfarers. . . ." The three disappeared, but were replaced by a different group that kept watch over the caravan. "When it was nearly dusk, five mounted men made their appearance, two of them leading six empty camels. . . . I treated them to supper—in fact, I am obliged to feed all strangers. . . . During the night these strange fellows disappeared. . . . About two in the morning the Kailouees, wishing to start early, began to bustle about in the dark, in order to collect their camels. They could not find any of them."

The camels were gone. The next day Haghar Tuaregs surrounded the caravan and extorted payment under threat of attack.

Here's another way to view the land and its problems. Environmental groups and foreign-aid workers blame West African dust on the actions of people—a thousand years of deforestation and overgrazing. The United Nations has pinpointed Africa's growing deserts, the Sahara especially, as the continent's gravest environmental threat. The experts have a point, but there's another side to the issue. The Sahara, once a lush plateau, is a natural force at least one hundred thousand years old—there are scientists who believe the Sahara began growing as much as two million years ago—and no one really knows when or how things began to change, or to what extent human activity can fairly be blamed. What we do know is that the soils that the hot Saharan winds rob from the Sahel account for more than half the dust in the global atmosphere. Those fine grains of quartz have settled as far west as New Mexico, sixty-six hundred miles away. Geological Africa mixes with the American West.

A balance of physics and chemistry is at work here, the right combination of vulnerable soils and wind, driven by solar heat—pure airborne energy that helps power the air into a frenzy. Or, as the English meteorologist John G. Lockwood writes in *Causes of Climate,* "The sun drives all the meteorological and climatological wind systems and these continually dissipate energy mainly by friction at the ground surface."

I saw this point demonstrated when I visited Niger's government meteorology center at the national airport in the capital, Niamey. The walls were plastered with ever-changing maps of West Africa, white posterboard with dramatic black arrows that revealed wind direction, temperature, thunderstorm patterns during the monsoon season, and the year-round movement of dust, all measured against the position of the sun.

Hamza Ibrahim, the center's director, bluntly translated the charts for me. "The sun causes these winds," he began. "One energy source we don't lack here in Africa is the sun."

Along Highway 2 from Abalak you can see the evidence of that natural power. The wind shapes dunes in stars and crescents with knife-edge ridges and rounded domes. But all this vanishes in dust that imprisons the landscape behind a shroud, creating open terrain that is much more difficult, if not impossible, to navigate. Dust collects in the wrinkles of your clothes, frosts your hair, coats the inside of your mouth and lungs, disguises your face. To survive, you develop a sense that much is not what it appears to be.

Wind, dust, and heat, in a vast sameness of landscape, are the germs of what the French have called *la Soudanite,* a nervous state that is thought to have afflicted colonial officers in Africa. The French recommended that men serve no more than two years in the West African interior to avoid mental collapse. The ailment, very likely, is what the historian Douglas Porch calls in *Conquest of the Sahara,* his history of the French in the Sahara, a "way to pass off . . . excesses of behavior brought on by the African climate."

I'm talking now about murder, and the complicity of landscape and climate. Some believe that those two factors alone can trigger homicidal mania. In 1900, colonial authorities investigated, posthumously, two French officers who had laid waste to a five-hundred-mile strip of what is now southern Niger. The previous year, captains Paul Voulet and Charles Chanoine had led a force of six hundred African conscripts on what was to have been a geographic expedition. Instead they razed villages and cities. Villagers welcomed them, offering supplies and guides, only to be massacred. In July 1899, the African soldiers mutinied and killed the two officers near a village 180 miles south of Abalak, leaving France with much to explain, both at home and to the African population it had pledged to enlighten.

"Blood was spilled . . . and many villages . . . were burned," wrote an officer who came upon the expedition's swath in May 1899. "I can't understand the causes of such harsh measures."

In his journal, Voulet had complained of wind and dust, lack of water, and fear of Tuareg attack (though none occurred). The closest thing to an explanation finally came with the publication, in 1931, of the journals of two officers sent to arrest the renegade captains. The book's anonymous preface blames "*la biskrite, la Saharite, la Soudanite, l'Africanite*. . . . The name is of little importance. . . . It is this state of absolute agitation with so many small causes that produces such regrettable effects."

The soldiers marshaling the Abalak supply convoy positioned the government bus ten vehicles from the lead truck. I took the only seat left, just behind the driver. The passengers were mostly civil servants and their families traveling to homes and jobs in Agadez and beyond. I hoped a government bus might be the safest vehicle to ride in, but I could also think of reasons why it might be the most dangerous. Civil servants and merchants, after all, carry money and make good hostages.

As we started to roll, I watched the dust swallow cars and trucks in front of us. It was as if we were driving into a cotton swab. A Land Cruiser escort followed us. Eight soldiers sat in back, legs hanging over the sides of the rear bed, guns poking the air. They had wrapped their heads in turbans. One soldier stood behind the cab, manning a mounted machine gun. Dust blew in sheets across the road, a geological migration that reminded me of the powers bush taxi drivers attribute to dust. They talk of giant swirling dust devils patrolling the roads in hotter weather.

To meteorologists, dust devils sometimes signal that conditions are right for dust storms. The whirlwinds burst from the soil when extremely hot ground heats and fuels the air layer above it so that the air becomes unstable and rises, meeting cooler air above. This cooler, heavier layer of air flows downward to displace more of the hot air. The result is chaotic energy that sucks up dust as the hot air rises. The hotter the patch of ground, the more powerful the dust devil. Some rise to heights of one thousand feet, spinning at sixty miles per hour with the power to pick up and fling small mammals.

A driver once told me he'd seen a vision one windy afternoon on the road to Agadez: a tall, thin woman in flowing white cloth. Her body seemed to extend endlessly into the atmosphere, swaying and twisting in a serpentine way that made him think she was about to lunge and attack, like a sort of spiritual tornado. She was, of course, both spiritual and meteorological: a vengeful being, on the one hand, and a whirling centrifugal column of dust particles, on the other—pressure gradients, sparring drafts of cold and hot air crashing together from above and below and spinning outward in a vortex whose inner workings scientists have never completely understood.

The driver assured me that he'd seen the ghostly woman's face and that her mouth was open in a scream. She didn't attack, but it was weeks before the driver could face the road again.

This is the rarest kind of dust devil, because of its size, and the most dangerous on the road. To drivers the dust devil is psychopathic, an agent of evil that has neither top nor bottom and blinds when it strikes, as if a hand has suddenly gripped the car's entire frame. Bush taxi drivers maneuver wildly to avoid such dust devils. I've been in cars that have struck them, and have felt them grab hold, shake the car with indignant fury, and leave little cracks in the windows from flying pebbles. The Hausa word for wind, *iska*, is the same as the word for ghost. Drivers have a name for sections of road prone to accidents: *hanya mai iska*, which means "road of the wind" or "haunted road."

On the bus I tried to ignore such thoughts by sleeping. At noon the convoy stopped for the midday Muslim prayer. Off the road I stood on a landscape at war, looking off in one direction and then another, hands dug into my pockets as sand broke about my ankles.

I watched travelers, their bodies blurred by dust, spreading prayer rugs on the sand and praying prostrate before Mecca. The men prayed in front and the women behind, while children ran about laughing, and babies watched quizzically from blankets their mothers had laid out beside them. Most of the people in the convoy were Hausa, longstanding enemies of the Tuaregs, lords of the dunes who for centuries had raided Hausa villages to take slaves and foodstuffs.

Miles back, we'd passed three wrecked petrol tankers that rebels had attacked on the road months earlier. Through the dust I could see that explosions had blackened the asphalt. Sand drifts crept up the sides of the metal corpses. As we passed army checkpoints—a common feature on Niger roads in peacetime or war—I felt a tension uncommon farther south, away from the conflict. There were more soldiers up here. They were Niger's best troops, younger and stronger, in smart fatigues and boots. They had automatic rifles, wore field packs, and looked ready to fight.

This was the closest I'd been to war. My awareness of the journey's risk, of the history of the conflict, had made me jumpy and irritable. Now I couldn't even make notes. I thought of Richardson's frustrated declaration against banditry, written in the desert northeast of Agadez: the region, he wrote, "abounds with thieves, and we must now always keep watch."

At the roadside, waiting for prayers to end, a soldier smoked. One stood at the mounted gun. Six others surrounded the bus, staring into the desert with their guns. Then a peculiar event occurred. Down the road a white Peugeot pickup popped out of the haze. The truck raced up the roadbed, across the asphalt, and bounded back into the dust. Dust had almost perfectly camouflaged the truck, but not quite well enough. Soldiers jumped and shouted, and the Land Cruiser took off after the Peugeot so fast the soldiers had to run to get in, their buddies pulling them up by the trousers as if onto a life raft. Passengers cheered. Some shouldered children to watch. "Rebels will die today," a man said. I hoped the pickup's driver was

only a farmer hauling wood. Not unusual in Niger, where the few who can afford a vehicle move people and goods at a price and without permits. They would flee at the sight of soldiers—scared soldiers who might shoot before investigating.

In seconds the escort dissolved in the haze. The cheering and talking trailed off, as if everyone realized a decoy had lured away our protection. Behind the bus, I could see nothing in the haze, but I heard voices and the idling motors of the rest of the convoy: sounds suspended in dust.

"You are afraid?" a man asked me in French. He was a big man, tall and heavy, his body protected under a camel's-hair cloak. He wore a white turban and sandals.

"Yes, I am," I said. "Aren't you?"

"Why, no, we are well defended." He laughed. "The rebels would not dare attack us." I stared off and he walked away. I sat in the sand and looked into the dust. We might as well have been sitting in total darkness.

After an hour we heard an engine approach. The escort roared out of the dust and stopped, facing the bus. Our driver had a brief shouted exchange in Hausa with the soldier at the mounted gun. The driver shrugged and waved his arm at the passengers. Time to push on.

On board, I asked the driver what had happened.

"They lost the truck in the dust," he said.

At 6:00 P.M. we made Agadez, a city that James Richardson bypassed in his hurry to get to Lake Chad to meet the German explorer Heinrich Barth. But Richardson fell ill and stopped in a village a few days' journey from Lake Chad. He died there in delirium on March 4, 1851. Barth made it to Lake Chad, and learned of Richardson's death weeks after the fact. He traveled to the village to collect the Englishman's journals and carry them to the British consul in Tripoli. "Mr. Richardson could never bear the sun," he wrote to the consul. "I think this to be the chief reason of his death."

In Agadez I stayed at the Hotel Kaosen, named for a fierce Tuareg leader who finally surrendered to the French months after the end of World War I. But I spent most of three days at the police commissariat trying to convince the commandant that I was a harmless traveler, not a white mercenary hired to help the Tuaregs.

The commandant told me to leave the city.

I returned to southern Niger in a much smaller convoy, with two escort vehicles, that left Agadez on a clear, sunny day. "Don't worry," a soldier assured me. "There's no dust for rebels to hide in."