If one was to draw a ‘Top Ten’ list of most mythical peoples, the Kel Tamasheq would probably rank rather high. If confronted with the ethnonym ‘Kel Tamasheq’, or even ‘Tuareg’, most people outside West Africa would not necessarily know who are meant. But if shown a picture they would quickly recognise one. Cars, camping gear, travel agencies, perfumes, even skiing outfits have been advertised with the image of a Tamasheq, some products even sporting a Tamasheq as their logo or simply being called ‘Tuareg’. In globalised commercial imagery, the Tamasheq man with his veiled face and turban, flowing indigo robes and camel, has become the prototype desert nomad, a symbol of freedom. This essentialisation of the Kel Tamasheq into ‘The Nomad’ in global culture is the result of a process of stereotyping a strange ‘other’, which had already started in classical Arabic culture and even well before in the ancient Middle East. As evidenced in documents almost as old as writing itself, nomad-sedentary relations have been problematic since their beginnings, thousands of years ago. ¹ Yet, sedentary fascination and idealisation of nomadic existence is almost as old. Much of the Old Testament deals with nomadic existence and draws its wisdom from it. Yet, the recollections (or imagination) of their ancestors’ deeds were written

¹ Klengel, H. 1972.
down in a (by then) largely sedentary Jewish society. The present-day image of the Kel Tamasheq would definitely qualify as Orientalist in Edward Said’s sense, but the creation of stereotyped images, and the subsequent projections of virtues and failings on the Kel Tamasheq and other nomads, is not a uniquely European business.\(^2\) Tamasheq culture has a few characteristics that make it peculiar not only in the eyes of the European, but also of the Arab-Muslim culture or of neighbouring African cultures. When visiting Walata, Ibn Battuta already remarked (and scorned) the relative freedom in gender relations that are now seen as almost unique to Tamasheq culture.\(^3\) It is the men who veil their faces in front of women, and not the other way around, which astounded both Arabs and Europeans. European administrators cherished Tamasheq ‘chivalry’ but condemned their ‘nomad laziness’. On the other hand, these days, rich Saudi tourists visit Northern Mali and Niger to see the people who still live the honourable nomad camel-breeding life their Saudi grandfathers had lived, as one of them told me. The nomadic pastoral existence of the Tamashque ancestors was already extolled by Ibn Khaldun as an explanation for the military and moral superiority of the nomadic Berber tribes over their sedentary Arabised neighbours.\(^4\)

On the other hand, the Kel Tamasheq too have their preconceived ideas about the Europeans, and about their neighbours. The idea of the European, in colonial times as well as now, is best summarised in the term reserved for them: *Ikufar*, infidels. Although militarily superior to the Kel Tamasheq, Europeans were (and still are) seen as ethically and morally inferior as they do not adhere to Islam. However, to some Kel Tamasheq in the late twentieth century, the rule of the ‘infidel’ was preferred over that of the ‘slave’. Indeed, to many Kel Tamasheq of free origins, ‘black Africans’ were peoples who had long been subjected to Tamasheq rule. Ever since the Moroccan invasion and subsequent fall of the Songhay Empire at the end of the sixteenth century, the Kel Tamasheq had not been subdued to a sub-Saharan polity. On the contrary, after the quick demise of Moroccan rule in the area, it was the Kel Tamasheq federations who ruled the Niger Bend and present-day Northern Mali. In Tamasheq ideas on power, black peoples could not rule


\(^3\) Ibn Battuta, C. Defremeay & B.R. Sanguinetti (1858) 1982.

\(^4\) Ibn Khaldun & B.M.G. de Slane (1851) 1978.