



Photo: Hamadi Ag Mohamed Abba

The invisible oasis of Mali:

Where agroecology meets peaceful resistance

Thanks to a solar-powered water pumping system, farmers in Tassadja-Farach managed to harvest more than 500 kilograms of corn in 2024.

We are in northern Mali, on the dry bed of Lake Kamango in the Timbuktu region. An agroecological oasis stretches over three hectares reclaimed from the desert: invisible to the world, but very much alive under the feet of its inhabitants. Men, women, and children grow millet, tomatoes, potatoes, courgettes, onions, cowpeas, and even wheat. It is a way to contribute to the nutrition of nearly 150 families while also generating income. Moreover, the garden is a source of hope and resilience in an otherwise tense political situation of structural oppression and racism.

HAMADI AG MOHAMED ABBA

"There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born."

- Franz Fanon in 'Black Skin, White Masks' (1952)

The first bird to sing is the turtle dove. Its cooing heralds dawn in Tassadja-Farach, in the middle of the Sahara, some sixty kilometres from Timbuktu. The dunes, still tinged with pink, stretch out like a herd returning from a mirage. The children climb onto their donkeys and race through the acacia forest towards the well.

Some minutes later, the men arrive at the well to water their animals and load the donkeys with jerricans. The children then leave to bring the water to the camps within a two-kilometre radius. Greetings are exchanged, and news circulates between the camps. Then, the farmers adjust their Tagelmust veils and each one heads to their plot. For several years, the local Tuareg community, which traditionally focused on livestock farming, has now shifted towards agroecology.

The choice of staying

It is here, in this land without 5G or tarmac roads, that I, Hamadi Ag Mohamed Abba, was born in the early sixties. I belong to the Kel Ansar people, who have been present on this land since the 15th century and who hold the customary land rights in this vast municipality covering almost 10,000 km².

Like many in this community, I had to endure exile. In 1990, when the Tuareg rebellion broke out in northern Mali, I was forced to flee. The crackdown by the Malian armed forces was brutal. I took refuge in Mauritania, but a decade later, decided to return to Tassadja-Farach.

I descend from a lineage of semi-nomadic men and women who are deeply anchored in their territory. In my family, stories are passed down about the camel riders of the 20th century, the resistance against the raids in the north, and the diplomas hanging on the walls of the mud-brick houses. The local history is proudly upheld: that of a community that has survived for centuries by relying on knowledge, solidarity, adaptation, and the precise control of the climate, grazing cycles, and water management. For us resilience means to cultivate, nurture, transmit knowledge, and spread the cultural riches of the Tuareg identity.

Agroecology in the desert

In 2021, facing a prolonged drought and food insecurity, with a group of inhabitants of Tassadja-Farach, we launched a gardening project on three hectares of the dry bed of Lake Kamango, part of the Faguibine lake system in the

Goundam district. As young and able-bodied community members, we secured the perimeter with a wire fence and drilled a well equipped with a water pumping system. In addition to ensuring food security and sovereignty for local residents, our very concrete goal was to counter population exodus.

Despite insufficient water flow, we now successfully grow a variety of crops: tomatoes, chillies, potatoes, beetroot, onions, aubergines, courgettes, carrots, peppers, cabbage, millet, cowpeas, cotton, and peanuts. Hard cereal crops such as wheat and maize are also thriving.

The cultivation is carried out without chemical fertilisers or pesticides. This is agroecology in its most direct form: rural, collective, modest, and adapted. We manage as we can, despite the lack of water. Mohamed Assaleh Ag Moctar, head of the fraction, explains: "There is a real enthusiasm for gardening, but the lack of water is a constraint for the population." Farmers also face sandstorms, sand encroachment on crops, and seasonal pests. These phenomena are becoming increasingly frequent, exacerbated by climate change.

In this worldview, working the land means remaining in one's rightful place in the world order

The perimeter also provides water for passing animals (around 550 heads). During the dry season, from January to April, families come every morning to harvest what will go straight into the pot. Thus, market gardening has become firmly established in the habits of the inhabitants of Tassadja-Farach. Although livestock farming remains the primary source of income and the main focus of economic development, vegetables are now consumed with rice, pasta, or in soups accompanied by takoula, the traditional bread. This also has the health benefit that it limits the harmful effects of the increasingly widespread consumption of processed products with high salt or sugar content.

The triple scourge of violence, climatic deregulation, and hunger

This fight for food sovereignty takes on its full meaning when we consider the geopolitical context in which it takes place: that of peripheral regions sacrificed to the extractivist and military logic of globalised capitalism. Northern Mali, like the Sahel, is today the scene of violence ignored by the international community: ethnic cleansing, mass forced displacement, militarisation, and resource grabbing.

The Tuareg populations have suffered from structural oppression and racism since French colonisation. Control of the territory goes hand in hand with control of the subsoil: in the past it was salt, today it is uranium, lithium, and oil. Since the withdrawal of UN forces from Mali at the end of 2023, the vacuum left by international institutions has been filled by the Malian army and Russian Wagner militias. Officially, there to 'fight terrorism', their presence is now synonymous with the killing of civilians, drone strikes on markets and other civilian infrastructure, the burning of food stocks, and sexual violence against women and girls. Fear reigns as violence continues with impunity and goes undocumented due to the absence of journalists on the ground.

Roadways are regularly blocked for months at a time, paralysing the supply of food, medicine, and fuel. Humanitarian convoys are regularly attacked, and food distribution in rural areas becomes sporadic or even impossible. Prices have skyrocketed for basic necessities such as potatoes, fruit, vegetables, tea, and powdered milk, with the cost of half a kilo rising from 1,000 to 3,000 CFA francs (almost 5€) in 2024. As for the Tuareg herders, most of them have been forced to migrate to other areas to ensure the survival of their livestock.

According to the [Cadre Harmonisé](#), a tool for analysing food and nutrition insecurity in the Sahel and West Africa, in the period June-August 2025, approximately 140,000 people in the Timbuktu region were facing severe food insecurity (phase 4, designated as emergency). Several NGOs have reported that hunger is being used as a means of territorial control and collective punishment. Although they remain cautious in their wording on this subject, their reports describe tactics such as blockades, destruction of crops, and obstruction of humanitarian aid. They suggest that hunger is being exploited for military and political ends.

The drone strikes on the Zouera market and near Tinaicha in July 2025 leave no doubt: they are trying to empty

A child harvests aubergines for the home kitchen.



the region of its Indigenous population. These practices constitute a violation of the human right to food as defined by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Yet protection mechanisms are ineffective, and the international response remains extremely limited.

The Mbera refugee camp, across the border in Mauritania, where some 180,000 Malian refugees are crowded together, has become the second most populous settlement in the country after the capital. Among them is my family.

Sovereignty and resilience

Far from being an imported or technical practice, agroecology here is rooted in ancient cosmology and practices. It perpetuates Indigenous knowledge and seeds passed down from generation to generation. For example, on some plots of the Tassadja-Farach community garden, you can see rows of small, evenly spaced holes dug by hand. These are filled with manure before the rainy season: this is a local technique directly inspired by the Sahelian *zai*, which concentrates moisture and nutrients around each seed.

But this technique is only one facet of a deeper relationship with the land. In Tuareg culture, the earth is perceived as a pious angel, full of mercy. Cultivating it is

a virtuous act that goes beyond immediate needs: it is an offering to all living creatures. In our tradition, we say that a farmer is never alone in enjoying the fruits of his labour. Birds, insects, humans, all benefit from it. Even if the harvest fails, divine reward is assured, because the intention is good. In my worldview, working the land means remaining in one's rightful place in the world order.

Resilience for us means to cultivate, nurture and transmit knowledge, and spread the cultural riches of the Tuareg identity

The community garden has become both a source of healthy food and a reason to stay or return. Since the launch of the garden, we have seen new faces: young farmers, families who have returned from Mbera and settled not far from the crops. Agroecology is therefore much more than an agricultural practice: farming here is a way of reaffirming the sovereignty of the Tuareg people. For the inhabitants of Tassadja-Farach, staying on the land is a dignified and courageous choice.

To put an end to violence, food and nutritional insecurity in Mali requires long-term investment in social protection systems and conflict resolution mechanisms. We also need to protect and encourage small-scale and family-based agro-sylvo-pastoral activities, which are essential for feeding the population in a sustainable, healthy and resilient way in the face of multiple and multifaceted shocks.

Epilogue

Evening falls on Tassadja-Farach, as the wind dies down and the sky gradually lights up with stars. The children, having returned to camp with the donkeys, give way to a calm punctuated by the intermittent cooing of the turtledove. Some prepare the seeds for the next day. They watch over the land, as if it were a promise.

Northern Mali is a vast territory, largely unknown and obscured from the eyes of the world. It is a place associated with hunger and war, but rarely with beauty, resilience, and even less so with success. In this spirit of philosopher Fanon, this oasis truly is an 'authentic upheaval' in a 'zone of nonbeing.' ■



Photo: Hamadi Ag Mohamed Abba

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