MEMBER PROFILE

BELLAH PEOPLE

Malian Association for the Preservation of Bellah Culture
**Status:** Unrecognised indigenous group in Mali

**Areas:** Spread out all over the territory of Mali

**Population:** Estimated to be between 300,000 and 500,000

**Ethnic Groups:** The Bellah community consists of ethnic groups such as the Songhoi, the Fula, the Bambara, the Mossi and the Dogon

**Religion:** Mostly Muslim

**UNPO REPRESENTATION:** Malian Association for the Preservation of Bellah Culture (AMASCB-IKEWAN)

The Bellah people is represented at UNPO by the Malian Association for the Preservation of Bellah Culture (AMASCB – IKEWAN) since 2017.

**OVERVIEW**

The Bellah people are an indigenous black people of the Sahel/Sahara area and one of the largest communities in Mali. Despite its demographic weight in Malian society, they suffer from slavery, violence and discrimination. Some members of the Bellah community were and are still forced into slavery by Tuaregs due to their vulnerability, stemming from economic dependence and discrimination by other communities. They have never been considered as a proper community by public authorities despite what they bring to the socio-economic and political life of the country.

**UNPO MEMBER PERSPECTIVE**

AMASCB – IKEWAN was founded as an association in August 2015 with the objective to struggle against prejudice and stigmatisation, as well as to put the little-known Bellah people on the map through socio-cultural demonstrations.

The Bellah, through this organisation, aim at gaining recognition by the national and international community, as well as being able to promote and preserve their culture better through raising awareness. They also wish to affirm and defend their right to recognition.

**CURRENT ISSUES**

Today the Bellah people are present in the southern regions of Mali such as Ségou, Koulikoro and Mopti, as well as in the traditionally Tuareg-dominated north and north-east regions. They live alongside a great number of different people that constitute Malian society. Although their situation has considerably improved in comparison to the enslavement and oppression of the past, the Bellah people continues to suffer social prejudice, stigmatisation and close to complete exclusion from positions of power within the Malian political system. The recognition of their very existence is feeble, as they do not appear on ethnic maps of Mali. This lack of recognition impedes efforts to get a clear idea of demographic information on the Bellah. Moreover, the Bellah culture has been degraded by the socio-economic and security situations for years. Their culture is not promoted as the Bellah people are influent enough in society.

**Identification and Recognition**

The Bellah people currently struggles with many political and social problems. The Malian State refuses to recognize them as a community with its own characteristics. The refusal of their existence, without doubt, has a traditional background. As Tuareg and Arab chiefs
Mohamed Ali Attaher Ansari and the qadi (magistrate or judge of the Shari’a court, who also exercises extrajudicial functions such as mediation) of Tombouctou told French colonists in the late 1940s: “We, whites from Sudan (Tuareg, Moors, Berabichs), will never accept to be placed under the command of blacks (Bambaras, Sonrais), who are our slaves. We cannot admit that black rulers conduct a census of Bellaahs and the Haratins, in order to separate them from us”.

**Lack of Access to Basic Services and Stigmatisation**

Accordingly, the Bellaah people in the Northern regions of Mali, who are a majority in some areas, are deprived from an access to public services, aid, projects and other opportunities provided by the State and the partners of Mali. As mentioned above, the Bellaah community is subjected to stigmatisation and they are the community that suffers the most from negatives prejudices by other neighbouring communities.

**Vulnerability to Crime**

In addition, the Bellaah are the victims of perpetual attacks by bandits. These attacks have a brutal and devastating impact on their daily life. Even if they manage to escape from the bullets of gangs, their herds are stolen and sold in neighbouring countries. No matter if they are nomads or sedentary, they are the victims of assassinations, destruction of their goods, robbery, rape and the abduction of their children, girls and workforce. The violence and the persistence of insecurity force many Bellaah to migrate to the southern regions of Mali.

**Integration**

The Bellaah community, in search of stability, is confronted with the difficulties of integration in the host regions of the south. The consecutive arrivals of populations for several decades has not been welcomed by the public administration in terms of accompanying measures, stabilisation and assistance for the integration of “citizens in difficulties”.

*Photo courtesy of Guillaume Colin@Flickr*
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The term “Bellah” comes from a denomination given by Arabs to every black people living in the Sahel-Saharan strip. The majority of these Black people were peasants. In Arabic, the peasant is called “Fellah”, which has changed to Bellah over time.

The Bellah people gradually had to return to the South due to the drought of Sahara. Part of them have found themselves being in contact with white people coming from Yemen, Israel and Europe and who were called “Arab-Berbers”. Historically, Bellah people form communities of “Blacks” which speak a common language, “Tamashek”, also called “the language of Bellah” in Niger.

In Mali, “Bellah” means “slaves of the Tuaregs”. These “Black People” have indeed been subjected to slavery, often after being kidnapped by Tuaregs and being put on the caravans of slave traders which travel from the South of Sahara to the North. In this respect, all those who have become the slaves of Tuaregs have been called “Bellah”.

The Bellah people came into being as a servile class, constituted of members of a number of sub-Saharan sedentary communities that were taken from their original homelands – being the lands of the Bambara, the Bobo, the Dogon, the Peuls and the Songhois – as a consequence of Arabo-Tuareg conquests. Alternative names for this servile class were “Tamacheq” and “Ikelan”, the latter of which referred directly to their subordinate status in Tuareg society at the time.

Under Tuareg rule, the Bellah have led mostly nomadic lives for centuries and acquired specific cultural traits which set them apart from both the dominant Tuareg culture, as well as from the other sub-Saharan cultures that make up the melting pot of today’s Malian society.

After Mali’s independence in 1960, the Bellah people have become more and more settled and migrated towards the humid regions to the south of what had become their traditional homelands – Ségou, Koulikoro and Mopti. This change has been caused both by the abolition of slavery under the rule of Modibo Keïta, which significantly altered the function and role of the Bellah in Tuareg society, and by droughts and rebellions in the north, that have made their homelands less hospitable.

CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT

The Bellah people speak the Tamasheq language like Tuaregs although they have a different lifestyle. Like the other communities in Mali, the Bellah people are mostly Muslim. However, the number of Christian Bellahs in the Tombouctou and Ménaka region has been increasing since 1990.
Just like Tuaregs, the Bellah people share all the nomadic and sedentary living spaces in northern Mali. They represent the majority in many cities in the northern and central Mali such as Ménaka, Gourma Rharous, Gossi, Tombouctou, Goundam, Tonka, Diré and Léré. According to some research, the Bellah people comprise 60% of the population in the Ségou region. The Bellah and Songhoi peoples constitute 87 percent of the population in Tombouctou, Gao and Ménaka, thus being the biggest community in these cities. The Mopti and Ségou regions have become reception and residence areas for the Bellah fleeing insecurity and repetitive rebellions in other parts of the country. However, some also live in the capital, Bamako, and in the rest of the country where they carry out various economic activities such as shepherding, agriculture, commerce and labour.