

PERFORMING CULTURE: A TUAREG ARTISAN AS CULTURAL INTERPRETER



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A Tuareg smith visited an import shop in Texas to discuss, display, and enact aspects of Tuareg art and culture, and later held informal conversations at a reception. This artisan, at home in Niger, is a member of a social category that manufactures jewelry, tools, and weapons, presides at rites of passage, recites histories, and serves as go-betweens for their aristocratic patrons. This essay describes the artisan's control over cultural representation in this "borderlands" encounter and analyzes cultural tradition as a multi-mediated process. At the Texas shop, this artist gave a "performance" of cultural intimacy. Notwithstanding his talented presentation, there were struggles over translation and representation which alternately empowered and muted his cultural voice. Like many ethnographers, this "cultural ambassador" must deploy rhetorical strategies to convey his culture, and in that way this essay contributes to studies of negotiation over meaning by mediators between cultures. (Culture brokers, culture translation, Tuareg, Niger)

This essay addresses the question of who controls the translation and representation of culture during encounters in borderlands. This question is considered in the context of a Tuareg smith/artisan from Niger, West Africa, visiting an import shop in Houston, Texas. During his visit, this smith/artisan conducted an ethnographic performance. In effect, in presenting Tuareg culture, he displayed art objects, explained the role of smith/artisans in his society, demonstrated jewelry-making and Tuareg tea-making, and socialized with his American audience at a Japanese-style teahouse.

As elsewhere in Africa, Tuareg smith/artisans, called in Tamajaq *inaden* (sing. *ened*, fem. sing. *tenet*), possess much local historical and cultural knowledge¹ (Bernus 1981; Loughran and Seligman 2005; Casajus 2000; Rasmussen 1992, 1997, 2004). In addition to smithing, in some regions and groups of Tuareg, *inaden* are oral historians, musicians, and ritual specialists who serve alongside Islamic scholars at rites of passage, help negotiate bridewealth, and act as political and social go-betweens, particularly as confidantes of women and traditional chiefs. Thus this visiting smith is particularly expert at representing his culture to American audiences. The central questions here are how the visiting artisan presents his culture to others in what amounts to a translation process, and more broadly, what anthropologists can learn from this performance of "cultural intimacy" (Herzfeld 2005) and a cultural encounter, where such knowledge confronts sympathetic audiences.

Most Tuareg live in Saharan and Sahelian regions of Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Algeria, and Libya. They are semi-nomadic, Muslim, and combine pre-Islamic matrilineal and Qur'anic and state patrilineal legal influences.² Precolonial hereditary, endogamous social categories include an aristocracy, tributaries, artisans, and (in the past) slaves, all of whom have experienced many changes in their roles and relationships (Bernus 1981; Claudot-Hawad 1993; Nicolaisen and Nicolaisen 1997; Kohl 2009; Rasmussen 2006), from French colonial interference, and later, independent state governments, ecological disasters, and wars.

Smith/artisans and aristocrats (*imajeghen*) practiced client–patron relationships, in which smiths were inherited by aristocratic patron families through noble women's marriage. Many artisans, traditionally jacks-of-all-trades, have in recent years specialized as jewelers, and become more dependent on the tourist trade, since many of their noble patrons have been impoverished from herd loss during a series of droughts and armed conflicts. Along with some other Tuareg, some inaden have moved to towns in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, and also traveled abroad to sell their art objects.

Many inaden, however, still reside in their rural and urban home communities, except while traveling to sell their wares. In rural areas, male artisans specialize in metalwork, woodwork, and stonework, and female artisans specialize in dyeing, cutting, and embroidering leather. In the Niger Air Mountain countryside, inaden continue to serve aristocratic families, but with more flexible client–patron ties and modified roles.

Based on my extensive research on smith/artisans in their rural and urban communities, I assess how the Tuareg visitor to the United States retained his local cultural voice in the construction and translation of Tuareg cultural knowledge. This knowledge emerges in sharp relief, even at a distant geographic and cultural remove from his community in Niger. In some respects, this artisan becomes like an indigenous performer of ethnography. Nonetheless, some interference and “strains” occur over meanings, although these cannot be reduced to mere “misunderstandings” or cultural blurring. The many voices here sometimes compete in a Bakhtinian (1984) polyphony. In this interstitial cultural space, meanings emerge with some interference from prevalent assumptions and values of the American middle-class audience. But the artisan retains some control over cultural representation as interlocutor in dialogues with his audience.

Recent anthropological concepts, such as “technospace” (Appadurai 1996, 2002) and “middle-ground of friction” (Tsing 2005), shape but do not fully determine the outcome of cultural translation. As interlocutor during his presentation, this artisan is empowered as an active discussant who moderates reflections on culture. In so doing, he draws upon, and richly elaborates, the

longstanding role of African smith/artisans as social mediators. He also transcends and expands mediators' roles beyond the traditional contexts of ritual and myth (Beidelman 1971; Douglas 1966; Levi-Strauss 1963) or recent contexts of broadcast media (De Vries 2008; Morgan 2008).

THE VISIT

The import shop this Tuareg smith visited, called Ten Thousand Villages, is part of an association called by the same name which promotes fair trade, and works with NGO-sponsored artisan workshops abroad. The organization imports handcrafted items from more than 30 countries. It pays the artisans and their organizations 50 percent of the retail price before shipping. Fair payment of artisans is a condition for the marketing.

Prior to the visit, I met the store staff, identified myself as an anthropologist familiar with Tuareg culture, and was invited to attend the artisan's presentation at the shop and the reception at a teahouse/café later. (I had neither a commercial nor a volunteer relationship with this shop.)

Ten Thousand Villages publicized the visit of a Tuareg smith/artisan in June 2006 in a poster on the store window and in a neighborhood newspaper, which said:

A store appearance June 1 by Aliou Mohammed [pseudonym], master silversmith from Niger, will dramatize the importance of fair trade marketing assistance to artisans working to make a sustainable living in "underdeveloped" [sic] areas of the world. The event is scheduled to begin at 1:30 PM for approximately one hour at Ten Thousand Villages.... Touring the U.S. with the sponsorship of this organization [Ten Thousand Villages], Aliou will show the steps involved in the lost-wax process used in making the distinctive Tuareg silver jewelry. He will also talk about his life and how he and his friends developed their craft business. An interpreter will be on hand for visitors who do not speak French, the official language of Niger.

Two terms in this article, "underdeveloped" and "craft," emphasize an evolutionary ranking, despite the good intentions of the organization and its goal of fair remuneration for artisans worldwide. This contradiction went unnoticed by the organizers and audience. Aliou never commented on it, perhaps because he realized that the term would prompt sympathetic persons to attend and purchase his wares, but also out of politeness. Note also the emphasis on the nation-state, Niger, rather than the culture, ethnicity, or language of the artisan as the unit of affiliation and identity. Indeed, missionary-based organizations like Ten Thousand Villages, international NGOs, and other aid organizations working in Niger tend to refer to the national identity, despite intermittent tensions between regions and groups there.³

Also obscuring in the written publicity for this event was the somewhat one-dimensional representation of the artisan as a silversmith, a jeweler/craftsman. While this reflects the increased specialization by many *inaden* in towns, in transnational travel, and itinerant trading, other *inaden*, particularly those in the countryside, remain jacks-of-all-trades. They not only manufacture silver jewelry for their “noble” patron families, other Tuareg, and outsiders, but also make wooden, metal, and stone household items, gardening and herding implements, and leather sacks for caravan trade and travel. Although *inaden* are not the only ones who relate oral histories and folktales, and recite poetry, Tuareg agree that *inaden* are particularly adept at verbal arts⁴, which gives them power in ritual, and they are adept at historical and cultural knowledge (Casajus 2000).

The representation by Ten Thousand Villages was not simply a distortion. The silversmithing and economic activities were foregrounded in order to attract customers to the import shop, and in this respect, did correspond closely to the more urban Tuareg smiths who, since having specialized in silversmithing, call themselves by the French term *les bijoutiers* (jewelers), rather than *les forgerons* (blacksmiths) or the Tamajaq *inaden* in the presence of outsiders (Loughran and Seligman 2005). Still, something was indeed lost in translation here for the more complex and embedded sociality of *inaden*, especially rural and older ones. Nonetheless, this dimension of smiths’ roles emerged during that event, and powerfully shaped cultural meanings.

The brochure for this visit featured a small photograph of Aliou at his forge, and stated:

Aliou Mohammed, a master silver artisan, crafts traditional Tuareg jewelry in his village of Terhazer, near Agadez, Niger. Using a lost-wax method to cast the silver, Mohammed first creates a wax mold, forms clay around the mold, and pours molten silver into the hardening clay. Using hand tools, he etches traditional designs and adds ebony inlay to create the finished piece.

After providing a detailed, accurate description of the lost-wax technique in Tuareg jewelry manufacture, the brochure quoted Aliou, “Our work is very important to us, as it enables us to live, to help each other and to meet the needs of our family.” He added that the Ten Thousand Villages order helped him and others provide for their families during a recent famine in Niger. He said, “The artists were able to help their families in the most affected areas of Niger. And being able to send money ourselves, rather than simply being a recipient of aid builds our dignity.”

Dignity is important, particularly to aristocratic Tuareg, but in Houston, this cultural value becomes more egalitarian to appeal to the predominantly middle-class, liberal, American clientele’s ideals. In Niger’s rural

communities, artisans are supposed to de-emphasize equality and purposefully act undignified; they are supposed to emphasize their ambiguous status as different from, yet close to, other Tuareg (Rasmussen 2004), in order to freely serve as non-aligned go-betweens, oral historians, and genealogists for noble descent groups and clans in their hierarchical society. Inaden often relate to others with relaxed familiarity, including ribald joking, buffoonery, and comical dance performances; and they may say things and names other Tuareg should not. As inaden in Niger declared to me, “We joke with nobles, since we lack dignity and reserve ... this quality enables us to (better) arrange their marriage and bridewealth.”

In his statements quoted in the brochure and newspaper article, Aliou also expressed global neoliberal capitalist economic ideals of individual foresight, advance planning, and self-sufficiency—traits not emphasized by many in his home community, where there is great emphasis upon spending, rather than saving, but, importantly, spending not solely in satisfaction of individual wants, but, at least ideally, as a moral obligation, and in order to be generous and express ideals of reciprocity. Superiors and patrons are supposed to support and protect subordinates and clients (Claudot-Hawad 1993; Kohl 2009; Nicolaisen and Nicolaisen 1997; Rasmussen 2006). Of course, not everyone practices these ideals, but the important point is that Tuareg cultural values are modified in this Houston narrative to include everyone being able to make a living without receiving assistance. The dependency of a poor subordinate or client, although not welcome or prestigious in Niger, does not have quite the same stigma as in the United States. For example, in the towns of Niger there are beggars’ guilds and chiefs of beggars, and in Tuareg communities in the countryside there is great emphasis upon giving alms (*takote*), despite some conflicting feelings of shame over the indignity of poverty. The category of dependents (*tilaqqawen*) once referred to social inferiors, tributaries, and persons of servitude, but today this term denotes poor persons and younger household members. Despite the stigma of being poor, the ideal of supporting dependents and subordinates by high-ranking persons in vestiges of the old client–patron system is still somewhat valued, even in the emerging socioeconomic classes based on new criteria of remunerative work. The quotation therefore conveys a plural, fluid, and changing predicament, rather than a monolithic, or static condition: missionaries and NGOs have imported a Protestant ethic, superimposing its values onto local organizations such as that to which Aliou belongs. Thus Aliou’s narrative here is multilayered: its cultural translation reflects Tuareg culture as a dynamic encounter, even at home in Niger.

An additional flyer advertised the Ten Thousand Volunteer Appreciation Event, and invited customers to attend an informal tea party from 7–8:30 PM, following the store demonstration:

Please join us for an enjoyable evening as we celebrate our store's dedicated volunteers and our relationship with artisans around the world. Help us welcome silver craftsman Aliou Mohammed from the UPAP/Tanakra (a regional branch name of his artisan co-operative in Niger). Please bring a guest, perhaps a friend who would like to become a volunteer, to enjoy delicious desserts and fine fairly-traded, organic teas from around the world and to relax in the wonderful atmosphere of Connie and Allison's Té House of Tea.

The publicity literature also explained how Aliou and his associates originally marketed their wares by traveling through France selling from backpacks. After several years, they founded the Union of Peasants for Self Development (UPAP is the abbreviation for the French name of this organization), which later began marketing jewelry and leather crafts through Ten Thousand Villages.

Neither the English term "peasants" used in Houston nor the French term *les paysans* has any precise equivalent in Tamajaq. Some functionaries and officials, NGOs, and aid agencies in Niger use the term "les paysans" to refer to rural peoples in general, in order to distinguish them from the urban dwellers. Although some urbanized Tuareg occasionally also use this term, they invariably use the French, and never translate it into Tamajaq. Approximations include the Tamajaq term, *tilaqqawen*, which, as already noted, denotes both poor people (including former slaves and clients) and younger members of a household, thereby implying dependents. But the idea in much of the English-speaking world, including lay and academic understandings of this term, (of a peasant as landless in a landowning, sedentarized farming society) cannot be applied accurately to the Tuareg, even in semi-sedentarized, agro-pastoral oases in the Air region. For although land there is becoming more privately owned, with increasing competition for diminishing oasis gardening plots precariously carved out along dried riverbeds, the term "peasant" does not fit exactly into local socioeconomic categories, nor does it convey the longstanding and changing client–patron relationships, since many Tuareg of diverse social origins (even individuals within the same household) now mix different livelihoods, (except for smithing at the forge, which tends to remain inherited). The important point is not simply that there was a misunderstanding; rather, in the process of cultural and linguistic translation, what occurred was a superimposition of multiple colonial and postcolonial state socioeconomic categories upon local ones, reflecting Tuareg changes characterized by emerging social classes, but nonetheless somewhat distorted or elided in translation.

In the foregoing narratives, the role of the promotional literature is powerful in mediating cultural representation. Even though the literature quoted Aliou, his narrative in many ways became suppressed. The finer nuances of his voice came into focus later, in his presentation/performance at the shop. Long-term historical, cultural, and social contexts tended to be attenuated in the publicity. Yet the translation that came through cannot be dismissed merely as inaccurate, for the publicity narrative of Aliou's background and goals reflects important processes in Tuareg society. In the publicity literature, the commercial considerations predominated in order to attract the interest of readers. Only during and following his presentation and performance, in his responses to questions and during conversations, did Aliou regain more power in cultural representation, creatively integrating his roles as jeweler, verbal art specialist, and social mediator, and in effect, unofficial anthropologist.

THE PRESENTATION

In the Ten Thousand Villages import shop there was intensive dialogue on the topics of Tuareg culture and visual art. There, Aliou spoke in French, the official language of Niger, rather than in Tamajaq. A French Canadian interpreter translated his presentation and subsequent questions and answers into English.

During his exegesis of his culture to an American audience at the import store, in the organizers' advertising of his visit, and in the interpreter's translation of his words, there were, of course, cultural flows of knowledge—yet, these were mediated by different parties. The audience also was significant, as was their immediate subjectivity and wider infrastructural forces. The artisan's exegesis of his culture and art was aimed at the American audience, and his responses were cleverly tailored to their questions. The Americans (mostly educated, some professionals, but non-specialists in anthropology or African Studies) in turn, revealed their own cultural values in that process. In many respects, this encounter offered a space in which the Tuareg specialist, in effect, powerfully theorized his own culture, critiquing and modifying it as well as describing it. In addition, he also—albeit unconsciously—conducted his own ethnographic analysis of the United States as “a foreign country” in skillfully tailoring his cultural translation for his audience, thereby facilitating some de-familiarization by all and some degree of mutual knowledge production. This occurred in a context of give-and-take, with several parties translating languages and cultures, but one that was, nonetheless, hierarchical.

At the store, during his presentation, Aliou and his French Canadian interpreter, a young woman recruited by the organization bringing him to Ten Thousand Villages, sat on mats on the floor next to a forge and jewelry samples. Speaking of his kin-based local apprenticeship during his childhood, Aliou said that his father's strictness made him discard imperfect items. "When I learned silversmithing from my father, my father broke items not well-made as a pedagogical technique. Then, I completed an item my father was making because my father had to go to a wedding. This was my diploma!" This brought chuckles from the audience. He implied that his father was busy, but also approved his work. He also insightfully conveyed the important point, albeit subtly using humor, that his apprenticeship and certification, though conferred orally and informally, was equal to a diploma in an educational system. In his cultural translation, Aliou also utilized his verbal art skills, joking with the American audience as he would with his noble and other patron families at home. Thus he acted as a kind of cultural critic in his analysis of apprenticeship. He continued:

At first, my mother opposed sending me to school, but my father convinced her this was OK because an older son had been to school and became a teacher, but remained Tuareg [i.e., he did not change or abandon traditions]. Also, the school director was Tuareg. He offered me cookies, and let me play with other children there. [He then added, to convey mobility in terms Americans would understand,] We [Tuareg] are transhumant. We are all Berber, but are divided by national boundaries.

Here, Aliou alluded to the historical Tuareg opposition to secular schools from fears that they would become sources of state control through censuses and other records, and would destroy cultural autonomy. Schools were one of several means the French (and, later, some independent governments) used to control the heretofore free nomadism (in herding and caravan trading) across formerly porous borders (Claudot-Hawad 1993). He then added a bit of historical perspective on the colonial disruption of ethnic and cultural borders and the imposition of artificial nation borders.

Aliou's remarks conveyed some key aspects of Tuareg historical experience, which he did not elaborate and which the audience did not probe further. Tuareg experience of border crossings has been longstanding, but with colonial and post-colonial state controls, there are now greater cultural barriers, rather than smooth cultural flows across spaces. Although nomadism has taken new forms, notably in labor migration of youths to Libya, Algeria, and more recently, France and Italy, this is very difficult to achieve in the face of intermittent political restrictions (especially by the European Union), sporadic armed conflicts in border zones of Niger, Mali, Algeria, and Libya, and precarious labor conditions. In Libya, some employers are rumored to

refuse to pay Tuareg workers and even occasionally to shoot them. These “borderliners,” as Kohl (2009) terms them, very often find it impossible to settle down anywhere, since they cannot find regular, remunerative work, and so they periodically return to the Sahara. Thus, while globalization undeniably occurs, assumptions of accompanying de-territorialization, loss of barriers, and smoother flows are misleading for Niger.

In his demonstration, Aliou showed some silver bracelets modeled on a train he had seen in France. “My bracelet design here is called “*le train*,” inspired by a train.” Then he demonstrated making earrings by the lost-wax process. This usually takes one day; but for the American audience he did this in an hour. In Niger, when Tuareg traditional aristocratic patrons commission jewelry and other items, these orders take anywhere from several days to several months to complete. Some artisans in the new NGO-sponsored cooperative workshops are pressured to hurry for the tourist trade. Inaden I encountered in a market in Bamako, Mali, agreed that the older pieces were “better... since we now have to often make things very quickly... for the money. Whereas in the past, we made these items more slowly and carefully...” Today, rural nobles pay artisans in a mix of cash and food products, such as sugar, tea, and millet, and nobles are no longer compelled to limit their orders to those inaden whom their family has inherited through marriage as dowry.

Still, for most Tuareg today these transactions are never solely commercial, they remain personal, and include much sociability, including repeated visits to the forge, gossip, and continual negotiations with the artisans. Also, the creativity of the artisan is important, though some adherence to designs is required for older pieces of jewelry. Expatriate and functionary customers of smith/artisans today vary in their understandings of these practices. Peace Corps volunteers tend to be more sensitive to them, and of course, have more time to remain and wait for products. Many tourists passing through Niger, by contrast, are in a hurry and do not understand the importance of dropping by with some tea and sugar to see an artisan. Thus jewelry-making practices vary in time and commitment, and involve a range of personal engagement. At the Ten Thousand Villages presentation, the connections between depth of social engagement with the artisan and quality of the finished product remained mostly hidden from the audience. Aliou only hinted at this when he acknowledged shortcutting his work on the bracelet.

Audience questions following Aliou’s presentation included asking where he obtained silver; how smithing began; how he became involved with Ten Thousand Villages; the significance of the Tuareg men’s face veil; and women’s roles. The questions reflected an American cultural emphasis on the visual, the concern with gender, and at times, the difficulty in reconciling

Tuareg women's high social status and economic independence with American stereotypes of Islam.

The more Aliou responded to questions, the greater became his role as interlocutor and mediator. At the same time, paradoxically, he also modified cultural meanings in accordance with his own conception of his audience's knowledge. In his responses, Aliou politely but firmly asserted, "Islam respects women, as do local Tuareg cultural values: Men come from women's stomachs, not from the sky."

In these remarks regarding women and religion in Tuareg society, Aliou emphasized the connections, rather than disjunctions or contradictions, between Islam and Tuareg gender constructs, though he also alluded to pre-Islamic matrilineal descent, but so subtly that they were muted in translation to the Americans. Whereas some outsiders assume these values are in conflict, residents in Niger view them as interwoven and complementary, and Aliou conveyed this without tediously explaining that the local system today in most Tuareg communities combines matriliney predating conversion to Islam, with Arab-influenced Qur'anic law and patriliney. In the towns, there is the colonial legacy of state law (*laique*) from the French system. In Aliou's exegesis, interestingly, he juxtaposed Islam and Christianity, the religion he assumed most Americans there adhered to: "Christianity values virgin birth," thereby linking Tuareg matrilineal influences and Tuareg cultural interpretations of Islam and respect for women to the Virgin Mary, a technique which, in effect, offset any tendency to oppose Islam to matriliney, or to stereotype Islam as monolithic.

Aliou referred to the custom of bridewealth (*taggalt* in Tamajaq), but he used the French term *la dot*, which was translated as "dowry" in English by the interpreter. Thus the two separate practices were conflated in this session for the Americans, who were expected to be more familiar with the term "dowry."

Concerning local dress, Aliou explained, "The men's veil is a custom, but there is a choice of colors, though indigo is popular. It also protects from sand and dust." Here, he avoided the complex and changing meanings of the men's veil as a marker of gender, modesty, and aristocratic dignity (Murphy 1964; Rasmussen 1991, 2010), in favor of emphasizing its environmental practicality. By doing so, he provided a transition to his next point about droughts, locusts, and diminished herds. This strategy of style recalls an ethnographic rhetorical genre given priority over "objective facts" (Clifford and Marcus 1986). In effect, some aspects of Aliou's performance are comparable to experimental ethnography but in an aural medium, through his translating of culture in the question-answer discussion session.

Following his jewelry demonstration, Aliou prepared tea by boiling the leaves in a small enamel teapot, adding sugar, and serving it in small glasses in the Tuareg manner. The store staff and the publicity literature had described this as a “tea ritual.” Aliou explained that tea-drinking is central to Tuareg sociability, and described its symbolism: “The first glass is hard as life (a bitter, strong brew); the second glass is good as love (more sugar is added along with mint); and the third glass is sweet as death (more sugar, with progressively weakened tea-leaves).” (This last glass is an allusion to paradise.) The Americans present did not taste the tea at the shop, but did so about two hours later when the tea was made at a Japanese-style teahouse/café in another part of town.

As the crowd broke up just before shifting to the teahouse/café, Aliou took me aside and related some news from Niger and France: For example, the former chief in a semi-nomadic oasis where I have worked was deceased, and his son became his successor. When we discussed my early research topic, female spirit possession, Aliou expressed the view of many men, and a few women, but one at odds with the explanations of my female informants— that women become possessed because they miss absent men—but this explanation is at odds with the additional explanations of many other of my female informants. I did not contradict him, and he politely and kindly deferred to me as “more knowledgeable” regarding Tuareg women, even though he was Tuareg, thereby conveying cultural emphasis of Tuareg respect for women, for written scholarship, and the etiquette in Niger more generally emphasizing politeness and not directly contradicting someone.

In other conversations with him, he said that before Houston he toured Boston, Princeton, and Austin. In Houston, he stayed with a family in a suburban neighborhood. According to his hosts, he was taken aback by the high status, even the humanization, of dogs here. The host family took him to a ranch because he wanted to see cowboys and livestock, not surprisingly given his origin in a semi-nomadic rural community.

THE TEA RECEPTION

At the tea reception held at a Japanese-style teahouse/café in another neighborhood of Houston, Aliou made tea and served it, again on mats, but here against a background of a Japanese-style décor of sliding silk screens, ceramic pots, and bamboo furniture and appliances. The café served cookies and other pastries with the tea. The Tuareg of northern Niger and Mali usually serve tea alone or with peanuts, goat cheese, or meat (which is preferred, although expensive and rare). Side dishes of mostly protein and complex carbohydrates are related to their cultural emphasis upon balance in their

thermal/humeral medical system, which resembles those of Morocco (Rasmussen 2006). Refined sugar (often in the form of cubes in the Sahara) called *amagal n edaz* (“the medicine against fatigue”) is added to the tea, and some perceptively recognize that sugary tea masks hunger, always a threat in intermittent droughts. But many Tuareg emphasized to me that any additional sugar on the side would be “too much,” preferring instead the sugar only with the tea (i.e., not additional sweet desserts). At the teahouse/café, when I attempted to tactfully explain this difference to one of the American organizers, she expressed astonishment and did not believe that Tuareg—or anyone else—did not serve refined sweets with sweet tea. Again, Aliou was courteous, and did not mention this slippage.

Therefore, although the tea-making demonstrations by the artisan and the tasting by the Americans included an explanation of Tuareg tea-drinking and its symbolic categories and social meanings, there were multiple mediations occurring: the American organizers projected Japanese ritual and cultural space and English tea-time dietary items onto the Tuareg custom, in serving the already very sweet tea with American and English desserts. These re-classifications, in effect, mixed symbolic culinary categories, violating powerful yet implicit boundaries for some parties (Douglas 1966) in ways Aliou and I could not explain explicitly with ease, as these boundaries involved deeply-held, often unconscious and implicit symbols. Thus implicit meanings of classification systems remain powerful, even in their re-alignments at that event. Aliou himself did not address these ironies, in courtesy as a guest and visitor, departing somewhat from an ethnographic performance that would have noted the irony. His cultural analysis and representation focused upon his own home. He might have, but did not, take the next step toward a greater empowerment of indigenous knowledge.

CONCLUSIONS

A truism of post-structural anthropology is that classifications, including metaphorical cultural spatial models, do not occur in a vacuum. For most humans, including travelers and migrants, there is also a rootedness or grounding with cultural categories. To better understand the uses of categories and classifications by cultural brokers in borderlands spaces such as the Houston import shop and teahouse, the forces beyond the immediate context of the encounter require examining. There, powerful mediating parties affected constructions of Tuareg identities, particularly inaden roles and relationships.

Aliou’s presentations in the United States were not held at large, crowded, international festivals or jewelry fairs, economic events which tend to foster

greater social distance and predominantly impersonal interactions between buyers and sellers. Instead, Aliou visited small shops mostly in college towns or university neighborhoods in cities, such as Rice University Village in Houston, the location of the Ten Thousand Villages shop mentioned in this article. Predominant in these settings were mostly middle-class, educated audiences and customers, many with liberal (political) views, at least concerning fair trade, including some who practiced or were interested in artisan activities. Importantly, these customers' goals coincided with cultural expectations in Tuareg communities, particularly in rural areas, concerning noble–smith and customer–smith/artisan relations: fair remuneration, sociability (visiting, chatting, and reciprocity), not solely commercial transaction with the artisan, and payment not solely in cash, but including “presents” such as food (in Niger, sugar, tea, and millet; in Houston, tea and pastries.)

Tuareg artisans operate at the intersections of both international/global history and geography, and intimate and subjective cultural, social, ritual, and political worlds. Their positions are half-embedded, half-dislodged in each place, and this positioning, rather than displacing, facilitates cultural translation, however approximate, alternately amplifying and muting inaden voices. In these processes, several key Tamajaq concepts play key roles: *tangalt*, denoting indirect speech, discourse by allusion, metaphor, or “shadowy speech” (Casajus 2000), greatly valued by persons of aristocratic origin in informal conversation and in oral art style such as poetry; and the cultural value of *takarakit*, denoting reserve/respect or modesty, also most strictly observed by persons of aristocratic origin. The important point is that inaden at home allegedly lack these qualities and dignity, but this lack is not viewed as a deficiency. Rather it is a source of power, for it enables the artisans to play important roles in Tuareg society.

At times during the cultural encounter in Houston, Aliou deviated from these artisan patterns: he sometimes conformed to artisan role expectations and sometimes projected attributes normatively associated with Tuareg aristocrats. This performance or “poetics” of identity was double-edged in his power over the representation of his culture. On the one hand, projecting the noble stereotypical qualities of dignity, reserve, and tactful or indirect allusion in speech enabled him to mediate diplomatically with American standards of etiquette to make his audience feel good about themselves, in learning something about Aliou and the Tuareg and in contributing to a worthy cause. This was shown when Aliou practiced some indirect allusion in his politeness toward the American audience, his reserve and respect toward the store staff and me, the ethnographer, as shown in his tact concerning the foods served with the tea and my interpretation of Tuareg female spirit possession.

On the other hand, his performance strategy somewhat blunted the impact of Aliou's voice in constructing cultural translation. At times during the visit, his lack of shadowy speech and reserve in accordance with, rather than deviating from, his role as a smith/artisan shaped his conduct, and continued to empower him in the United States. Recall that he was, for example, free to joke and use language that some more modest and conservative Tuareg would consider a bit shameful, as for example in his comments and terminology regarding women's stomachs, virgin birth, and love. Indeed, *inaden* are often women's confidants in love affairs. This role reinforced his own representation of artisan's roles in cultural translation, if even unintentionally. Yet Aliou's general conduct also conformed to many prevalent ideals back home concerning proper interpersonal relationships between the Tuareg and outsiders. Since *inaden* may pronounce words other Tuareg consider shameful to say, they can negotiate between different parties. In early encounters with Europeans, chiefs and nobles initially employed artisans as a buffer to outsiders. During my early residence in rural Niger, many *imajeghen* felt somewhat shy and reserved toward me at first, sending children and smiths to visit, guide, and assist me. In effect, in those days I was a potential invader from whom nobles used smiths as buffers. Many *inaden* continue these roles as go-betweens in tax-collecting, census taking, food relief distribution, and tourist guides, and approach and befriend outsiders before other Tuareg would. Thus the context of the U.S. import shop significantly altered the terms of his cultural voice, but did not obliterate or transform it completely.

Also instructive and relevant here is a comparison of different settings of *inaden* work. In contrast to the traditional kin-based *inaden* workshops—where workers are not just employees but rather relatives, and where a great deal of informal visiting and conversation take place as *inaden* work at the forge,—at a transnational smithshop in the Saharan town of Agadez owned by the French couture house Hermes, employees' voices are more muted both in their speech and in their design creativity. At the Hermes workshop, they work under the close supervision of an unrelated Agadezian man. Other smiths in Agadez expressed mixed feelings about the Hermes workshop. Some resented its corporate control, and claimed to pity the workers there. Others recognized its benefits of regular pay, as opposed to dependence on unpredictable remuneration from tourists and/or impoverished noble patrons.

At the kin-based artisan workshops, which are numerous in the countryside and small towns in Niger, there is also some regimentation, but this ceases upon the end of the apprenticeship, as Aliou indicated when he described how he took over from his father.

On the one hand, Aliou took his home community along with him into the interstitial cultural space of the import shop. On the other, he was selective in

the voices he projected in his performance, since he had to modify his representation of culture to suit his audience. What was at stake, what was gained, and missed or lost for these parties in this cultural encounter? What Aliou gained from this experience was a wider appreciation for his art, and perhaps also, additional customers in more distant locations for his wares, but there was a limited understanding by the audience/customers of the historical, social, and cultural context of Tuareg artisans and their work. In effect, the Americans experienced these encounters with “an exotic artisan” as a kind of reverse tourism: this cultural performance traveled to them. There were hints of Aliou’s own reactions to Houston here that would likely not have surfaced if they had traveled abroad to see a performance staged in the local “home” cultural setting of a hotel, museum, or art center. Aliou also learned something about his American audiences from their questions; namely, some cultural presuppositions and preoccupations of educated, but not specialist persons concerning “high-profile” international issues, such as religion and gender, highlighted by the media. The entrepreneurs and volunteers at Ten Thousand Villages gained publicity for their store and some success in their mission of fair trade. The customers and audience members varied in what they gained from this encounter. Some simply listened politely, purchased jewelry following Aliou’s presentation, and then left. Others were fascinated, and posed questions, usually with good humor and jokes, a prevalent feature of etiquette at such gatherings in the United States. Some—mostly the entrepreneurs in the shop and volunteers supporting the fair trade practices promoted by the import shop—gathered later at the social event in the café. There, most of these persons socialized with each other, particularly those in the Ten Thousand Villages organization. Aliou, though not left alone, sat somewhat apart, surrounded by the French Canadian interpreter and myself. The reason for this social/spatial pattern was not unfriendliness, but rather language limitations—most Americans there did not speak French, and none spoke Tamajaq.

In these spaces of cultural encounters, what was the fate of cultural translation? These contexts of the cultural encounter alert anthropologists to the need for caution in assuming that de-territorialization models, for example, “technospace” (Appadurai 1996), completely uproot local voice and representation of meaning. Yet there are no smooth, unimpeded cultural flows in this “middle-ground” (Tsing 2005). Subjective meanings were projected, albeit through multiple “hoops” of power: international NGOs, missionaries, written advertisements, and language translators. Much is lost in the often superficial translation of local terms into moral terms in English (recall, for example, “dignity”), especially as the translation is supposed by the American hosts to be at the nation-state level (i.e., French rather than Tamajaq). This

slippage reflects the degree to which the nation-state has taken over so many of our own vernacular ideas about culture. Likewise, the mistranslation of a Tuareg/Tamajaq local category of *tilaqawen* into the French *paysans* reflects a romanticized, nostalgic image of the past. In the elision of the distinction between bridewealth and dowry, and in the misunderstandings about the nature of Islam among the Tuareg, the focus was on questions that interest Americans, but might not be salient for a Tuareg. Recall that Aliou himself inquired about other topics, such as livestock herding and ranches in Texas. Also, many meanings, such as the matrilineal/patrilineal distinction, appeared to escape the American non-specialist audience. Thus certain cultural assumptions and presuppositions precluded, or at least minimized, effective knowledge of this visitor's culture. The Americans were well-intentioned, but had difficulty understanding, not solely Tuareg culture, but also the anthropological perspective. This event was not intended to be a course in anthropology; it was intended to promote fair-trade commercial transactions and to assist local artisans (a worthy goal, of course). Yet in staging the performance, organizers also hoped for some degree of international understanding from meeting (however briefly) an exotic other. Indeed, only Aliou the artisan approached anthropological insight, specifically cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2005), in self-recognition, in that he mentioned certain practices that are common to his society, actually a source of solidarity, but that conflict with official nation-state, missionary, and neoliberal capitalist international NGO ideologies.

In cultural translation, several persons authored the meanings in these dialogues, not solely a single individual, in that each voice contributed in some way to the construction of cultural knowledge in these contexts. Fine nuances of multivocal meaning emerged in many comments of the artisan and his audience. But there were also power differentials which, as shown, elided nuanced meanings. The exchanges in mutual knowledge construction were not on equal terms. Much translation of cultural meaning emerged from the artisan as a figure I call "interlocutor," with the added skill of ethnographic performance, albeit within the limits of powerful mediating forces. This role constitutes, as I hope to have shown, in part a continuation, but also partly a modification, of his role as mediator in his home community.

Although his performance was staged primarily to sell wares, much more occurred. Aliou also made his audience appreciate cultural diversity and non-Western art, accept exotic others, and feel satisfied they were helping artisans to help themselves in a neoliberal global economy with its appeals to individual initiative. But in light of the challenges outlined above, to what extent and how did this artisan's role as cultural broker empower his anthropologist-like voice? As shown, in translating his home cultural

meanings, Aliou also modified them, suggesting some parallels with conventional and “experimental” ethnography, but ways in which he navigated the different parties (and barriers) to translation reveal finer nuances of circulating meanings in globalization, and warn anthropologists against too-facile generalizations concerning borderlands processes. Since relations between artisans and their traditional patrons of aristocratic descent in Niger have become modified in the countryside and are breaking down in the larger towns, Aliou in effect, related to his American audience much as he would to his old noble patron families back home: in, for example, his lively joking, in his easy sociability and pleasant conversation during his jewelry-making and tea preparation (indeed, often, artisans prepare tea at the feast phase of noble rites of passage!), accompanied by subtle social analysis and critique (again, what smith/artisans do during praise-singing phases of noble rites of passage!), and above all, in selling his art products to his new clientele, which many nobles back home can no longer afford.

Many classic and pioneering anthropological works, especially symbolic-oriented studies, have shown the importance of mediators within cultural, “mythical,” and ritual contexts (Beidelman 1971; Douglas 1966; Levi-Strauss 1963). More recent approaches to mediators and mediation—even in studies of religion (De Vries 2008)—have placed less emphasis upon ritual mediating in small-scale, face-to-face, micro-community contexts, but rather focused more intently upon the far-flung global communication media (Meyer and Moors 2006; Morgan 2008). Although constructive, the latter have tended to approach “media” in a literalist manner. In my view, understanding media, mediators, and translation over larger terrains requires sensitivity to problems of translation in ways that retain the subjectivity and intimacy of small-scale, face-to-face social-, ritual-, and performance-mediating contexts (in spite of the current fashionable emphasis upon high-tech communication media such as the Internet), which coincide with some ethnographic concerns. By detaching the mediating process somewhat from its more literal media communications frame, for example, by approaching this visiting smith/artisan as a kind of interlocutor in an intimate, face-to-face setting—albeit one constrained by powerful global forces, i.e., fair trade movements, NGOs, global communications, etc.), this essay may have avoided the pitfalls of older models of cultural translation, but at the same time, also salvaged the more valuable post-structural uses of hermeneutics.

Fischer and Marcus (1986) have constructively analyzed interference in post-structural/post-modern cultural translation, and Asad (in Clifford and Marcus 1986) has constructively warned that the translation of culture is not the same thing as translation of languages. But we must not forget to examine subjective meaning transformations of language and culture intertwined in

systems of power. This smith/artisan, in effect, translated between social (in his aural presentation and discussions), ritual (in the tea demonstration), and “communications” media (in his quotes in the pre-performance written advertising of the visit). The setting of this visit as “middle-ground,” (Tsing 2005), geographically-distant from the smith’s home community, made a difference in meaning construction. Yet despite significant hierarchies, distance, and time limits, this encounter involved more than purely commercial roles. In the sociability with store-managers, customers, and researcher—however fleeting—this artisan became empowered by expanding on his longstanding go-between role and in effect, conducting his own ethnographic analysis.

As Smith (2004) observed, amending the older dyadic conversational emphasis of Bakhtin (1984) and Volosinov (1973), dialogical meanings may vary even within the same person’s single narrative. In the Houston import shop context, translation, and voice were complexly mediated. The cultural encounters at the Ten Thousand Villages event were not truly “polyphonic” or a harmonious chorus of “voices” over long-term in their infrastructural arrangements. There was, even short-term, some narrowing of cultural meaning composite-like, as shown, in the way the staff introduced Aliou, ways in which the American audience framed their questions to him, and ways the French interpreter translated his presentation. Yet much was also gained, at least for the customers who learned something, however basic, about Tuareg cultural knowledge and practice, and for the artisan, who personalized understandings of cultural exchange and sold his art.

What anthropology can learn from this is that there is a qualitative gulf between living in and experiencing the community and learning about it from some intermediary source. Hence the challenge: How much does one have to know about the home space in order to understand cultural knowledge production in an interstitial space? Can one hope to transcend superficialities in a middle-ground? Tsing (2005:2) sees situations by being “in the middle of things,” but being in the middle is not sufficient in itself to empower all voices in cultural translation. The effects of encounters across spaces can be empowering, but unevenly and unequally. The challenge is to reflect more carefully on whose meanings are empowered, how, and why.

NOTES

1. These data are based upon my residence and numerous field research projects between 1983 and 2007 in Tuareg communities of northern Niger, and more recently in northern Mali, as well as briefly among Tuareg and other Berber-speaking expatriates in France and the United States. In these projects, I am grateful for support from Fulbright-Hays; Wenner-Gren

Foundation; Social Science Research Council; National Geographic; Indiana University; and University of Houston.

2. The language, Tamajaq, and the culture of the Tuareg (sometimes called Kel Tamajaq) are related to those of other Berber peoples of North Africa. Although there is a rich verbal/aural art, visual arts are prominent and there is an emphasis upon aesthetics, personal appearance, and visual beauty. Prevalent art media include, silver, wood, gypsum, soapstone, goat hide, and gold jewelry.

3. For detailed discussions of the origins and tensions, see Bernus 1981, Bouilley 1999; Dayak 1992; DeCalo 1996; Kohl 2009; Kohl and Fischer 2010; and Rasmussen 2010.

4. In some regions, the inaden also performed praise-songs, oral history epics, and ritual functions for noble patron families, somewhat like “griots” or oral historians in neighboring societies.

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248 ETHNOLOGY

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