When the Field Space Comes to the Home Space: New Constructions of Ethnographic Knowledge in a New African Diaspora

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This essay analyzes processes of knowledge construction when Tuareg smith/artisans from the Niger Republic travel to the United States to sell their artworks. Specifically, I examine the effects of these new travels upon the roles of Tuareg smith/artisans as culture-brokers and mediators, and upon the anthropologist’s similar work as messenger and translator in confronting transnational complexity, when the heretofore distant “field” space comes to the anthropologist’s “home” space. The essay explores how this variant of the African “diaspora” brings about a re-negotiation of roles for artisans, as well as a reconstruction of knowledge of African and Tuareg cultures and artisans, and more generally, invites a reflection upon the ethnographic process itself in anthropology. The essay draws upon data from both Niger and the USA, in analyzing longstanding and changing smith/artisan roles as these roles remain situated in Niger, but become embedded in wider social and economic processes and cultural encounters abroad. These encounters produce not solely new art objects, but also new commentaries on cultural boundaries and ethnographic processes. The essay contributes to theories of culture, ethnographic analysis, and the study of African art patronage.
Introduction: Localizing “Global” Cultures

Siting “Moving” Cultures: Mediators, Anthropologists, and the Construction of Ethnographic and Cultural Knowledge

In anthropology and African Studies, many scholars conduct field research. Usually, anthropologists travel to what is called “the field site,” often geographically remote from their home. What happens when longstanding informants/consultants/friends come from the field to the anthropologist, rather than vice versa? In this essay, I analyze a visit by Tuareg smith/artisans from the community where I conduct research in terms of recent efforts toward “siting” culture in transnational settings. It has been correctly pointed out that the old concept of culture as unitary, neatly-bounded, and rooted in a single locality has limitations in light of current global cultural flows (Harvey 1989; Coombe and Stoller 1994; Steiner 1994; Stoller 1999,2002; Glick-Shiller and Fourier 2001). Yet there is also the need to carefully deconstruct and critique these recent formulations of “global” and “moving” culture, and reassess their uses and limitations. Such concepts as “technospaces,” “transcultural flows,” “transnationalism,” and “diasporas” are themselves rooted in our own cultural categories, the products of scholars’ own classifications (Appadurai 1997; Olwig and Hastrup 1997). There is still the need to foreground local responses to these processes, viewed from the other side of borderlands and meeting-grounds. How can anthropologists adequately convey local residents’ responses to “moving” and global cultures, in terms which do not replicate our own categories? Instructive here is a focus upon cultural mediation in, not solely wider transnational infrastructures, but also more intimate settings of give-and-take and mutuality of knowledge construction, at the intersection of dynamic, yet still-salient cultures.

One approach is to focus upon mediators, a social category of long-standing interest in anthropology and African Studies (Stoller 1999, 2002; Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001).1 Here I explore the roles of itinerant smith/artisans and vendors as cultural brokers in the transcultural market-place, who hail from a semi-nomadic rural setting—Tuareg communities in the Saharan Air Mountains of Niger, West Africa. Specifically, I examine the impact of their transnational travel and trade on the shifting nature of the ethnographic fieldsite and the changing nature of anthropological knowledge. Tuareg smiths, like many other African smiths, are important mediating figures in their local community as well as in cultural encounters in urban Niger and abroad (Saenz 1991; Rasmussen 1992,1995a,1998; Loughran 1996; Davis 1999). They work not solely at the forge to manufacture art objects, but also as “masters of ceremonies” and go-be-
tweens in ritual and social contexts to facilitate the forging of relationships. I briefly review how their travel is motivated by the economic and social conditions of postmodernity, that is, by those global economic forces and exploding communication technologies in the social and political transitions of “late capitalism” (Harvey 1989; Coombe and Stoller 1994). I then examine more closely the consequences of their travel to the US, analyzing its implications for anthropological theory, ethnographic method, and studies of African smith/artisans. I explore how this cultural encounter both shapes, and is shaped by, local Tuareg formulations of smith/artisan roles, as well as anthropological formulations of ethnographer’s role, and how these in turn mutually influence each other’s theories of culture, smiths’ art, the field site, and ethnographic practice. I analyze these dynamics in a new “field” setting: Houston, Texas. During their travels, two smith/artisans visited this anthropologist here, staying for several weeks in my home. In this situation, the field site in effect “moves” onto the anthropologist’s home turf, but the research subjects remain the same, thereby making this somewhat different from many other anthropological encounters. The implications of this encounter need to be explored for the light they shed on local/global relationships, culture, knowledge, and African ethnography and diasporas. Here also, the usual conditions of field research are reversed: the anthropologist, who has worked for approximately twenty-five years in small rural Tuareg communities in northern Niger, residing with local families, now hosts two smith/artisans from this community, who have arrived in Houston, Texas to sell their jewelry. They produced, I argue, not solely new art forms, but also new commentaries on culture, art, anthropology, and ethnography.

The American setting presents distinctive conditions for knowledge construction and ethnographic representation concerning art (Steiner 1994) and practices surrounding it. First, it encourages reflection upon African smith/artisans in ways not always obvious in the “other,” distant field site, Niger. Secondly, this travel/visit also empowers the “research subjects,” conventionally called “informants” or “consultants.” During this visit, I assisted my guests in establishing their business connections, outlets for their jewelry, and cultural exchange linkages between Tuareg and Americans. In these processes, I argue, the anthropologist served not solely as language interpreter, but also as social mediator and facilitator (in introducing them to Americans)—this is the longstanding role of Tuareg smith/artisans back in rural Niger: they help arrange noble patrons’ marriages and act as representatives for chiefs in delicate political matters. The anthropologist also served as cultural broker or “translator” between these different worlds. As informant/consultant for the Tuareg guests, in a setting geographically distant
from that of northern Niger yet also very much intact in memory for host and guests, there was a constant intertextual referencing back and forth between the Niger field setting and my own home setting (field setting for my guests). This process modified the construction of knowledge concerning Tuareg culture, African smith/artisans and their art, and culture more generally. It also affected the process of writing about culture. This extension of the field space into the home space therefore opens up new perspectives on dynamic and emergent, rather than static or passive, roles of African smith/artisans from the “periphery” in labor migration and itinerant trading in nations that are officially more “centrally” located as centers of power (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Marcus 1995).

Even before their international travels, Tuareg smith/artisans, who belong to a social stratum that is inherited and endogamous in the Saharan Air Mountain countryside, were accustomed to shaping representations of culture in their work as artisans, musicians, praise-singers, and ambassadors for the traditional aristocracy, their noble patrons. When they travel, they bring some older formulations of their home culture with them, albeit in modified form. I show how, in the United States, Tuareg smith/artisans are more than vendors of jewelry: they become like anthropologists and “cultural critics” in their dialogues and commentaries, revealing the importance of “localizing” as well as “globalizing” forces in multiple modernities. When the heretofore distant field comes to the anthropologist’s home, the mutuality and exchange of cultural and ethnographic knowledge bring about a re-negotiation of roles for artisans and anthropologist, as well as a reconstruction of cultural knowledge. In these processes, I argue, there are both continuities and transformations in the specialized roles of smith/artisans and more generally, “field assistants” or “consultants” that impinge upon the construction of knowledge. In this global process, Tuareg cultural elements are powerful, shaping emergent new forms of knowledge and situating cultural practice (Ortner 1996).

Ethnographic Context and Background

**Tuareg Social Organization and Smith/Artisans’ Roles**

Tuareg today predominantly live in Saharan and Sahelian regions of Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Algeria, and Libya. They are Muslim, semi-nomadic, traditionally stratified, and speak a Berber language, Tamajaq. Nowadays, many combine livestock herding, oasis gardening, caravan and other itinerant trading, migrant labor, and artisan work. In the pre-colonial hierarchical social or-
most occupations corresponded to inherited occupational groupings based on descent. Nobles, tributaries, slaves, smith/artisans, and religious specialists popularly known as marabouts comprised the principal social categories. Smith-artisans, called *inaden*, were clients of noble patrons. Nobles controlled caravans and raiding, and owned most large animals. Some, though not all Tuareg owned slaves who performed domestic, herding, and caravan labor. The more nomadic nobles collected tribute from the more sedentarized, subjugated peoples of varying degrees of clientage and servitude on oases (Keenan 1976; Bernus 1981; Nicolaisen 1997). Tributaries, some of whom were once nobles defeated in battle, raided and traded for nobles. Slavery has been abolished, and nowadays many formerly-subjugated peoples own their own oasis gardens and no longer give tribute to nobles. In some regions, there has been intermarriage between nobles and former slaves, but very few marriages take place between nobles and smith/artisans, generally still disdained.

Recently, some Tuareg have begun to travel farther beyond the Sahara than their caravan trading destinations (Bilma and Kano), in new forms of migrant labor, itinerant trade, and refugee and exile flight from droughts and political violence). They have begun new associations with non-Tuareg, and also non-African, peoples (Claudot-Hawad 1993, 1996; Davis 1999). But there are not yet large or permanent Tuareg immigrant neighborhoods in France or the United States; only a few, predominantly vendors or students, travel to these places and tend to reside there temporarily, usually dispersed.

Many scholars believe that the increased migration of “third world” peoples—including West Africans—devolves directly from what economists call global restructuring (Coombe and Stoller 1994; Stoller 2002). As a complex of economic, political, geographic, and sociocultural phenomena, global restructuring has spurred the growth of multinational corporations and imploded notions of space and time. Its changes have encouraged the outplacement of manufacturing from the first to the third world, the out-sourcing of industrial parts, and the downsizing of corporate payrolls (Stoller 2002:17). The emergence of globalized financial markets has contributed to such conditions as the feminization of the workforce in rapidly proliferating export processing zones, eroded large sectors of the American middle classes, and induced the exponential growth of informal economies. This complex of relations has led less to the global integration of human and economic resources than to the polarization of rich and poor. This polarization is particularly evident in Africa. Economic problems in West Africa, for example, have recently been exacerbated by the World Bank’s insistence that credit-hungry West African governments live with-
in their means, no matter the volatility of international currency markets. The resulting devaluation of the West African franc in 1994, which in one day lowered the region’s standard of living by 50 per cent, affected the lives of millions of people, including many artisans and merchants (Stoller 2002:17). Many migrated to Europe and the United States. Among the Tuareg, labor migrants are thus far overwhelmingly men. At first, most of them tended to find herding and gardening work in Libya; more recently, some have ventured farther to Italy and France. A few have begun factory work, albeit reluctantly. Like some other migrants from Niger, most Tuareg men attempt, if possible, to avoid wage labor, preferring to sell artwork independently as vendors. A few Tuareg reside as expatriates in France. Some are students, others are more long-term exiles from the recent tensions with central governments—in particular, the Tuareg Rebellion, an armed nationalist/separatist conflict between some Tuareg and the central state governments of Niger and Mali, which lasted from approximately 1990 to 1995. But most expatriates tend to maintain close ties with their relatives, yearn for home, and eventually return.

Back home in rural Tuareg communities of Niger, noble-smith relationships persist, albeit in modified form (Saenz 1991; Rasmussen 1992, 1994, 1995a, 1997a). Most rural smiths are “jacks-of-all trades”: they manufacture jewelry, household tools, and weapons for their noble patron families, perform praise-singing at noble rites of passage, recite tales, legends, and genealogies, assist nobles in bridewealth arrangements, and act as go-betweens for chiefs. In towns, smith/artisans have become more specialized, many as jewelers (Rasmussen 1995a; Loughran 1996; Davis 1999). Although smiths have always traveled, usually following their noble patron families, until recently much of their travel was close to home and in connection with their work roles: delivering goods and transmitting messages, serving food and tea, and organizing and presiding over rituals and festivals. Smiths bring together diverse people in the social fabric. They still negotiate nobles’ marriages, assist at school registrations, tax collecting, and relief distributions. In towns such as Agadez, many smiths remain the confidants of nobles.

Thus smiths can enter other people’s social spaces, despite some pollution beliefs that until recently limited physical contact between smiths and nobles (Saenz 1991; Rasmussen 1992, 1995a, 1998). One important role of rural smiths is to facilitate transitions through time and encounters in space; they enable others to take up new statuses and forge new relationships. Like many other African smiths, their arts and other works have always been closely related to liminality and transformation (Herbert 1984; McNaughton 1986).
Smith/artisans reputedly lack reserve (*takarkit*), an important noble cultural value which requires respect toward father, senior relatives on the paternal side, parents-in-law, elders, chiefs, and Islamic scholars. Nobles observe this more strictly, by name teknomy, refraining from eating in respected persons’ presence, and by wearing the men’s face-veil high over the nose and mouth. There are familiar joking relationships between nobles and smith/artisans; they are traditionally fictive cousins (Nicolaisen 1997), yet recently, there are also social tensions because of economic competition (Rasmussen 1998, 2001). Smiths are also free from restrictions of another important noble value, *tangalt*, denoting speaking by indirect allusion and carefully measuring words (Casajus 2000). Thus smith/artisans may pronounce what nobles cannot, due to the latters’ reserve and verbal restrictions, and smiths have served as important mediators and gate-keepers for nobles, who are often fearful of the outside world.

Smiths are also said to lack dignity (*imojagh*). This enables them to accept remuneration from nobles for the work they do. Rural nobles must give food and cash to smiths in exchange for their services at rites of passage and also upon smiths’ request. There is the belief that smith/artisans activate mystic ritual powers, allegedly malevolent, if nobles refuse them presents and remuneration, if they circumvent or ignore their services, or attempt to do work traditionally defined as smiths’ work (Rasmussen 1992, 1998). These “pollution” beliefs are still powerful in the countryside. Smith/artisans may also enact a retaliatory ritual resembling mumming, called *alburusa*, in which they embarrass and exact a fine from a noble after his/her offense. Today, however, many nobles are impoverished from recurrent droughts, and have difficulty supporting smiths. Consequently, some (though not all) smith/artisans have migrated to towns and have become more specialized as silver and gold jewelers, adapting many of their works to the commercial tourist market, and many migrate to the towns of Niger and beyond—France, Belgium, Italy, and occasionally, the United States—to sell their jewelry (Rasmussen 1992, 1998; Gabus 1971:156-57; Loughran 1996:379; Davis 1999:485-501).

Smith/artisans have always traveled, usually following their noble patron families. Until recently, however, much of their travel was close to home—namely, in the rural Saharan region—and in connection with their work roles for noble patrons: for example, delivering goods and transmitting messages; serving food and tea, grilling meat, and singing and drumming at noble name-days and weddings; organizing and presiding over popular festivals. Notably, this work involves assembling diverse peoples and groups in the social fabric and fa-

The new forms of patronage and travel have brought important changes in smiths' social roles. They have become mediators in larger domains, conveying Tuareg cultural representation to wider audiences. Urban smiths are increasingly called "jewelers" rather than "smiths", (in French bijoutiers rather than forgerons), whereas in Tamajaq, the term for them, inaden (sing. ened), does not make this semantic distinction. Nonetheless, important aspects of their mediating and facilitating roles continue.

What is the significance of these processes for anthropology and ethnography? Today, what has previously been thought of as the "imperial frontier," that fragmentary and somewhat overwhelming agglomeration of the shards of empires and colonies, seems to be everywhere in diaspora (Carter 1997:7). The economic and social problems of those remote spaces beyond the West are now a part of our own life. Workers and other migrants have entered a heterogeneous world stratified into classes and divided into states. Like Wolof wood-carvers in Turin, Italy (Carter 1997) and Hausa and Songhay traders in New York (Stoller 2002), Tuareg smith/artisans have extensive social and economic "self-help" networks throughout Europe and the United States, but live very modestly in an informal and often precarious economy. Many lodge in neighborhoods that have been in decline, with many other ethnic groups from Niger and beyond. Most face increasingly repressive anti-immigrant legislation. A few, however, manage to successfully practice their profession as artisans and vendors, acquiring sufficient means to send regular remittances to their families at home and to travel extensively, building up their network of friends and business associates.

Messengers, Go-Betweens, Hosts, and Guests: Smith/Artisans in the United States

The Visit
Upon their travel to the United States, I argue, the Tuareg smith/artisans who visited me in Houston in some respects continued their longstanding roles: they conveyed forms of knowledge as well as material art objects, and mediated social groups and knowledge systems. Yet much more occurred as well, in terms of the consequences for me, as anthropologist. Although the Tuareg smiths came to Houston not as Tuareg anthropologists, but rather as artisans aspiring to sell their artwork in the U.S. market, they continued their important
cultural mediating roles. My focus here is upon ways the visitors as brokers facilitated, for me as anthropologist/host, new dialogues over the meanings of Tuareg identity and more generally, culture, African smith/artisans, and their arts, the field space, and the role of anthropologist and informants/consultants in ethnographic writing.

In July 1999, two Tuareg smith/artisans from northern Niger visited me at my home in Houston, Texas, on a trip to the United States, after a stay in New York City. One, whom I shall call Idrissa, was from a rural, semi-nomadic caravanning village where I conducted long-term research between 1976 and 2001. His mother still resides there, and makes leather amulet-covers, dresses noblewomen’s hair, and sings praise-songs at weddings and namedays. The other man, whom I shall call Sidi, came originally from a small nomadic camp west of Agadez. Both had workshops and boutiques in the capital, Niamey, where Idrissa had eight apprentices working for him. Sidi now resided most of the time in Niamey. Idrissa divided his time between Niamey, Agadez (where his wife resides with her parents), and his rural village. Both had traveled extensively in France and the United States, touring stores, museums, and festivals to sell their silver jewelry, their wives’ leatherwork, and a few textiles.

Their visit opened up new perspectives on African diasporas, in particular Tuareg culture, smiths, their travel and art. It also illuminated certain aspects of American culture through a kind of “defamiliarization” that is difficult to achieve unless one is compelled to continually mediate between Americans and “Others.” More broadly, this experience shed new light on researcher-subject relationships, the field, and ethnographic knowledge construction. While at my home, Idrissa spoke several times long distance to his family with a phone card he had purchased in New York City. He sent his wife Fana (pseudonym), whom he had recently married, a sum of money via Western Union. He said he entrusted a Hausa merchant in Niamey whom he believed was “prosperous enough not to be jealous or dishonest” to send the sum in CFA (West African French francs) electronically to his brother in Agadez, and the latter gave the money to Fana. This arrangement usually worked well, and fulfilled the traditional groom-service obligations of Tuareg husbands toward their wives and parents-in-law in early marriage years.

Even during his travels abroad, therefore, Idrissa remained enmeshed in Tuareg family relationships and household dynamics back home. His obligations of bridewealth and groom-service toward his parents-in-law were not attenuated. But they required additional mediating channels and go-betweens (of technology—the Western Union and the telephone—and of humans and social
networks of different occupations and diverse ethnic/cultural groups, such as the Hausa merchant in Niamey. Idrissa felt that the Hausa merchant, while an ethnic outsider, nonetheless protected rather than threatened his moral and commercial interests. He felt a kinship and trust with this merchant because of their common religion, Islam. From its inception, Islam has been inextricably linked with commerce, and commerce has been central to the development and diffusion of Islam. Stoller (2002: 34-36) describes how Mecca’s long history as a powerful pilgrimage center triggered the growth of merchant capital in the city. Meccans created institutions that made it easy for people to undertake pilgrimages to the site: merchants supplied water and created alliances to provide widespread access to markets. Through these institutions, Meccan merchants became wealthy. The new social structure, defined by the Ummah, transformed the authority of clan-based merchant capital to the power of those who followed the Prophet. Allegiance to the Ummah transcended all ethnic identification (Stoller 2002:35). Muhammed deemed trade an honorable and essential activity in the Ummah, for with economic expansion the Ummah would grow, prosper, and expand its power and influence. The Prophet stressed that traders should interact in cooperative ways that would increase commerce. The Prophet stressed a high standard of straightforwardness, reliability, and honesty.

Thus Idrissa’s trust for this Hausa merchant was not surprising, given the structuring of business and social obligations between them. Indeed, even in more distant Houston during his visits, he expressed trust for an African-American Muslim trader who owned an African import shop; he agreed to leave some artwork with him on credit, and return later for payment, and always referred to him as “le Musulman” (“the Muslim”).

During their visit to Houston in July 1999, during Idrissa’s return visit in March 2000, and again during Sidi’s return visit in July 2001, my guests related to me impressions of their travels. Recurrent themes in some of their stories were efforts to maintain their self-respect and cultural autonomy in transnational power structures, including occasional racism and other threatening situations. For example, they described how customs agents had occasionally stopped them and other itinerant vendors and confiscated some of their jewelry; Idrissa reported that on one occasion, he had been pressured to pay a large sum of money to get it back, though he did not elaborate on details of this traumatic experience. Idrissa related how, on another occasion, “We sent clothes to be dry cleaned, but the cleaners returned them uncleaned, in plastic bags.” They had also discovered that some non-Tuareg jewelers in Asia were making “pirate” copies of their famous Agadez Cross, and appropriating it, calling it “the
Indonesian Cross." But as yet, no legal redress was forthcoming. Other themes dealt with more basic physical and economic survival. For example, when my guests discussed migrant labor, they indicated that many Tuareg are hesitant to work at herding in Libya because of a rumor that, in remote areas, some Libyan employers shoot Tuareg herders after two years of work, in order to avoid paying them. Another problem, they lamented, were some local guides who deceive people seeking to travel on foot to Libya: in 1999, for example, one false guide took two young men from Idrissa's village into the desert and abandoned them there, where they died, tragically, of thirst.

My guests also related problems of coping with, not failure, but success. For example, there was the challenge of maintaining social reciprocity and balance upon acquiring new wealth abroad (D. Carter 1997; Stoller 1999). Idrissa discussed some tensions and competition in Niger between some Tuareg in their new businesses and travels. This had affected his relationship with a business partner by late 1999. When the partner came to the United States, Idrissa sent some of his jewelry with him to sell in New York City, but the partner returned to Niger with neither the jewelry nor Idrissa's money from their sale. Idrissa reassured me that they were still friends, but added that he was nevertheless "a little angry with him," and they were no longer partners. By early 2000, this former partner allegedly experienced difficulties in creating his jewelry designs. Idrissa believed this was caused by sorcery (ark echaghel) and jealous or resentful gossip (togerchet) from other smiths over the man's success. He underwent treatment by a marabout from the Air region, however, and by 2001, he appeared cured and his business was again going well.

During our conversation about this incident, I also related to Idrissa some difficulties I was experiencing with neighbors. Their dogs, two very large doberman pinchers I found intimidating, barked at night and moreover, also snarled at me threateningly whenever I attempted to sit in my backyard. Idrissa commented that "noisy neighbors are always a problem, and dogs are even worse, ...we do not like them, they bring misfortune." Among the Tuareg, dogs are not usually kept as pets, but rather only for functional reasons, to assist with herding, hunting, or to protect gardens. Dogs are also associated, in local mythology and cosmology, with the Devil (iblis): for example, in one folk tale I collected, a dog is at home with the Devil when he brings a woman named Tellilan there after kidnapping her. According to legend, the town of Agadez was once prevented from becoming a major holy center equal to Mecca because a dog interrupted the Prophet at prayer; in another legend, dogs are disdained because they allegedly relieve themselves on tobacco plants. Dogs are also associated with
ark echaghel or “sorcery” (Rasmussen 2001): for example, a woman in rural Air, usually happy and healthy, died suddenly following a fall when a dog bumped into her (it allegedly did not bite her or cause rabies), and local residents firmly insisted that an enemy had sent this dog to kill her, a common method of “sorcery.” Idrissa’s cousin, a smith in the rural village of my research, recently broke local taboos (dogs had been heretofore unpopular and disapproved of as pets in the village), and kept two dogs near his home, ostensibly to guard his garden from invasions by goats, but also perhaps from pique over some social tensions with his neighbors.

In the intervening months between Idrissa’s two visits, my neighbors moved away when the husband was transferred by his company to a post in another state. When Idrissa returned to Houston in March 2000, we sat outside in my backyard, and he observed that the dogs were now gone. With relief, I related to him the story of how, just as I was about to arrange a mediation of the dog conflict, my neighbors moved away in a job transfer. Idrissa smiled, and commented, “I was hoping that would happen (during our last conversation)... I was worried about those dogs and the motives of your neighbors and what was going to happen. It was your togerchet that caused the man to be transferred to another state and move.”

In their travels, the smith/artisans also sought to continue, in so far as possible, personal, face-to-face social relationships within the more depersonalized market system. Their approach was, indeed, consistent with longstanding patterns in Islamic economic relationships which are ideally supposed to be social as well as economic (Carter 1997; Stoller 2002). Their approach also reflected, in large measure, Tuareg cultural values. These processes were shown, not only in informal conversation and casual incidents, but also in aspects of their dress and conduct that semiotically conveyed the dynamic reconstructions of Tuareg culture in these meeting-grounds. When he exhibited his jewelry at the Houston International Fair, for example, Idrissa wore his robes and also his face-veil, the latter high on his face over his nose. He explained that one reason for this was “to be identified at International Fairs.” Indeed, our own exhibit at the Houston International Fair was placed, inexplicably, in the Brazil Pavilion—hence he felt the need for clear markings of Tuareg culture. However, wearing the veil high on his face—over his nose and mouth—was classically noble, rather than smith, style: in rural Niger, this style conveys the predominantly noble male gender role values of modesty, reserve, and respect. Several American customers inquired about the veil’s significance, startled at seeing a man wearing this, since in Houston they had seen veils more often on female interna-
tional visitors from the Middle East. We explained that, “this is a traditional Tuareg men’s, not women’s headdress.” Yet at the same time, there was some ambiguity and “lack of closure” over the veil’s interpretation here, because of the unmentioned anomaly of a smith man wearing the veil in this particular style; back in Niger, smith men tend to wear the veil less modestly than noble men, allowing it to droop below the chin.

The Tuareg men’s face-veil remained a potent symbol, albeit in different ways and with modified uses and meanings, in their other experiences in the United States. Idrissa related a story to me about a friend of his, a Tuareg from the Tahoua region of Niger, who took a Greyhound Bus across the country to Napa, California. He had chosen this town because he knew an American resident there, a woman who several years earlier had been an expatriate worker in Niger. They had corresponded recently, and she had invited him to Napa. Upon his arrival there, however, she was not at the bus station, as planned. This man did not speak English and knew no one else there. So at first, he sat on his baggage and waited, wondering how they had missed each other, and what to do next. After some moments, a thought came to him: he put on his Tuareg face-veil and sat silently, waiting to see if this would make him more visible. A man in the bus station who had traveled in West Africa recognized this headdress as Tuareg, and offered him a ride and lodging for the night. The next day, they went to the woman’s home, where he subsequently stayed.

In these contexts, the meanings of the tagelmust face-veil, which, along with the Tamajaq language, are perhaps the most salient symbols of Tuareg culture, (Rodd 1926; Bernus 1981; Claudot-Hawad 1993; Nicolaisen 1997), were manipulated in outside travel spaces as a sign of neither exclusively noble nor smith/artisan identity. Rather, the veil was deployed strategically for the purpose of drawing attention to more general Tuareg ethnic-cultural identity, and this silent code was directed toward Americans perceived as knowledgeable and sympathetic to Tuareg culture. In effect, the face-veil in the Napa, California bus station was used almost as a name-tag or beacon to sift out possibly sympathetic new patrons from among the anonymous, largely indifferent crowd of strangers. In Houston, Idrissa wore the veil as an emblem or metonym of Tuareg culture for the purpose of drawing attention to other material cultural emblems: the jewelry and leatherwork being displayed and sold in an area not usually associated with Tuareg, although related to Africa as a whole: the Brazil Pavilion at the International Fair. Recall how, back in Niger, smith/artsans are said to lack reserve and tend to be careless about the veil. In rural Niger, as observed, the Tuareg men’s veil is a sign of modesty, of the traditional male gender role and
most particularly, reserve and respect of noble men in the presence of parents-in-law, chiefs, and Islamic scholar/marabouts—before whom smith men do display some respect, but less than noble men. For example, smith men sometimes eat and joke with their parents-in-law, something most rural nobles would be ashamed to do. Thus in rural Niger, smith men would not wear the veil so high; whereas they did, in almost an exaggerated manner, on these occasions in the United States. In the United States settings, therefore, the veil signified a complex mix, albeit not merely an amalgam or hybrid, of old and new attributes and goals: here, it was used strategically in the hope of initiating client-patron joking, or at least sufficient familiarity for simultaneously friendly and commercial relations, rather than its local message conveying distance or reserve. Thus these cultural markers reveal both continuity and transformation in mediating and constructing cultural knowledge.

There were additional processes occurring during the artisans’ visit. The travelers facilitated more open communication of African-Americans regarding their personal sentiments about Africa. At one import shop sale, an African-American man commented to us that his mother wished her ashes to be scattered over Ghana following her death. Such intimate family concerns probably would not have been confided to me had I been there alone. During our dinner at the home of a Nigerian Hausa vendor in Houston, it was revealed that the Nigerian man had relatives who manufacture the indigo-dyed cloth in dye pits west of Kano, and trade it with Tuareg caravan traders, some of whom were relatives of Idrissa: they go on caravans annually to Kano after going to Bilma for salt and dates. Thus the men knew each other’s relatives indirectly, and both participated in a wide-ranging trading network with roots in longstanding Tuareg-Hausa caravanning partnerships. Yet they probably would never have met each other except in the American market setting—a “borderlands” context in which there were multiple social, as well as economic factors facilitating mediation. Prior to this news, the Hausa vendor had identified himself to me only as “Nigerian,” and we had spoken English. As we all ate dinner, however, he now emphasized his Hausa background, and we all spoke Hausa (the lingua franca of many Tuareg in the Air region of Niger). The Tuareg visitors, in effect, here mediated between usually more distant (“reserved”) peoples, events, and objects, bringing them closer and facilitating a mutuality in knowledge construction about Africa and Niger, about each other and others. Smith/artisans in the Air countryside, recall, still act as go-betweens and ambassadors, in representing chiefs in delicate political matters and assisting with bridewealth negotiations in noble marriages. Thus their roles here were not really attenuated
or abandoned, but rather underwent a kind of what Jackson has termed “shap-shifting” (Jackson 1990:58-78).

My guests also stimulated a re-reading of anthropological concepts and categories. This occurred in several ways. They and I often reversed roles: at times, they became ethnographers and cultural critics, and I became a “key informant/consultant.” First, our conversations encouraged me to re-think and examine more carefully my own cultural categories, such as “ethnic,” “country,” “crafts,” and “arts.” As we searched the newspapers for potential places for exhibiting his wares, Idrissa asked me (in reference to one arts fair advertisement) what the English terms “collectibles” and “crafts” meant. Upon hearing of a fair in Washington State that was called “country,” he also inquired what this meant. I attempted to explain that, in that context, the term often referred to rural and/or older American antiques, although it could also include other items from other places. Here, my own explanations of Americana or “folk” art items (albeit hesitant and uncertain) approximately corresponded to some smith/artisans’ equation, described by Davis (1999), of “old” Tuareg jewelry with “traditional” jewelry items. In both cases, there is merging of “old” with “traditional.” In the American “country” term, in addition, there is a rural connotation as well. Furthermore, as among some other peoples, the arts/crafts distinction is not rigid among the Tuareg, despite the importance in recent years of “tourist art” in Niger. “Crafts” were consequently more difficult to define. Perhaps, I suggested, “crafts” are understood by many Americans to refer to items made at home and/or used in everyday tasks, not solely displayed. But of course, this definition is also problematic because the senses of “use” can be quite broad—most Tuareg, for example, use some decorative jewelry for ritual protection, some for economic security, and wear other jewelry for sheer pleasure and aesthetic appreciation. I asked Idrissa for the Tamajaq term for art. After long thought, he gave me the phrase, echeghel n inaden, which denotes literally “the work of smith/artisans.” Later, a Tuareg intellectual in France disputed this and indicated there is another term in Tamajaq for “art.” Still, I feel that this phrase aptly conveys the smith/artisan’s perspective of the meaning of art in these contexts: in other words, they associated art with active creation (occupational work, usually inherited and based on descent) of their social group who, until very recently, monopolized most jewelry, leather, wood, and stone works.

My guests found that most dealers, particularly those in New York and Washington D.C., now prefer older Tuareg jewelry and designs. They did not lament this preference as a potential loss of local art, however, but indicated that they planned to copy the “older” designs rather than promoting newer,
more “modern” designs as often done recently in tourist art sales, for example in Niamey, the capital of Niger (Davis 1999). For me, the question arose: did the fact that they would copy the old designs onto new jewelry make them new designs? For my guests, unlike some other artists, these planned copies of “origi-inals” were not an object of comparative evaluation (Halle 1993; Steiner 1994). Rather, their copies catered to a particular European image of Africa that locates “authenticity” in the past. Indeed, this recalls current efforts at critical decon-struction of the western category of “authentic” (Davis 1999). More broadly, one important effect of these dialogues was to encourage reflection, critiques, and mutually-constructed (albeit still tentative) re-definitions of concepts, many of which are commonly advertised in American newspapers and community and festival brochures, through dialogues which encourage local exegesis of transcultural flows. Concepts, categories, and boundaries in my own culture and in anthropology, furthermore, became the critical focus of interlocutors whose projects facilitated re-defining them. Hence the smith/artisans’ expanded mediating roles suggest that the transnational and global settings do not necessarily obliterate or replace local cultural meanings. Rather, in these new meeting-grounds, there can be mutuality of meaning construction.

Thus during their visit, many of our dialogues stimulated reflection upon the problem of translation of the art/culture system (Clifford 1988; Halle 1993; Steiner 1994). Much more occurred than sale of material art objects. As in Niger, Tuareg smith/artisans here mediated cultural concepts and social bound-aries—both local and outside. But they drew upon changing inventories of meaning and manipulated symbols differently. Their visit stimulated us to re-flect upon cultural differences as much as cultural “flows,” in dialogues with persons who, like noble patrons in the Saharan Air Mountains, engaged smith/artisans as interlocutors. Their own questions to me blurred intellectual boundaries, and this empowered them as both informant/consultants and an-thropologists/cultural critics simultaneously, in the field space for host and vis-itors alike (which was simultaneously, my home space) in the United States. Their visit also reversed social and epistemological roles of ethnographer and “informant/consultant.” I, in effect, became a key informant/consultant, on one level. Although this process was temporary, and of course did not alleviate more general differences of class and privilege, it nonetheless greatly affected my ethnographic practices and anthropological knowledge, and opened up new collaborative and reflexive dialogues concerning the smith/artisans’ art, culture, work, social roles and relationships, and more as well: the meanings of an-thropology and ethnography.
On another level, I also continued my role as ethnographer in questioning them and continuing my research on Tuareg smith/artisans from my home space. My guests enriched my perspectives on aspects of Tuareg culture from the distance. For example, they encouraged me to re-think the meanings of ethnographic writing and the different sources of knowledge on which it is based. Ethnographic writing is traditionally considered a solitary activity, often done in seclusion back in the ethnographer’s home following the standard phase of fieldwork in the geographically remote space. Other alternatives were vividly illustrated to me. In effect, a fragment of Tuareg social life came to me here. Idrissa, for example, indicated that he disliked television because “people don’t talk to each other” while watching it. However, he did enjoy some videos I had taken while in Niger. While I enjoyed his visit and gave priority to hosting my guests over writing, I nonetheless found myself in a predicament of irony and “double-bind”: on the one hand, my “data analysis” and “write-up” of ethnographic material from my field research in Niger needed my attention, but then, so did my guests. I was well aware that writing, normally a solitary activity, currently is subject to experimentation and revision, however, (Feld 1988), and I welcomed this opportunity for more collaborative consultations and analyses. Yet at the same time, I hesitated to make too many demands on my guests, who were, after all, also friends on a visit. But opportunities arose naturally, in contexts of informal conversation rather than strictly structured or segmented time units: for example, Idrissa punctuated many of his narratives with local folktales, just as many smith/artisans do in rural Niger: sometimes an animal tale, sometimes an oral history from his region.

These processes encouraged me to re-analyze some of my Niger field data from the viewpoint of smith/artisans outside their home space. We viewed a video recording I had made during my 1998 fieldwork in Agadez and rural Air during my research on urban and rural smiths. In one scene, which portrayed a smith woman shaving a baby’s hair during a noble nameday, my guests insisted, “We smiths only tell nobles that shaving babies’ hair severs the baby’s ties to the spirit world, but the reason we shave is really in order to be paid.” They added that only some, not all, smiths still serve at nobles’ rites of passage, but they are no longer obliged to do so; some do this now “only to be nice, and for sentimental reasons,” such as individual friendship. Thus while in some respects my guests emphasized the more commercial role of their ritual activities, nonetheless, there were hints that much more complexity underlies noble-smith relationships, even today, and that ideally, at least, there is a symbiotic mutual-
ity to the client-patron relationship. Indeed, in wedding songs that smiths still sing today back in the Air Mountain region of Niger, verses proclaim:

“Bravo for a noble
who loves his smith/artisan
two-toned colors the smith/artisan and the noble
that is, like black and white”

And further:

“My pigeons are seven in number
which have different colors, all laid eggs that hatched
each one has seven chicks, seven different chicks
My noble women like to see their chicks...
My pigeons I implore God that they will begin once more to lay eggs”

These verses appeal to the old ideals of nobles’ and smiths’ mutual benefits in wealth and fertility, from continuing their mutual rights and obligations, and also, optimistically insisting upon a complementary, reciprocal, even symbiotic relationship between old patrons and clients and emerging business partners. Yet there are, as already noted, tensions and transformations. Idrissa and Sidi, unlike their parents, did not perform songs and dances at noble rites of passage back home, and in good years, at least, accumulated more money for their work than most nobles and smiths at home. I told them how, on one occasion a distant relative of Sidi’s, a prosperous and successful jeweler who lived and worked in the capital, Niamey, had scorned these performances as “hopping about” in an undignified way, and even suggested to me that this pandered to some nobles’ “racism” toward smith/artisans. Indeed, to me Idrissa appeared a bit sheepish about his mother’s continuing this work, which some younger urban smiths regard as denigrating. He appeared more reticent to me about discussing her work.

The important point here is as follows: had I never visited rural Air, my impression would have been distorted, for I would have come away feeling that smiths no longer performed such work; but I knew otherwise —hence the necessity for continuing field research “on the ground,” in a local cultural setting, despite the calls in anthropology to recognize cultural flows and question overly rigid cultural boundaries. Truly “multi-sited” ethnography must ultimately refer back and forth, intertextually, between local and global contexts.
Another important point here is that, in their video commentaries, the visitors were not admitting to “cheating” in a simplistic or vulgar sense. To assume this would be to distort their roles in either setting—home or abroad—which integrate the social and the economic. As two more cosmopolitan smith/artisans who wandered farther afield from the social fabric of their rural community, Idrissa and Sidi emphasized the more voluntaristic and monetarized turns in client-patron relationships with nobles; in contrast, their more “traditional” rural relatives tended, at least in ritual contexts, to emphasize values of fertility, abundance, and descent-based mutual dependency, and to “tone-down” some rivalries and hostilities. My visitors’ perspective was undoubtedly shaped by their position as international entrepreneurs, more able than some other smith/artisans to make choices and escape constraints.

In Idrissa’s tale-telling, additional insights emerged. He provided more extended oral histories and commentaries on his home community. These narratives revealed events and opinions about which some other Tuareg of noble origins back in Air were more reticent, from their cultural values of reserve and speech by allusion. This was shown vividly in an account he gave me about a battle around 1957 between some members of two different descent groups. This occurred after a man from one descent group allegedly attempted to rape a sister of the chief of the other descent group, in a neighboring village. The man had entered her tent at night while she was asleep. She awakened, however, and in the ensuing struggle she kept his pants as evidence. He ran off, but was identified. Afterward, a large group of men from the woman’s village and descent group stormed over to the village of the accused, where they demanded he pay a fine. When he refused, a serious sword-fight broke out and escalated. The man who is now a local chief, then the son of the chief and brother of the woman, took a lance wound which pierced through his ribcage and out from his back on the right side. Another man in the descent group of the accused, now elderly and blind and missing a hand, lost his hand from this swordfight when he tried to fight two men (he was reputed to be very strong). French colonial forces arrived and transported the fighters to the Agadez courts. Some men were released, and some were sent to prisons in Agadez and also farther away, in Dakar, then the colonial headquarters of French West Africa. Even today, there are some lingering tensions between these groups in their neighboring villages, despite some intermarriage. Idrissa’s story enlightened me on this; in retrospect, it suggested some reasons why a field assistant of mine, a man of noble, chiefly, and maraboutique origins, felt ill at ease at entering some homes in the village where that battle had occurred. He had said only to me that, “once there was a fight over a woman,” but that it
had occurred in a more remote place and time, near some ancient ancestral ru-
ins. I now realize that this vagueness was probably from those noble cultural val-
ues of reserve and indirect speech, and also shame concerning sexual matters. The
man of noble origin had undoubtedly felt ashamed to mention the rape explic-
itly to me, especially since the event involved the current chief’s sister. He had al-
so, perhaps, wished to shield me from internal factionalism and violence. Recall
how smiths are confidantes of women as well as men; and with a smith, one may
discuss intimate matters, such as sexual transgressions, more directly.

These dialogues and narratives therefore yielded insights into both travel and
home spaces—indeed, they situated knowledge somewhere in between. The is-
ue of whether such knowledge was “true” or not is not my primary concern
here. While in the United States, the smith/artisans’ narratives and exegesis of
various aspects of Tuareg culture, and their impressions of travel and American
culture counterbalanced and complemented (and also sometimes contradic-
ted) the commentaries and interpretations of other Tuareg in their home space
(i.e. my field site in Niger). This does not, however, imply that anyone has “the
final word.” I do not regard their narratives or exegesis as necessarily more
“true” or “definitive” than, or as a “corrective” to, the data I collected in Niger.
And while a degree of skepticism is in order here (for example, I made sure to
verify the story about the battle upon my return to the field in 2001), I do not
regard their narratives or exegesis as necessarily less true or definitive than lo-
cally-collected data, either. Certainly, the “home as field” situation produced sig-
nificant emergent forms of knowledge that involved some modifications not
emergent in Niger. Yet the converse—my intermittent forays into the field in
Niger—also applies. Perhaps one needs to continually alternate between the
two sites, not solely in the literal sense of fieldwork and as literal, geographic
sites, but also intertextually in abstract analysis—for certain insights. It should
be acknowledged that my guests were somewhat more cosmopolitan and more
widely-traveled than most of their compatriots. This should be taken into ac-
count in incorporating their viewpoints, exegeses, and narratives into this text.
I do not intend their narratives to diminish the importance of local peoples’ nar-
ratives, or to be a corrective “proof-reading” of my field-site data. Yet they
should not be ignored either. Rather, I regard their narratives and exegesis as
similar to myths everywhere, in that they express powerful themes and concerns
of the tellers (Lévi-Strauss 1963; Malkki 1995). The tale-tellers draw upon old and
new forms of knowledge in order to suit their predicaments. This is not neces-
sarily a novel process in anthropological discussions, but it is one that nonethe-
less still merits attention in novel contexts.
Conclusions

Summary of Findings and Argument: Subverting the “Imperial Eye”

In the foregoing discussion of the smith/artisans’ visit, two types of observations/reflections were presented. The first consisted of a conventional ethnographic discussion of the activities of the smith/artisans, for example, how they maintain their social obligations in Niger while in the United States, their reactions to alleged pirating of the Agadez Cross by Asian jewelers, and how some migrants use the veil to make themselves visible. The second consisted of a reflection on the ways in which the author/anthropologist was forced to appropriate the role of informant/consultant during this visit. This issue was raised, for example, as the Tuareg smith/artisans were grappling with the American categories of “ethnic,” “country,” “crafts,” and “arts,” and attempting to understand how their work should be classified. For these artisans the role change was critical, as it had implications for the strategies they adopted in marketing and producing their art. Throughout this discussion, I have also reflected on the nature of fieldwork and the ways my own categories, as author/anthropologist, were redefined.

The data presented therefore speak directly to important issues concerning globalization and cultural production. Tuareg smith/artisans examine and interrogate American cultural categories and also, by way of their reflections on American cultural categories, redefine Tuareg art. Thus many of our own concepts of “global culture,” “technoscapes,” “transcultural flows,” “transnationalism,” and “diaspora” are culturally constructed and culturally specific. This account hopefully contributes to a rethinking of these terms and concepts.

In anthropology and ethnography, much has been made of problems of representation in wider contexts of unequal power relationships between observer and observed (Clifford 1988; Crapanzano 1992; Pratt 1992). More recently, the focus is less on problems of representation and more on how we can confront transnational complexity, for example, in “multi-site ethnographies” (Marcus 1995; Carter 1997; Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001; Stoller 1999, 2002). The visit of the smith/artisans to Houston, while not representative of the experiences of all Tuareg (or all anthropologists, for that matter), nonetheless yields intriguing insights into culture, knowledge, and ethnography, as well as African diasporas. The visitors were not passive “cultural exhibits;” rather, they actively contributed to re-negotiations of meanings in ways not always possible (or obvious) to me in Niger. Anthropologists’ ethnographic practices and interpretations were mediated in multiple ways and directions, in meta-comment-
taries in which the powers of local and distant voices became sometimes inverted. Although these processes were temporary, and did not result in permanent structural reversals or leveling of power and wealth, they nonetheless were important because they challenged some traditional concepts of “the field” space and suggested new ways of “siting” culture (Stoller and Coombe 1994; Stoller 1999; Olwig and Hastrup 1997). The visit became a kind of borderlands space which enabled me to stand back and critically reflect upon my own cultural (and anthropological) categories concerning “self” as well as “other:” African artisan roles and concepts of culture and art, and ethnographic practice. It enabled my guests to approach more closely my own stance as ethnographer, thereby empowering their voices in ways not easily accomplished in the more remote field setting. In these processes, there was a continual re-structuring of local cultural symbols and ethnographic knowledge in productive ways, thereby effecting a rapprochement between different knowledge forms often kept separate, and mediating also the so-called “global/local” split (itself problematic when treated as a rigid binary opposition).

Globalized travel markets therefore transform the traditional relationship between anthropologist and others. In the explosion of transnational trade and the implosion of time and space, the production of knowledge is altered. Global travel facilitates new dialogues over meanings. However, these data also suggest how problematic it is to reify and essentialize the category of “global”, just as it was earlier, to reify and essentialize “traditional” and locally-rooted cultures. Our own theories of the “global” and the “local” need to be more closely aligned with locally-based critical theories of culture. During this visit, there was a powerful localization of the global. Many local Tuareg cultural values and social practices continued to shape the smith/artisans’ global experience and their interpretations of it. Indeed, these processes would have escaped my attention without the insights from my previous field residence and research in the more “traditional/cultural” Tuareg field site in Africa, conducted before and after this “multi-sited” ethnographic practice. Even multi-sited ethnography, therefore, is rooted in local cultural experience, although this experience takes on new dimensions in transnational processes. Had their visit occurred without my prior experience in their own local cultural setting, many nuances of meaning in their transnational travels would have escaped my attention. What made this anthropological encounter different from many others was that our interaction recast the boundaries of the field site, thereby altering the focus, context, and practice of my ethnography. The smith/artisan visitors acted as “foils” for international responses to Africa and African responses to others. As critical com-
mentators, the smith/artisans on their visit opened up perspectives on these issues, viewed through their own lenses. Therefore the transnational journeys of Tuareg smith/artisans can be seen as a contemporary redefinition of the role of cultural mediator in the context of the globalization of Tuareg artistic production. In this, local residents can “read” culture over the shoulders of the anthropologist, thereby negotiating and sometimes even inverting each others’ powers and gazes.

NOTES
Acknowledgments. Data for this essay are based on residence and research in the Niger Republic among the Tuareg of the Air Mountains, Agadez, and Niamey, between approximately 1974 and 2002, and also briefer time periods in Mali and France. Projects included research on spirit possession; aging and the life course; herbal healing specialists; a comparative study of rural and urban smith/artisans; and most recently, a study of changing gender constructs. In these projects I am grateful for support from Fulbright Hays; Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research; National Geographic; and the Social Science Research Council, as well as Indiana University and the University of Houston.

1 A number of works have made interesting contributions to this topic, albeit from different perspectives and according to diverse analytical frameworks. There is a rich literature on mediators in classical studies in ritual and symbolic classification and studies focusing more specifically upon blacksmiths, griots, prophets, and other specialists who stand “on a boundary” (Lévi-Strauss 1963; Beidelman 1971; Herbert 1984; McNaughton 1986; Wright 1989; Hale 2000), as well as recent studies of mediators residing and traveling in “cultural borderlands” (Anzaldúa 1988; Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001). Also relevant here are portraits of some “key informants/consultants” such as Muchona the Hornet and Tuhami (Turner 1968; Crapanzano 1980), their positioning vis-à-vis anthropologist and local culture, and their effects upon ethnographic knowledge construction.

2 For detailed descriptions of Tuareg social organization, see Bernus 1981; Casajus 1987; Claudot-Hawad 1993; Nicoliasen 1997. For works focusing upon rural smiths, see Saenz 1991; Rasmussen 1992, 1997a, 1998; and for works focusing upon smith/artisans in towns such as Agadez and Niamey, see Rasmussen 1995a; Loughran 1996; and Davis 1999. Loughran and Davis place greater emphasis upon their art production; Rasmussen places greater emphasis upon their social and ritual roles.

3 Among the Tuareg, men, rather than women, veil the face; women wear a headaddress resembling a scarf, the latter covering the hair and nape of neck only, but not the face. The Tuareg men’s face-veil, called tagelmust, has diverse meanings and functions. It remains an important feature of proper etiquette in the countryside, although many younger men tend to drop it in the towns. Theories of the veil’s significance are diverse, but many ethnographers agree that it is, above all, central to male (particularly noble) gender role identity, with modesty surrounding the mouth. It also serves to convey respect/reserve in kinship relationships, particularly with parents-in-law, and to shield the orifices from evil spirits and pollution. While smith men are less strict about the veil, in rural communities they, too, usually wear it, although as observed, usually lower on their face than noble men. Many local residents also emphasize aesthetic aspects of the veil. There are over a hundred variations of wrapping it. Some others explain it as the local Tuareg cultural interpretation of Islamic men’s headdress or “turban.” For discussion of this topic see Murphy 1967; Rasmussen 1991b; and Claudot-Hawad 1993.
Recently, in my research in the Air region I found very few exceptions to this rule. A man of noble origins in a large oasis northeast of Agadez had begun to work at the forge making some implements and jewelry. Older smith men expressed some mild disapproval of this, but did nothing about it. The alburusa mumming rite, also briefly mentioned by Saenz (1991), is still practiced occasionally in rural areas; I collected several cases, and witnessed one small version of this rite. But older smiths told me that nowadays, nobles often resist, and sometimes even fight, when smiths enact this ritual. Smith/artisan women traditionally do leatherwork; but nowadays many women of diverse social origins, including some nobles, have begun to do some leatherwork as well. But smith women are still most renowned for the more elaborate dying and embroidering of leather hides.

Tuareg women’s primary source of economic independence in the countryside was, until the devastating droughts of 1969-74 and 1984, livestock, which they inherited, owned, and managed. But today the erratic rains and diminished pastures, as well as the political violence and upheavals, have reduced many herds. Rural smith/artisan women have traditionally had, as an additional source of livelihood, their leatherwork, hairdressing, and performances and services at rites of passage. In the towns, however, there is not sufficient demand for these services to support oneself. Some Tuareg indicated that in cases of a “family” marriage—the term for an arranged marriage between close cousins, in principle, the man’s family is obliged to support or help out the wife; in cases of an independent love match, they are not. Many smith/artisans still attempt to arrange very close marriages for their children, in order to keep the property in the family. Some youths resist elders’ efforts to arrange these matches. Idrissa and Fana were only distantly related.

According to Davis (1999: 498), there is “general consensus that the Tuareg cross is an ancient form, but age and assignment of regional name to each of the pendants in the Series are at issue.” Some artisans, for example, state that the Series has existed in its present form from early beginnings. Others say the Series is somewhat more recent, but give different accounts of its origins. See also Santoni 1976; Loughran 1996.

REFERENCES


