

## **Reflections on Myth and History: Tuareg Concepts of Truth, “Lies,” and “Children’s Tales”**

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### **Introduction**

#### *The Problem of Control in the Transfer of Knowledge*

Among the Kel Ewey Tuareg in northeastern Niger, West Africa, a local intelligentsia existed prior to contact with French and central Nigerian state control. Local knowledge specialists are not passive creations of colonial and post-colonial infrastructures, but have always been profoundly influential in interaction with Europeans and other Africans. Tuareg society is characterized by semi-nomadism, social stratification, official adherence to Islam, and oral and written traditions. Although the traditional social system is rapidly breaking down in the towns, in rural communities status is based upon descent and inherited occupational affiliation, in principle controlled by official endogamy: nobles, smiths, and descendants of slaves and tributaries are each supposed to marry within their social stratum. In rural areas nobles and smiths still practice, in modified form, client-patron relationships: smiths make jewelry, weapons, and household tools for nobles and recite genealogies and oral histories, and nobles are obliged to give them presents of food and cash on demand (Rasmussen 1992). Although Tuareg women traditionally enjoy high prestige and economic independence, gender roles and relations between the sexes are characterized by contradictions and changing property balance: for example, sedentarization and Koranic law create legal conflicts between men and women (Rasmussen 1990, 1994a).

Thus social stratum, gender, and age interact with knowledge and power systems. In principle, men and women of diverse social strata may practice oral history and healing specialisms. In practice, however, specialists rank different kinds of history and healing knowledge by invoking values derived from social position and based on gender, inherited social stratum, and age. Tuareg texts on local origins and healing thus

provide insights into ways in which resources are marshalled for intellectual coercion in a hierarchical but flexible and negotiable social system.

A number of authors have discussed the impact of unequal dialogues in knowledge transfer, specifically, asymmetric power relations between external hegemonic forces and local knowledge specialists.<sup>1</sup> Mudimbe points to the need to identify the “specialist of the past with the most influence” (1985:150), to specify what constitutes knowledge, and to locate where sources of knowledge and power reside in changing sociopolitical and economic conditions. He describes how the colonial enterprise in Africa had an impact upon local social roles, in the production and reproduction of knowledge: the new organization of power specialized tasks and stabilized them in new social relations of production. In this process, the relation between knowledge and discourse became reconstructed, as one empowered the other. Yet the relation between local memory and political practice is complex and has another dimension: it is also reconstructed by internal power struggles. These processes constitute means of intellectual coercion in their own right, means that shape and are shaped by external hegemonic processes.

In this essay, I discuss the problem of how to interpret these processes without imposing Western paradigms and “black-box” terms, and yet still produce useful comparisons of different knowledge-power systems. My purpose is to discuss the problematics of Western-derived classifications and lenses used in describing and interpreting knowledge and power systems. For example, essentialist categories such as “myth,” “history,” “science,” and “art,” as well as “sacred” and “secular” domains, are of limited value as a measure in crosscultural comparison, since they are derived from a Western episteme. Tuareg categories, I argue, need to be analyzed in relation to local social and epistemological distinctions.

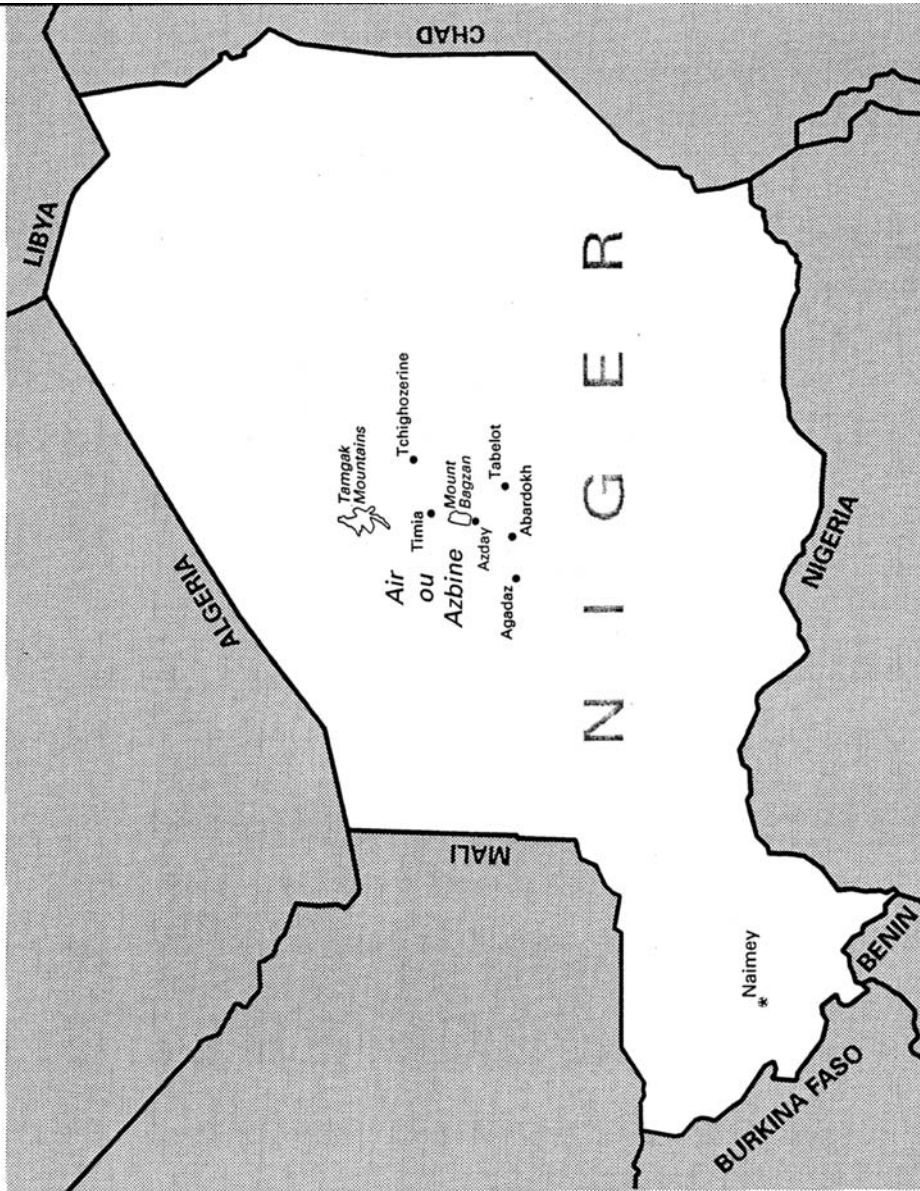
### *Research Area, Ethnographic Background, and Theoretical Focus*

This essay is based on data collected during my residence and research in the Republic of Niger, West Africa, for approximately six and one-half years, initially as a Peace Corps volunteer, subsequently under local contract for the Ministry of Education, and more recently in anthropological research on gender, ritual, healing, and the life course. From 1974-77, I taught English in Niamey, the capital, and Agadez, a

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<sup>1</sup> See Horton 1967, 1982; Jain 1977; Goody 1977; Said 1978; Comaroff 1985; Mudimbe 1985, 1988.

# The AIR Region of Niger



Cartography by:  
Adrienne Nold  
Geographic Resources Center  
Department of Geography  
University of Missouri - Columbia  
September 18, 1998

Source:  
Edmond Bernus, 1981. Touaregs Nigériens:  
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peuple pasteur.*

Saharan town in the Air Mountain region of northern Niger. During that time, I also conducted preliminary study of the local culture and Tamacheq, the language of the Tuareg, as well as Hausa, a lingua franca throughout Niger. In my preliminary research on local culture, I visited families in the rural Air Mountain region in 1977 and 1978. Later, in 1983, I conducted doctoral research on female spirit possession among the Kel Ewey confederation of Tuareg in the Air Mountains, north of Agadez. In 1991, I returned to this region for postdoctoral research to study Tuareg aging. In 1995, I studied local healing specialists, and most recently, in 1998, I conducted a comparative study of rural and urban Tuareg smiths. In each phase of research, my methods included recording, transcribing, and translation of verbal art (folktales, poetry, song, riddles, and proverbs), life histories, musical performances, and rituals.<sup>2</sup>

In looking at the relation between knowledge and power systems in this changing society, one is struck by a paradox: Tuareg generally, and nobles in particular, are underrepresented in the formal higher education system of Niger, despite the existence of a local intelligentsia and cultural values that respect learning and knowledge. A local form of literacy exists outside the formal, secular educational structure. Both written and oral forms of expression remain vital today. There exist two types of written channels: Arabic literacy of the Koran and the Tifinagh script of Tamacheq, the Berber language spoken by Tuareg. Among Tuareg, oral art addresses medical as well as historical knowledge domains, and these are often practiced together. As different interest groups scramble to “own” meaning, interaction between the different media within a single culture significantly shape the directions of knowledge specialties.

Kel Ewey Tuareg specialists offer conflicting versions of knowledge in the domains of history and medicine. Competing claims to authority are contested most fiercely in these specialized but interrelated domains. Both bodies of knowledge—historical and healing—are transmitted in the form of texts, which affect the cultural construction of self/societal relationships; both employ oral art in their communication of this. Thus in their content and practice, both provide contexts for reevaluating forms of knowledge.

Specialists transfer knowledge of history and healing through several types of oral and musical texts, called by different terms in Tamacheq. These texts contain and provoke critical commentary on knowledge. I analyze four principal kinds of texts, as they are classified and evaluated by local residents in terms of their legitimacy and credibility as knowledge.

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<sup>2</sup> In these projects, I gratefully acknowledge Fulbright Hays, Indiana Grant-in-Aid, Wenner-Gren Foundation, and University of Houston Limited-Grant-in-Aid support.

First, there are accounts called *imayen*, translated to me in French as *contes folkloriques* or folktales. These are primarily identified with children, young women, and smiths, who are the primary tellers of these tales. *Imayen* are viewed by some Tuareg—namely Islamic scholars and noble men—as “untrue.” By contrast, accounts called *idamen iru*, denoting legends of the past, are viewed as “true” by many Tuareg. These are associated with elders, noble men, and Islamic scholars, who relate these legends. I also analyze women’s spirit exorcism songs, sung by women at predominantly female possession rituals called *tende n goumaten*, in which women in trance undergo healing; and Islamic liturgical music, called *ezzeke*, praise-songs to God sung by men in mosques, which sometimes cause men to enter possession trance.<sup>3</sup>

Folk etymologies, explanations, and commentaries on these texts underline not solely problems of translation but also conflicts related to knowledge and power hierarchies, and highlight the problem of dealing with diversity within a single culture. Notions of truth (*teydet*) vs. lie (*behu*) play central roles in these conflicts. Different interest groups rank different versions of knowledge in perceived hierarchies of truth. For example, local residents of either sex and diverse social strata insist that “women tell lies and children’s tales” (*imayen*). This type of folk tale portrays what men and Islamic scholars (called marabouts) consider fictional, whereas, they insist, “men tell true historical legends (*idamen iru*) and true history (*tarikh*).” These narratives feature named heroes considered real persons in the past. Women’s possession songs are performed by a chorus in order to exorcise spirits believed to possess women. Their verses frequently make reference to knowledge/power relationships. For example, in one song the women sing, “These words are not the knowledge of the Koran (*tanestema*) . . . so let me not be struck down by a marabout when I pronounce them.” Transcribers/assistants explained this verse to me as indicating what they called the “unscientific” nature of possession songs, believed to address the spirits and considered

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<sup>3</sup> This term is derived from the synonymous Arabic *zīkr* and entered Tuareg religious ritual by way of Sufi mysticism. The idea here is to pronounce the name of God, and in so doing to praise him, thereby gaining protection. Marabouts prescribe pronouncing the *ezzeke* a specified number of times, but warn against exceeding this limit, somewhat like a doctor’s warning against exceeding a given dosage of medication. It is through excessive zeal, in feeling the “inadequacy” of their own devotion, that certain persons surpass marabouts’ specifications and fall ill with the “illness of God” (*tawarna n Yallah*), seen as caused by spirits opposed to spirits of the Wild (*Kef essuf* or, sometimes, *goumaten*) believed to cause women’s possession illness.

anti-Islamic.<sup>4</sup> Both men and women become possessed; however, the spirits possessing them are believed to differ, as do their cures. Women's spirits, called the People of Solitude or the Wild (*kel essuf*), require beautiful *goumaten* singing, accompanied by a mortar drum called the *tende*, for a cure. Men's *ezzeke* songs praising God, derived from Sufism, are identified with what local residents call the "science of the Koran" (*tanefema*). Men's possessing spirits, described as "illnesses of God," come about as a result of overzealous repetition of the *ezzeke* verses, in excess of the Islamic scholar's recommendation. Here, the notion is that the sentiments take over, obliterating logic, and the person "becomes crazy" from such a state.

Reserve and secrecy characterize some knowledge: specifically, noble male creativity is identified with solitude. For example, good poetry and men's singing should take place outside villages and away from groups. By contrast, openness and lack of reserve are associated with other specialties. For example, Tuareg say that "smiths and (former) slaves have no shame," and their drumming apprenticeships take place in public. Also relevant to these knowledge claims is the cultural opposition between prayer and song. Although they do not forbid them outright, Islamic scholars disapprove of secular evening festivals, music, and song.

My task here is to analyze the way these notions are used in asserting power, in terms of local social distinctions, thereby providing a critique of Western-based dichotomies and classifications such as "myth/science" and "sacred/secular." For example, possession song verses that oppose prayer to secular song on one level constitute debates surrounding gender and class asymmetry in Kel Ewey Tuareg society. Categories invoked in these debates resist translation into neat dichotomies and evolutionary phases such as the "sacred/secular" split characteristic of some analyses of literacy (Goody 1977; Comaroff 1985).<sup>5</sup> The data also challenge extreme images

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<sup>4</sup> Local concepts of "unscientific" and "scientific" are problematic to translate. Local residents who speak French use these terms in French to explain Tamacheq terms *teghare* (learning; study) and *tanefema* (Koranic knowledge), as well as the concepts underlying them. They also use the terms to explain attitudes toward the female spirit possession (*tende n goumaten*) songs, as "based on sentiment rather than logic." These attitudes associate logical thought with Islam, thereby breaking down Western dichotomies between so-called "sacred" and "secular" thought and knowledge.

<sup>5</sup> These works suggest a patterned distribution of power, but there remains the need to identify the agents conferring educational/political legitimacy and power, and to account for the greater prestige some forms of knowledge acquire in particular contexts. While Western-based colonialism and its mission and secular schools play important roles in these

of Tuareg gnosis in some ethnographic writings, which tend to overrepresent noble influence on Tuareg knowledge systems and also to exaggerate women's control over children's education (Foley 1930; Lhote 1955).<sup>6</sup> In the sections that follow, I show how concepts of truth/lie, adult/child, prayer/song, and knowledge/ignorance articulate with gender, age, and class typifications and relationships within Tuareg society, as well as with those imposed from outside, through colonialism. In the transfer of Tuareg knowledge specialties, the established local intelligentsia fear some texts as more threatening than others. This suggests that specialists seek to "own" knowledge, but ownership does not always coincide with a single form of power, in that other resources come into play. Different kinds of power—political and cosmological—are available to persons in diverse contexts. I show how local evaluations of knowledge specialties are connected to social stereotypes and fill the need for a negative reference group. Each disputant, for persuasive power, appeals to different principles in the competition to control "collective memory" (Bakhtin 1984; Hebdigé 1979).

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processes, in my view many authors tend to overemphasize this perspective and downplay the role of local intellectuals. In his analysis of traditional Western classification schemes used to describe differences between societies, Goody (1977:12-14) observes that one common theme in distinguishing between societies has to do with the contrast between myth and history. But this measure seems static and assumes that such categories are mutually exclusive. Among Kel Ewey Tuareg, most writing is identified with Islam. But specialists alternately use both verbal instructions and reading in transfer of similar types of knowledge, though toward different ends and audiences and with intervening mediating agents. Goody's scheme also leaves finer shades of contrast, as well as power relations, unaccounted for. For example, the role of Tifinagh, a script in which Tuareg women specialize, used in poetry, love messages, and graffiti, is currently enjoying a revitalization in Tuareg nationalism and cultural autonomy movements. However, women have always also studied Arabic and the Koran.

<sup>6</sup> Some earlier European representations of Tuareg gnosis as noble-dominated in a rigid, ranked hierarchy tended to ignore competing and negotiable power bases (Campbell 1928; Foley 1930; Lhote 1955). Images were based upon authors' projections of European medieval feudal society, rather than on local commentaries. There is also a discrepancy between European accounts of Tuareg women's roles, which tended to portray them as the sole repositories of knowledge, and Kel Ewey residents' respect for Islamic scholars and assertions by some individuals that "women tell lies and children's tales."

## The Setting

The focus here is on a rural community of semi-nomadic livestock herders, caravanners, and oasis gardeners. Kel Ewey Tuareg social relations and bases of power have been undergoing changes in recent years. Traditionally, in Saharan and Sahelian regions of Africa, sedentary agricultural populations who could not defend themselves militarily were subject to slave-raiding and taxation of their products by Tuareg nomadic pastoralists. Many became servile peoples, gradually incorporated into Tuareg society in this way, as either slaves or tributary groups who gardened and paid nobles a proportion of their produce in millet and dates. The roles of diverse social strata, however, have always been subject to negotiation and flexibility, and resist neat pigeonholing. For example, before slavery was abolished, there were varying degrees of servitude, some types resembling serfdom, in their greater independence from owners. Slaves could inherit from noble owners. But they were not free, and they performed all the arduous domestic, herding, and other manual labor. Smiths have never been owned or exploited economically; in fact, nobles have depended on smiths for technical and intermediary roles in tasks nobles disdain. For example, since smiths do not marry nobles, they assist in arranging noble marriages and in negotiating bridewealth. But pollution beliefs surrounding smiths—for example, their alleged malevolent, mystical powers—are still relevant in rural communities today (Rasmussen 1992).

There is now some degree of sedentarization, due to pressures from drought and government political policies. Consequently, sectors of subsistence activity have lost their one-to-one correspondence to social stratum. This situation has produced less coincidence between prestigious descent and prosperous socioeconomic positions, and has affected relations between the sexes, age groups, and social strata in ways discussed elsewhere in greater detail.<sup>7</sup> Many former slaves as well as smiths are becoming prosperous through gardening in years of good rains, and some nobles are becoming impoverished due to diminishing returns from herding and caravanning. But caravanning and herding are still considered more prestigious than gardening. Other contradictions concern descent: the ancient local matrilineal system, which traces inheritance and descent through women, faces competition from Islamic law favoring men.

Recently, nobles' traditional bases of power (monopolization of weapons and camels, control of the caravan trade) have been eroding in

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<sup>7</sup> See Murphy 1967; Bernus 1981; Casajus 1987; Rasmussen 1985, 1988, 1989, 1990.



ecological disaster (intermittent droughts) and political tensions with the central government of Niger. Since the early 1990s, there has been increased Tuareg separatist/nationalist activity, with armed military resistance, in the North. Some Tuareg have dispersed to refugee camps in Mauritania.

I argue that these forces—internal, longstanding contradictions and ambiguities of the traditional system, as well as recently changing bases of power and their ecological and political effects—create marked dispute over ownership of knowledge. Nobles, smiths, and former slaves, as well as men and women of different ages, scramble to “own” meaning, but the role of written knowledge in this scheme has no clear-cut correspondence to a single social segment. Smiths and former slaves are often more literate than nobles in French, due to nobles’ avoidance of secular education. Islamic scholars (popularly called marabouts) and smiths, who did not customarily fight or collect or pay tribute, served nobles in client-patron relationships: the former as lettered religious specialists in regional history, Koranic law, and medicine and the latter as oral historians, musicians, ritual specialists, and intermediaries for chiefs. Although women were not active in the official political system of local chiefs, councils of elders, and Islamic scholars, they have always held high social status, represented themselves in legal cases, inherited and managed herds, initiated divorce, and been traditionally active in music, poetry, and the education of children.

### **Knowledge Systems and Their Transfer**

#### *Traditional, Koranic, and non-Koranic*

In rural communities, Koranic scholarship includes religious, legal, and medical studies. Keenan (1977) and Norris (1972, 1975) have documented how Islamic education entered Tuareg regions through migrations of clans of Koranic scholars called marabouts and Sufi mystics originally from Tademekket in the Maghreb. Lettered Islamic scholars are similar in some respects to the Murabtin or Zwaya among the Moors, though among Tuareg they do not correspond to a coherent class. Only in a few cases do they wield any authority, and by and large while Tuareg nobles respect marabouts for their knowledge of the Koran and their piety, they consider marabouts to be semi-tributary (Norris 1972, 1975).

Tuareg nobles state, “The path followed by the noble leads one way, the way of the marabout is another.” A prominent Islamic scholar explained that a marabout practices *taneslema* or Koranic knowledge better

than others and is pacific, that is, does not fight. Traditionally, the noble warrior needed blessings and amulets from a marabout for protection in raids and battles. Today marabouts practice divination, counseling, and the interpretation of Koranic law. They are sought out by local chiefs for their advice. They are also expected to be generous, for example, in redistributing their wealth. In rural areas, there is less of a split between so-called “sacred” and “secular” knowledge and specialties of law and medicine. I noticed, for example, that many rural Tuareg friends conceptualized my role as scholar/anthropologist by referring to me as *taneslem* (in Tamacheq, marabout, fem.) rather than by the French *professeur*, a term that is known from contact with secular primary schools in the region but less commonly used.

Koranic education extends beyond the primary level; students pursue higher education after memorizing Koranic verses. This next level includes study of Koranic verses’ meaning. There follows introduction to other religious writings, such as the Hadiths (traditions of the Prophet). The student also learns Arabic grammar, logic, jurisprudence, theology, and commentaries on the Koran. Although many local residents would be considered nonliterate in French, the official language of Niger, and in their local language, they read and write Arabic. Elders told me that at one time there was a Koran written in Tamacheq with Arabic letters (similar to the Ajumi in Hausa religious tracts), but that this disappeared long ago. There were famous centers of higher education throughout the Sahara well before Europeans established universities: namely, at Timbuktu and Agadez. One story relates that the children of the Tuareg and Moors left their parents’ tents to go to Sankore, where lectures were given more than 1,000 years ago.

Thus Tuareg have only recently opposed sending their children away to secular schools established initially by France and later by the central government of Niger. This opposition is an expression of resistance first of all to colonialism and subsequently to central state taxation and anything perceived as “secularism” (referred to as “non-Moslem”). Secularism is explained, in local terms, as urban and anti-Islamic. For example, one man who currently resides in the capital of Niger, but previously came from a rural community, disapprovingly commented, “Formerly, people here [in Niamey, the capital] were Moslem; they did not dress in tight pants, drink alcohol, go to bars or nightclubs, or dance. Now, they do all these things. . . . Here [in the town] people say they are Moslem, but they really are not.” Another individual, the husband of a woman friend of mine in the rural Air region of Mount Bagzan, today a retired secondary school teaching supervisor, told me how, as a child, he and his family had resisted

efforts at recruitment of Tuareg children to secular schools. When authorities came to take children to primary school, they encountered local resentment and lack of enthusiasm: as he put it, “Me, I wanted to become a marabout. Everyone at that time did. I begged my parents to hide me. My mother first hid me and then told me to travel to a distant town to avoid school, but later they [the authorities] caught up with me.” Other friends of mine had acquired their French schooling by quite literally being marched off at gunpoint by soldiers. Tuareg nobles at first willingly sent only the children of slaves and smiths to school, and then as punishment.

The structure of traditional learning outside Islam in Tuareg society featured few specialized teachers apart from Koranic scholars. Nonetheless, there were other sources of learning besides Islamic scholarship, based on local religion and ritual, oral traditions, economics, and subsistence. There is a continuum—an embodiment of skills, social practices, symbols, values, and attitudes—that individuals learn through rites of passage and everyday activities, according to age, sex, and social stratum. The acquisition of knowledge is conceived of as a living process linked to the daily experience of every individual: in rites surrounding birth, marriage, and funerals, and in apprenticeships in herbalism, smithing, and musical performance. In more nomadic conditions, women in some Tuareg confederations became primary educators while men were away on raids and caravans. But marabouts have been more influential educators among the Kel Ewey. In the seminomadic villages and camps of my research near Mount Bagzan, many small boys who do not accompany fathers on caravans spend much time in Koranic schools. As they age, men frequently become practicing marabouts, regardless of social class origins.

Smiths and women also educate by telling tales that have a clearly didactic purpose. Yet elders, especially noble men and marabouts, call these “children’s tales” rather than history, and accuse women and smiths of lying. Yet local reactions to different versions of origins suggest that the circumstances of knowledge transfer are as significant for legitimacy as are the teller and the knowledge content, in local classification systems.

Intellectual pursuits are thus linked to age, descent, gender, and types of morality and upbringing identified with them, used in the sense of symbolic capital to mark off outsiders. Yet no sharp division exists between home and school or between religious and secular education in rural areas. Claims to legitimacy and power in knowledge specialty are linked to age, sex, and social stratum origin. This tradition persists alongside recent secular, central state, and urban influences.

*Historical Knowledge: Oral Legends, Tales, and References to Events in Life Histories*

*Idamen iru* is a plural term Tuareg use to designate oral historical legends, denoting that they are “from long ago” and believed to transmit history (*tarikh*). Many people, particularly youths, deny that they know origin tales; some types of these narratives constitute esoteric knowledge, and their telling is restricted by values of respect toward elders and deceased ancestors, particularly on the paternal side. The elderly know them and sometimes, after long acquaintance and proper approach through intermediaries, agree to relate them. Youths say that only old people should tell some kinds of tales. But asking them to do so is a delicate matter. For youths cannot pronounce names of deceased ancestors, in particular those on the father’s side; nor are such younger people supposed to ask questions of old people. This type of tradition is also linked conceptually to Islam. One elderly former slave whom I will call Adamou, now a prosperous gardener and successful Islamic scholar, told me, “Since I have grown old and become a marabout, I have stopped telling the other oral tradition, called folktales (pl. *imayen*, sing. *emay*); now I tell only historical legends (*idamen iru*) and true history (*tarikh*).” Folktales (*imayen*) told by smiths, women, and children focus upon female founding ancestors and sometimes hint of primal incest. Adamou expressed a view prevalent among many men, that these latter are “not Islamic” and therefore “not true.” However, despite his success, noble residents expressed mild disapproval of him for relating historical knowledge, in whatever form, in public, for to do so is to lack reserve (*takarakit*), an important cultural value. They also mocked him behind his back, despite his claims to credibility through identification with Islam, due to his servile social origins. “Of course,” they said, “he is really a slave; that explains his shamelessly pronouncing names of deceased ancestors and living elders.” Low social status (slave and smith), however, can become a source of power, for it enables the person to pronounce what others (nobles) are ashamed to say. Lack of reserve, while less prestigious, confers freedom to appropriate knowledge and tradition.

For example, Adamou gave the following account of the origin of two villages at the base of Mount Bagzan, about 200 miles northeast of town of Agadez. Residents there belong to the Kel Igurmaden clan or descent group of Kel Ewey Tuareg:

Now the people of Azday are all Kel Bagzan [i.e., from Mount Bagzan], from the time of Kaousan [leader of the Tuareg Senoussi Revolt against the French in 1917]. They left for Hausa country. They returned home, where

they have remained. Then they came to Azday. The Kel Bagzan, of the same *tawsit* (descent group), in the year of Kaousan left for Hausa country. They all left for Agadez [a Saharan town in the Air region] when the white people came. They [the whites] harassed them a lot. They taxed them. They made them pay taxes. The local residents went south to find a livelihood. They returned. The whites seized power and now there is peace. The whites all later abandoned the country. They spent six years in Azday and then they returned to Talat. The Kel Igurmaden remained in Talat. They stayed at their place, with Chetouna (pseudonym), an old woman in Azday now. They spent a long time over there. They lived there for six years. They went to Abardak for gardening. Now they are around Talat. Those who are gardeners garden in their gardens. Now they make their gardens there. All their work is the same. All our relatives are on Mount Bagzan. The Kel Chimilan [of Abardak] are from Timia [an oasis to the northwest]. They speak the same language. They left Timia and went to Agadez. The whites made them pay taxes. They returned. They stayed here in the Air. They did not go back to Timia. They went to Abardak where they remained without leaving. Those Kel Nabarro left for Agadez, and then they settled in Abardak, they did not go back to either Timia or Nabarro. The fathers of the chief of Talat and the chief of Abardak, I'll tell you their fathers: the father of the chief of Abardak was named Nano (pseudonym) and the father of the chief of Talat is named Elias (pseudonym). Elias is "father" of the Kel Igurmaden, Nano was father of the Kel Nabarro.<sup>8</sup> These men are great marabouts, and their ancestors built a mosque and sank a well [here]. The Kel Igurmaden and the Kel Nabarro are the same, relatives. They all belong to the [larger confederation of] Kel Ewey.

Men encouraged me to gather stories about another early male hero, Boulkhou, who according to legend hung suspended by a thread inside a well for forty days, hidden from enemies, and who used special Islamic amulets to save the Kel Igurmaden in battle.

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<sup>8</sup> Several etymological notes are instructive here. *Adda*, though the term of address for "father," is less often heard in reference. Usually Kel Ewey refer to such figures as *amghar*, which denotes (masculine) "elder" and "leader." The latter term was used to identify fathers of the two current local chiefs. Also, while these men are described as the "fathers" of their respective descent groups within the larger Kel Ewey confederation of Air Tuareg, the fathers' ancestors are credited with actually founding the local sites where Kel Igurmaden and Kel Nabarro predominate.

*Kel* denotes "people (of)" in Tamacheq, e.g., *Kel Igurmaden* = "People of Tagunnat," *Kel Ewey* = "People of the Bull" (a reference to their offering a bull to the Sultan in Agadez to secure political autonomy from him), *Kel Bagzan* = "People of Mount Bagzan" (a reference to the original geographical location of many local descent groups). Many Tuareg call themselves, collectively, *Kel Tamacheq*, "People of the Tamacheq language" or, alternatively, *Kel Taguefmust*, "People of the Veil."

Women's origin myths tend to be related in fragments, and disagreement surrounds their telling. In addition, women tellers sometimes blur the boundaries between genealogical and mythical ancestresses. For example, women say they descend from "the same grandmother," and when asked for the name will initially give a recent ancestress' name. One woman, said to be the oldest in my research village, at first gave me the name Anta, her grandmother. On further questioning, however, she indicated that the "mother" of the Kel Igurmaden (a smaller descent group of the Kel Ewey) was a woman named Tagurmat, who led the Kel Igurmaden on horseback into a battle near Mount Bagzan long ago. This ancestress had children, and they were the original ancestors of the Kel Igurmaden. Another elderly noble woman, from a *maraboutique* family, related another variant on this theme:

There was a man named Mohamed of Ibil. He had his wife, they were inside their house, and the woman saw some *cameliers* who were passing, and she went outside to watch them. She looked at them to see them clearly. The husband slapped his wife, she died, he cut open her stomach, and he took out two little girls who were twins, whom they called "Those girls who were cut." The two little twin girls, it was they who founded all the Igurmaden. One made the Igurmaden of Mount Bagzan. All Kel Igurmaden are from these two girl twins.

A group of smiths told a different version of Kel Ewey origins:

Kel Ewey descended from seven sisters who came from Turkey to the Tamgak mountains. They had children: these were ancestresses of major Air Tuareg divisions, the Kel Ewey, Kel Perwan, and others. These divisions are cousins; they joke with each other.

Other historical knowledge concerns the origin of the Tuareg men's faceveil. Like founder/ancestor origins, variants narrated by marabouts and men on the one hand and women and smiths on the other differ. The following account, told by Adamou the marabout/gardener, contrasts markedly with the versions told by women and smiths: "Now I know how the faceveil that men wear originated. The Hausa and the Tuareg made another type of headdress before. When the Tuareg saw Mohammed (the Prophet) with the faceveil (turban), they began to wear it. Women wear only the headscarf." Other variants, circulated among women and smiths, relate the origin of the men's faceveil to inversion in the remote past: they allude to men formerly wearing the women's wrapper skirt and women formerly wearing the men's faceveil. One tale called *Kuchinanga* that I

collected from a young noble woman relates how long ago women wore the men's veil and men wore the women's wrapper skirt. This is related, in the plot, to hostility between the sexes, disguise/deception, and murder.<sup>9</sup> In a tale recorded by Lhote (1955), upon men's return from defeat in battle, women threw aside the faceveil and told men to wear it, shaming them. In these latter etiological myths, called "folktales" by local residents, the origin of the faceveil is linked to the noble value of reserve, whereas in the marabout's version, called legend and considered "true" history despite its oral rather than written transmission, the men's veil was linked to the Prophet and Islam.

Women's and smiths' accounts of local origins emphasize matrilineal kinship, gender role ambiguity, and shameful primal events. Conversely, the marabout's version, considered "true history," emphasizes external contact with Europeans, Islam, and construction of the first local mosque and well. Local residents distinguish legends they translate into French as *histoire* predominantly told by elders and men, or *idamen iru*, from the category of *imayen*, a term denoting folktales. This latter is a larger category, including animal tales, stories about kinship (a common motif is the brother/sister relationship), and accounts of matrilineal ancestresses as founding culture heroines. This last type alludes to matrilineal vestiges in the modern bilateral kinship system, which combines matrilineal and patrilineal descent and inheritance.<sup>10</sup> Predominantly women of diverse social strata and male smiths tell these folktales.

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<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere (1990) I analyze this theme in greater depth. Disguise and covering/veiling are pervasive in the cultural values and imagery of the Tuareg. But only men wear the faceveil.

<sup>10</sup> Among the most recent authors (Nicolaisen 1963; Murphy 1967; Bernus 1981; Casajus 1987) there is agreement that the Kel Ewey division of Air Tuareg follow a bilateral kinship/descent/inheritance system, which traces descent and inheritance on both mother's and father's sides of the family, with vestiges of ancient matriliney from pre-Islamic eras. While many of these matrilineal features have persisted in contemporary social institutions, patrilineal bias (of descent and inheritance calculated through men) is apparent in areas of Koranic law (for example, in Koranic inheritance granting approximately two-thirds of property to male heirs, and one-third to female heirs). Alongside these, however, exist counterbalances in the system to protect women against such biases (for example, *akh hudderren*, livestock herds transmitted to daughters and nieces). Yet patrilineal/patrifocal bias in social institutions does not result solely from Islam; elsewhere (1985) I have discussed the influence of tendencies toward patrifocal households, stronger imposition of Koranic law, and polygyny upon sedentarization and gardening.

Thus while both history and folktales deal with origins, their content is contradictory. Their modes of transmission and perception by local residents also differ. Male nobles, in particular marabouts of noble origin, became irritated when I attempted to elicit stories of female founding ancestresses. They insisted that because these stories were not true they represented a distortion of their history, and therefore had no value as part of my ethnographic data. The question I pursue here is as follows: who has the edge in knowledge transfer, and how are claims to this legitimacy established?

As shown, many local residents classify only certain original accounts as serious historical legends (*idamen iru*). Noble men and marabouts generally do not take *imayen* folktales seriously, in particular those that women and smiths relate, which portray matrilineal ancestresses or nonIslamic origins of the men's faceveil; they call these tales childish, thereby denying them adult status, and equate them with lying rather than truth. Furthermore, folktales and their associated riddles are often told in the relaxed context of joking relationships, between friends and cross-cousins. Women tell folktales at night as they weave mats for tent construction, to make a point during tea-drinking, and during conversation. These are sometimes accompanied by stylized hand gestures called *sikbar*; a tale is not considered complete without them. Among female performers, I also noticed a frequent preference for telling tales in pairs and via improvisation: the performers debated details of plots, one interrupting and correcting the other.

Historical legends and folktales further differ in the circumstances giving rise to their telling. The former are almost always told upon special demand; they are given in response to someone formally seeking information about the past, who elicits accounts from the teller. The latter are told more spontaneously, in situations of sociability, and do not necessarily need to be elicited by special request in a context of information-seeking.

The personal reminiscences of one older woman, literate in Arabic and the Koran, and coming from a family of prominent marabouts, provide further insights into the relation between different media of knowledge-transfer and social roles:

From the moment of my youth, I entered Koranic studies. At that time there were studies. We had our elder who taught us. He got us started in studies. At that time we were with our older and younger brothers. We studied and studied. Then we read alone, holding pages of the Koran. Even if no one was present to make us read, we did that ourselves. So if we wanted to



increase our knowledge, we went to other marabouts to learn. We progressed. Because Tuareg women are not marabouts, they do not [usually] seek to study the Koran. Some also know how to read it, but their studies are not the same thing [as men's]. Others have studied it more. Some only a little, only some prayer verses. They did not continue studies. Some were obliged by others [relatives]. Now the woman who willingly, on her own wishes to do so can find someone to study with and learn. Also she needs intelligence. Now if she goes to someone she can learn well, with someone she prefers . . . the woman who has motivation, if she wants will learn and find ways to study. If she wants to participate in festivals she can go; writing is the same thing. That of the woman and the man. When she goes to write, she writes only what she must write. Me, I have never written healing amulet [talisman] charms for anyone. Writing Koranic verses for curing amulets must be done by a great sage. Me, I do not do writing for medical cures now. Because now there is too much work [to do] at home [for me] to study.

Women say they are afraid to touch the Koran. Furthermore, much ideology opposes female sexuality to Islamic ritual; for example, menstruating women cannot have contact with Islamic amulets. However, women told me that, in the past, there were more female Islamic scholars than there are today. I have discussed reasons for women's changing status elsewhere (1985, 1994b). In brief, these include greater freedom in the past for noble women to practice the arts and education because of the availability of domestic slave labor; since the abolition of slavery, many noble women are today more constrained by domestic tasks such as processing food. But a number of women still receive some Koranic education and are literate in Arabic as well as the Tamacheq Tifinagh script. The use of the latter script, however, is specialized: it is used primarily in love messages, poetry, graffiti, inscriptions on musical instruments, and a few folktales. Contrary to what has been reported about women from some other Tuareg divisions,<sup>11</sup> Kel Ewey women tend to echo men's disdain for Tifinagh as being less important than Arabic, the alphabet of the Koran. The woman above, for example, at least gives "lip-service" to this view; when questioned about Tifinagh, she stated, "Tifinagh and Koranic studies are not the same thing. Islam is worth more; I do not know Tifinagh, but I know Koranic studies." This response contrasts with some Iwllmeden women from Mali with whom I became acquainted in the capital of Niger, who enthusiastically taught me some Tifinagh script.

Thus the content of men's versions of historical knowledge, Arabic, and the Koran appear more highly valued. Yet women's and smiths' tales,

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<sup>11</sup> See Murphy 1967; Borel 1987, 1988; Worley 1988.

when viewed processually, like informal gossip, become powerful in their enactment, and significant in some practices. Women enjoy a large degree of prestige and also exert influence through property ownership. They have the right to initiate divorce, inherit camels, sheep, goats, and donkeys, and own the tent, from which they may eject the husband. Today, women's previous position of privilege is undergoing some change due to increased sedentary lifestyles, influence of Islamic scholars, greater dependence on a money economy mediated by husbands as middlemen, and irregular returns from herding (Rasmussen 1985). Smiths are believed to retaliate against nobles who do not give them presents on demand by activating malevolent powers causing illness and death. A smith is described metaphorically as "like a cousin or a woman; you joke with him (or her)." Smiths frequently circumvent official authority roles by acting as intermediaries and go-betweens, particularly in love affairs, and by exercising their right to "pronounce what other Tuareg are ashamed to pronounce." Smiths are able to do this because they lack reserve, the important noble cultural value. Women and smiths are considered closer to the spirits, and both groups also exert power indirectly in performing poetry and song.

Thus in actual practice, and contrary to official ideology, local knowledge systems undergo reversals in relative influence. These shifts are due to the need for mediators and facilitators, who intervene in the chain of knowledge expression between composition of content and its performance in context.

### *Medicinal Knowledge*

Traditional medicine consists mostly of Islamic ritual knowledge and centers around either curing specific physical/psychological ills or providing protection against social misfortune (theft and forms of sorcery including gossip, jealousy, and love problems). On first scrutiny, from the point of view of ideology, specialized Koranic healing knowledge enjoys higher status and prestige as the standard medical treatment of choice in many rural communities. It is conceptually opposed to other non-Islamic forms. Closer inspection of its practice reveals a more complex relationship, one that conforms to neither sharp opposition nor the "syncretism" conventionally used to describe African Moslem societies.

Islamic scholars (marabouts or *ineslemen*) are skilled in diverse healing methods. They insert Koranic verses written on paper into leather or silver amulet cases manufactured by blacksmiths. Another method consists of writing verses onto a wooden tablet with a vegetable-based ink

solution, which is then washed off and given to the patient to drink. Alestakhara refers to marabouts' divination by writing Koranic verses and numbers on paper, placing the paper underneath the head, and sleeping on it. The marabout then dreams and counsels the patient on the basis of the content of his dream. Alkhukum is a week-long period of seclusion with a marabout following a possessed person's exorcism ritual. Another cure consists of the marabout writing certain combinations of Surat (Koranic verse) numbers together in geometric designs in a small book for curing a given illness. Marabouts state that the entire Koran consists of medicine; each verse, numbered and named, contains a remedy for any illness (except some requiring the music and noise of exorcism, to be discussed presently). It is the order and geometric pattern of numbers that is important; some illnesses and misfortunes require one pattern, others a different pattern.

Most residents indicate that knowledge of these healing skills is accessible to almost everyone; being a specialist in the field merely requires practicing Islam "better" than most others, that is, leading an exemplary life. Yet they emphatically state that maraboutism is a science, called *tanleslema*, in contrast to other types of knowledge such as non-Islamic divination, herbalism, and spirit possession exorcism, which I examine in subsequent paragraphs. The science of maraboutism consists of knowing and writing the Koran, praying, fasting during Ramadan, almsgiving, and respecting other people. Anyone may learn to practice the science of maraboutism, although there is a subtle terminological distinction indicating occupational specialization rather than clan affiliation. Adamou exemplified this: he was called *al faqir* rather than *aneslem*. Clans claiming descent from the Prophet or from Sufi mystics who brought Islam to the Air from the Maghreb, known as *icherifan*, are usually called "true" *ineslemen* and are considered powerful healers. One spirit possession song verse refers to the need for a "cure by cows' milk from herds of the *icherifan*, kept in gourds." Marabouts' sources of prestige are primarily in Koranic knowledge. Although this is to a large degree lettered knowledge, much of its transfer occurs through oral tradition and ritual processes. Furthermore, in actual content as well as in practice, the written and the Islamic frequently overlap with the oral and the non-Islamic, contrary to local cultural ideals (and anthropological theories) of opposition between these different knowledge systems. The question that arises is how power is channeled in this system.

Some Islamic rituals do not directly cure specific ills, but rather ensure community well-being generally by transmitting God's and the marabout's blessing power or benediction, *al baraka*. One example of this is animal sacrifice, *tawatrai*, which takes place on Friday. After collection

of alms and a donated animal, the marabout slaughters it, reads the Koran, and prays, pronouncing a benediction. Each contributing household receives a portion of the meat. Another important duty in practicing maraboutism is the *tahajira*, a religious retreat to mosques and saints' tombs, where study groups discuss and debate issues in Koranic law and medicine. These often take place in the hot and rainy seasons (April-September), or around the Ramadan fasting month. Important pilgrimage centers are Tabelot and Tchighozerine in northeastern Air.

An important body of knowledge in Islamic ritual is *ezzeke* music, derived from Sufi mysticism. These are songs praising God and the Prophet, including the pronouncement that there is only one God and his Prophet is Mohammed. Men perform *ezzeke* songs in mosques, and sometimes enter a trance state while doing so. But this type of possession is considered very different from the spirit possession cured by public exorcism rituals: the former is more positively valued, said to result from a feeling of inadequacy from seeing the contrast between the Prophet's devotion and that of the worshipper. Nonetheless, *ezzeke* possession may become destructive; friends related several cases to me concerning men who were said to become "crazy" from this practice and had to be forcibly carried home from the mosque. A marabout explained, "One problem is that some worshippers recite *ezzeke* many more times than a marabout prescribes; it is this excessive repetition that causes them to become crazy. For ideally, the name of God is pronounced nine times." There are different kinds of *ezzeke* songs; it is a generic term for songs praising God and the Prophet. The songs are sung in canon (round) style. Some marabouts told me they considered reading the Koran to be also a type of *ezzeke*, "because everything in the Koran is from God." These songs also have certain protective or curative powers; individuals do not do anything (for example, satisfy one's hunger) while reciting these praises, "because the power of God enters the reciter through the mind." Marabouts state that before the first man, Adam, could marry Eve, he had to give bridewealth by pronouncing the *ezzeke*:

God is one  
 If all the world dies,  
 it is God who will remain  
 I cry out in the name of God  
 God is one  
 There is no other  
 God Come praise God  
 I cry in the name of one God.

There are other songs praising the Prophet, also believed to confer protection. These are called *almodahan* (or *almohadan*), and are sung by elderly women near the mosque during the Ramadan fasting month. They are learned from other elderly women and marabouts. A text I collected appears below:

I change my words. I say there is no God except Allah.  
 Of all that he has created, he prefers Mohammed.  
 The father of the Prophet (Rabdullai) when he is in the viscera of the  
 father, his light is outside.  
 The day that Mohamed descended into the world, blind people saw the  
 road, paralytics stood up.  
 Even those who are deaf heard.  
 Even animals love the Prophet Mohammed. Even birds praise him.  
 Even frogs and fish in the water send their greetings to Mohammed.  
 Even when a man has wealth, death is near him.  
 Death surrounds each time. These days it sends arrows, there they are  
 falling among the herds [of livestock].

This type of singing is considered very beautiful and the apprenticeship for it is long and demanding. Young women generally do not participate, saying it is better to wait until they are older to do so. Elderly female singers perform these songs very late at night, or in the pre-dawn hours, before the first morning prayers and the beginning of the daylong fast. They are seated outside of, but close beside, the mosque.

Koranic verses, written or sung, cannot cure some spirits, however. Some spirits require the *tende n goumaten* ritual. This public ceremony features loud music, singing, drum music, joking, and flirting among audience members. Its oral art is conceptualized entirely differently. *Goumaten* songs and their accompanying drum music are conceptually opposed to Islam and the Koran, in local references to them and the secular content of their verses. Many local residents, both men and women, were reluctant to transcribe these texts because they were afraid of songs that addressed spirits. Adamou the marabout warned that, after listening to *goumaten* songs, "it is necessary to wash, remove, and change clothing before entering a mosque." Most exorcism songs feature secular subjects of love and economics, and contain jokes and social criticism. However, many refer to Islam. A recurring theme is the opposition between the oral tradition of exorcism songs and knowledge of the Koran (*tanleslema*), as in the following verses: "[It is] Word of the mouth (*awal*). It is not science of learning (*teghare*), let me not be struck down while reciting it before a marabout." Drumming is usually performed by smiths or former slaves.

These possession rites are, however, grudgingly tolerated by marabouts, provided they are carried out in neighborhoods far from mosques and at times that do not coincide with Moslem holidays.

Despite their pronouncement of some Koranic-derived Arabic blessings, marabouts consider herbalism and divination rituals “non-Islamic” healing knowledge. Herbalist curing specialists are usually women, called *tinesmegelen*, and reach full professionalism after youth. Their specialty is curing stomach-aches of women and children, who rarely consult male Islamic scholars for these problems. Significantly, in Tuareg culture, the stomach (*tedis*) is symbolically associated with secrets and with the matrilineage. The major technique herbalists use is touching the patient’s stomach after touching the earth, and then pronouncing a blessing. The herbalist consults at the same time, and may perform some divination. Herbalists inherit the skill in certain clans, but they must also undergo a lengthy apprenticeship with their mother or aunt. Many herbalists told me that they do not treat people independently of their mother’s supervision until they are older; this is due to respect and also to belief that “the treatment of old women works better” in this type of curing. Upon my visit to the nomadic camp of one family of herbalists, the daughter of a famous healer refused to treat patients who arrived while her mother was away on travel. She said she was still too young, and practicing only with her mother present. When I received treatment from an herbalist in the caravanning village where I resided, she gave me a massage, and as she did this pronounced the Koranic benediction, “Bismillallah,” and then touched the earth twice; this is believed to make the medicine (massage) work more effectively. On one occasion, I accompanied an herbalist to the home of a mutual friend who was ill. The herbalist waited until the moon had appeared before she assembled medicines (mostly leaves and bark). She filled a small basket with millet, held it up over the barks and leaves mixed with water, and rotated it in a counterclockwise direction three times. This is a recurrent ritual gesture among Tuareg, particularly used at rites of passage and believed to ensure *al baraka*. The herbalist then took the medicines to the sick woman’s home, where she rubbed her stomach with goat fat and had her drink an infusion of millet, goat cheese, and dates. Throughout the treatment, she kept up a steady stream of pleasant conversation. Afterward, she was paid cash (about \$.50) for her treatment and was given dinner and tea.

## The Cultural Construction of Knowledge: Curiosity and Creativity

### *Traditional Education and Apprenticeships*

According to Alioto (1987:116), Islamic views of knowledge were characterized by regarding knowledge as essentially that which was passed from master to disciple, almost as a secret rite, in contexts of client-patronage systems, instead of from teacher to class. Among Tuareg, learning a skill is similarly linked to upbringing; local residents told me that in order to sing or cure well, the person must be well raised. This belief has moral connotations. Emphasis is put upon the conduct of parents and elders, which is seen to reflect purity of origins as well as to ensure good marriage of children.<sup>12</sup> So learning is bound up with ideals of noble descent and increasingly, nowadays, with ideals of cultural revitalization and autonomy. Part of ideal conduct is correct behavior toward parents and other respected authority figures such as Islamic scholars and in-laws. Paradoxically, however, much knowledge is ideally imparted without direct questioning by youth. This view is expressed in a tale I collected from a young married noble woman with children. It concerns the fate of a youth who seeks the unusual:

#### The Man Who Wanted to See the Marvelous

A man said that he wanted to see something marvelous.<sup>13</sup> He walked, walked, and encountered a stream of flowing oil. A woman spirit said, "Sir, aren't you astonished?" He said to her, "What is so astonishing about a stream of flowing oil that I already know?" He walked, walked. He encountered buttocks that were fighting. She asked him, "Sir, aren't you astonished?" He said, "What is so astonishing about buttocks that fight, which I already know?" He walked, walked, and met eyes fighting. She asked, "Sir, aren't you astonished?" He told her, "What's so astonishing about eyes that I already know?" He walked, walked, and arrived at a home. She [the woman spirit] turned into a woman and told him, "Come here." He came, and she prepared a meal, she had many children. She picked up the stick. He licked it. The meal was finished. She prepared

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<sup>12</sup> As they put it, "The marriage of children depends on the conduct of parents."

<sup>13</sup> Although this tale is a Tuareg tale related in Tamacheq, the woman teller used a term from the Hausa language, *mai maki*, denoting "something (or someone) surprising." Kel Ewey Tuareg have close contacts with Hausa culture, due to historical migrations during the Senoussi Revolt against the French and also to men's continuing caravan trade expeditions to Zinder, Niger, and Kano, Nigeria. Many men and older women speak Hausa as a second language.

another meal. He slept. Then she sharpened her knife. The rooster cried, "Yako!" She cursed it. But the rooster did not sleep. The rooster cried, "Kikikiyako!" She sharpened the knife in order to cut the man's throat. The rooster crowed again. The woman put down the knife. She lay down and herself fell asleep.

The man went out. He packed his baggage, he left. He went along. He walked, walked. The female spirit awakened. There was no one there. The man traveled for a whole day. She got up and followed him. She was very tall, [stretching] from sky to earth. She walked like a sand devil. Like that, like that. Until she saw him throwing down his cat [from his camel baggage]. She swallowed it, she pursued him. He dropped the rooster from the camel. She swallowed it, she followed him. Like that, like that. She saw a camel's paw and she swallowed it. The camel ran, foot on foot, until only one paw was left. Then she ran. She told him, "Even if there is only one paw, I want to try to take you over to that tree over there." Run, run, arrival at the tree. The sole [remaining] paw, also, was pulled out, she ate the camel, until she ate all of it. She looked up into the tree. The man had climbed up into its top. She looked at him. She did not know what to do. She tore off his penis, and changed it into an axe. She cut the tree. When she tried to cut down all the tree, the chameleon said, "Give it to me." She gave it to him. When the chameleon began to cut, he said to the tree, "Return to what you were before." So the tree became as [it was] before. Then the chameleon seized the axe, and cut. She said, "Become what you were before." The tree became as before. So the man called his dog. He called and called. He had two dogs, and his wives. He said to them, "When you see the dogs, try to run, and unleash them." They told him, "All right." They left, they tried to run, one wife said, "We'll unleash them." One said, "We must not unleash them." They argued, until finally they unleashed them. The dogs ran, they arrived, they saw the spirit woman, and they ate her. They tore her all up, they said to the man, "Come down." He said, "I don't want to come down until you pick her up, pick up her bones from there. Then I'll come down." He said, "Oh, I've seen the marvelous." He divorced the wife who had argued against unleashing the dogs. The tree had to be shortened in order for him to descend.

The term here for female spirit, *djinniya*, refers to the type of spirit mentioned in the Koran. Chameleon, *tawoutte*, is considered a very wise and good animal, and among Kel Ewey the term is also slang for a very devout marabout (*taghaghen tawoutte*). Here, seeking the marvelous or astonishing is implicitly understood as knowledge outside the sacred religious tradition, dangerous at least to men. Spirits are conceptualized as inhabiting remote places outside human habitation and attacking those who walk there unprotected by amulets and swords made by Islamic scholars and smiths. Here, the female spirit is portrayed as a kind of Siren temptress who lures, tests, and later attacks the man.



Much knowledge transfer is channeled according to who may and who may not pronounce the forbidden and shameful: names of husbands, fathers, or deceased ancestors (especially on the paternal side). Furthermore, despite the importance of literacy and Islam, much specialized knowledge, including that of the Koran, is often transmitted orally in rural areas. This transmission occurs through storytelling, sacred and secular songs (which, as shown, have hazy boundaries), and healing rituals employing these songs and other verbal and nonverbal expressive media.

Another way knowledge is transmitted is through musical apprenticeship. In the classical repertoire each poetic rhythm, based on the author, event, or person to whom it is dedicated, is a kind of matrix from which poets (predominantly men) are obligated to be inspired to create and pattern poems and songs. These rhythms are memorized with the aid of inherited formulas that permit pursuing the song by recourse to verses extracted from any other poem, provided that their meter corresponds to the rhythm. Noble values of reserve and respect obligate a noble man to sing in relative seclusion, in the company of listeners from the same age group with whom he has relaxed, joking relationships. A man caught in a situation of inferiority, particularly before those persons with whom he practices a reserve or respect relationship (namely, in-laws, elders on the paternal side, marabouts, and chiefs), is vulnerable to mockery in the poetry and songs of others. But traditionally, smiths attached to a noble warrior were the first to repeat his poems and songs, a privilege that they alone possessed. Today it is among smiths that one finds the greatest number of poets and singers. Smiths lack reserve; as observed, they are “like cousins,” and they joke with nobles, even marabouts and chiefs. Thus smiths’ social status permits them to circumvent constraints surrounding creativity. They are the principal purveyors of the repertoire.

Some marabouts have recorded melodies and rhythms in a book written in Tamacheq in the Arabic alphabet, with commentaries on their origins and the history of their creation. In epic poems the personal creativity of the singer intervenes only rarely. It is, however, permissible to mix poems and to insert verses borrowed from other authors, but one must respect meter, rhyme, and scansion, hallmarks of noble warrior sung poetry, and at least cite verses of the original poem (Borel 1987 , 1988).

Vocal and instrumental performance can take place only by executing known melodies, and can never be detached from their melodic context. In poetry generally, each poem has a corresponding melody played on the *anzad*, a one-stringed, bowed lute played by women and sung to by men. The same author usually composes both poem and melody. Borel reports that, among the Iullemeden Tuareg confederation, different poetry

rhythms are the property of different noble divisions (1987:79). They thus have a kind of copyright, and only the *anzad* players have license to diffuse rhythm and melody, and then only in instrumental form. Today, when asked to name the melody they are playing, they answer according to the name of the rhythm or one of its derivatives.

Borel classifies Tuareg music into three principal categories: vocal music of noble, tributary, and male smiths; instrumental *anzad* music of noble and tributary women; and instrumental *tende* drumming music of smiths and former slave women (1988). Among the Kel Ewey confederation, I collected additional music: drum patterns, songs, and poetry performed specifically during the spirit possession curing rite; and brief, half-sung, half-told lamentations often performed by women. Competence consists of following aesthetic rules of vocal technique transmitted from generation to generation. Thus familiarity with the repertoire and its mode of reproduction are inseparable. Poems are faithfully memorized and reproduced by recitation. For a Tuareg singer, form counts much more than faithfulness to the text; it is by his melodic creativity that he is recognized.

Apprenticeship to the *anzad* takes place with the onset of female adolescence, when the girl first begins to wear the headscarf. She starts with a practice melody called *melloloki* that allows her to perfect the movements of the bow first. Classical *anzad* melodies are first acquired by song, in solitude, and then transferred onto the instrument, but always accompanied by a murmur of the throat, called "song in the soul." One friend described to me how she first observed more experienced players, and how they then placed her hands in the correct position. She told me that in recent years, due to her advancing age, she had abandoned this instrument and now devoted herself to Islamic duties of prayer, thereby opposing secular music to prayer and youth to old age.

Apprenticeship on the *tende* drum, an instrument traditionally identified with slaves and smiths, is of a different order. Here the learning process is not hidden, for the game of *tende* is part of childhood amusements in which all smiths and former slaves participate. The different drum patterns are acquired progressively during evening festivals at which this drum is featured, as well as at exorcism rites, and are easily imitated on rocks and other objects. I observed small children playing at drumming for the possession ritual, enacting the process in detail, complete with possessed patient beneath the blanket, chorus, drummer, and a small toy drum. Therefore drumming is a less formalized musical apprenticeship than that associated with the *anzad*. The drum is assembled on the spur of the moment from a mortar used to crush grain, and can be reconverted into

the mortar; it is identified with domestic servitude, and more often played in public, informal contexts. The *anzad*, constructed especially for playing music and permanently a musical instrument, is used in more structured situations or in formalized musical practice. Women learn possession songs from their mothers; singers at the exorcism rite are usually close in residence and kinship relationships, such as wives of pairs of brothers or close cousins.

The foregoing description of musical practice, based upon both Borel's (1987, 1988) and my own observations, suggests that this is one of the major activities still consciously structured, repeated, and reproduced by individuals; it represents a kind of refuge for identity, regardless of the social stratum to which the player belongs. Furthermore, among Tuareg it is permissible to borrow and mix learned traditions as long as they appear "noble," and the noble origin of composition is given credit. Yet persons entrusted as vehicles for transmission do not appear to be exclusively male or noble; on the contrary, smiths, slaves, and women predominate in the transfer of musical skill and thus enjoy the prerogative to change knowledge conveyed in these texts.

### **Interaction Between Pre-Colonial and Contemporary Knowledge Systems**

#### *Official Colonial and Post-Colonial Central State Policies in Formal Education*

French colonial policy toward Tuareg regions (present-day eastern Mali, southern Algeria, and northern Niger) in the early twentieth century initially neglected education, since there appeared to be no wealth in those regions. Later, policies became more directed toward centralization. In education, the French saw their colonies as overseas units of Europe and France. Accordingly, they imposed European categories of study and a Eurocentric viewpoint upon local curricula; for example, many history books in the Republic of Niger spoke of "our ancestors the Gauls" until the mid-1970s.

While it is true that recent educational policies affect local social elites, the local entities and traditional systems have also affected official educational policy. Although the secular educational system became more compartmentalized and separated during colonialism, it has been shown that formal (albeit non-Western) education was longstanding in local culture. Traditional education, of pre-Islamic and Islamic origin, had its own system

and logic, and has interacted with colonialism and the nation state. In this scheme, elite status and its relation to knowledge and power become complex, because forms of knowledge and sources of power do not always coincide. For example, one young man, a friend of mine in the Air region, an agricultural extension agent with a primary school education, was chosen to teach literacy to local villagers. He related to me how, due to his youth, he was prevented from teaching the elders and marabouts in his village. Other primary school teachers are of low social status because they often come from a different ethnic group, having been transferred from a distant region of Niger in an effort to promote nationalism and discourage local-level patronage.

As shown, in many rural communities knowledge specialization and decisions about its transfer are based on internal status distinctions; however, composition of knowledge content or form is sometimes separate from its transmission and the context of this transfer. Agents of composition and agents of performance are not always the same. While knowledge specialties are sometimes seen as property “belonging” to particular social segments, performers who transfer knowledge may in fact alter its content to a significant degree, or reveal what is supposed to be kept secret. This data challenges overly static discontinuities or oppositions and monolithic, consensual conceptions of culture (Horton 1967, 1982; Goody 1977; Comaroff 1985). It also challenges tendencies to portray colonized peoples as passive and reacting solely in relation to outside impetus. There is unquestionable influence upon local systems by the new infrastructure. But the traditional intellectual elite is not necessarily the same as the new secularly educated elite. Former slaves with more secular education are often employed in towns as government functionaries, where they are respected and where they derive status and prestige from achieved rather than ascribed criteria. Such persons are less likely to return to the countryside, still dominated by nobles, in order to contribute to local development projects. There is a relationship between growth of knowledge and emergence of a diversified society with incipient class cleavages, but this relationship is not static, one-directional, or always predictable; it is based on changing bases of power including, but not

limited to, traditional material resources of weapons, livestock, and prestige based on descent.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusions

Among Tuareg, the need for mediators and facilitators enables “bedrock truths” and “party lines” to be easily appropriated. As shown, knowledge specialization and decisions about its transfer are officially based on internal status distinctions. On the other hand, knowledge composition and content are often separate from transfer and its context. The principal statuses to which Tuareg explicitly defer in knowledge transfer are based on religion, age, and social stratum—specifically, Islamic practitioners, elders, and nobles—but persons of either sex within these categories, and persons of diverse social origins, may dominate some situations of knowledge transfer. As shown, for example, the mother-daughter tie is as important for traditional apprenticeships as the father-son tie is for official Islamic scholarship; the former is a power channel for esoteric knowledge of exorcism songs, folktales, and herbalism divination, but also for women’s liturgical singing near the mosque. Although local cultural values nominally place the former bodies of knowledge lower on the hierarchy of legitimacy than the latter, in practice they enjoy equal if not greater currency, and are often used syncretically by almost everyone. Written and oral traditions, as well as young women, former slaves, and smiths, often play mediating roles in this scheme rather than lining up neatly on either side of the spectrum. Women consult both Islamic scholars’ written cures and exorcism practitioners’ sung verses; marabouts refer some women to possession cures after diagnosing spirits believed to be incurable by Koranic

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<sup>14</sup> Keenan (1977) documents how, by mid-century, servile Tuareg agriculturalists were becoming more aware of gradual transformation of their social order, of emergence of a modern elite in oases and towns. There was resentment toward nobles’ authority and the agricultural tax they imposed. Noble attitudes toward nomadic schools established by the French, and later toward boarding schools established by central-state authorities, were hostile because these innovations symbolized the new social order with its centralized tax system, alien values, and challenge to the client-patron system. In Tuareg society, therefore, secular education was initiated by moves toward sedentarization and breakdown of noble elitist positions. At first, nobles willingly sent only children of slaves to school in order to punish them; nobles’ children were coerced to attend by outside military force. Yet later, many nobles, subjected to pressures of drought, meager returns from caravan trade, and former slaves’ taking over the gardens, finally realized the crucial factor in securing employment in towns was achieved and not ascribed.

verses. Many smiths and former slaves become practicing marabouts, though those who do so usually refrain from drumming at exorcism cures.

Yet all these maneuverings occur within larger efforts to discredit and target “hoaxes,” in order to counter perceived subversion of “original” knowledge content. Composition and transfer of knowledge are separate strands of activity. These conditions enable specialists to alter knowledge content, thereby creating a need for proof of credibility through contrasts: youth is opposed to age; the openness of youth, slaves, and smiths is opposed to the secrecy and reserve of elders and nobles; and the secular (not sacred) and non-Islamic are opposed to science and Islam. In this process, the hierarchy and claims to knowledge take an unusual turn, somewhat different from expectation. Koranic learning interweaves oral and written modes of transmission; much secular knowledge is identified with pre-Islamic, “unscientific,” and stagnant conservatism rather than modernity. The Tuareg material suggests that knowledge classified as “scientific truth” is not uniformly equated with secularism or writing in a clear-cut fashion. Nor does science seem invariably attached to a single social elite, official political authority, or monopolization of material resources—for example, to male gender roles or Islamic scholarship. Knowledge is a commodity, but it is not static. There are brokers within the community who interpret it even as they process and redistribute it.

The Tuareg data inform broader issues in crosscultural humanities, namely problems of transforming local philosophical “folk” concepts into technical/philosophical metalanguages; delineating how the postmodern symbolic economy operates in local media; and discovering which relevant categories facilitate local discourse in religious/scientific thought in a fashion that avoids representing cultures as monolithic. In addressing the problem of transfer of knowledge and power in systems of thought, it is misleading to isolate a single prime mover in a process that is in reality a mosaic. Its configuration emerges from active manipulation of notions of truth/deception, involving challenging, but also protecting, local knowledge as property from within the community, rather than solely from passive reaction to conquest or contact imposed from outside.

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## Appendix (Texts)

### Mohamed in Ibil (Mohamed of Ibi<sup>15</sup>)

*Eliss iyan yigan Mohamed in Ibil*

There was a man called Mohamed of Ibil

*Ila tamtot net ahan amass in aghiwan nassan, issira tamtot tai toga rigansu izgaran  
tigmadou etakass tiswadissan*

He had his wife, they were inside their house, and the woman saw some *cameliers* who were passing by

*Achinatichigawe atagou rigansu*

She (went out and) looked at them in order to see them clearly

*Da yikal tchiquess yifastate tamtot*

He (the husband) slapped his wife

*Timout, yiflaytate, yicass dou sonat tchibararen in techawen tchiffelen*

She died, he cut her open, he removed (from her) two little girls who were twins

*Sonat tchibararen tchin techawen de atinitchi ayiknan Igurmadan*

The two twin girls it was they who made (founded) all the Igurmaden (people)

*Iyat tekna Igurmadan win Berge*

One made the Igurmaden of Berge (a nomadic camp near Mount Bagzan)

*Iyat tekna Igurmadan win Kef Bagzan*

One made the Igurmaden of the (People of) Mount Bagzan

*Igurmadan koulou techawen tchinida a tchinyikan*

All the Kel Igurmaden are from these two twins who made them

*Akujat tikna iyat tizoun*

Each one made a part (of them)

### Elis wayakodayenajabe or (mai maki) (The Man Who Wanted to See the Marvelous)

*Elis iyan ayinan inta yakodailenajabe*

A man said that he wanted to see something marvelous

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<sup>15</sup> A region at the gate of the Tenere, a vast desert plain in the Eastern Sahara, to the east of the Tamgak Mountains in Niger.

*Yorgaz, yorgaz, yiminaille dechelle in wouji*

He walked, walked, he encountered a dried riverbed flowing with oil

*Tijinniya (or Teljen) tinass, "Elis, wur tojeba?"*

A woman spirit asked him, "Mister, aren't you astonished?"

*Yinass, "Ma dejiyoujilben ed wouji asena?"*

He said (to her), "What is so astonishing about a stream of oil I already know?"

*Yorgaz, yorgaz, yiminaille ichtizoukin itakannassnat*

He walked, walked, he encountered buttocks fighting (each other)

*Tinass, "Elis, wur tojeba?"*

She said to him, "Mister, aren't you astonished?"

*Yinass, "Ma dejiyoujilben ichtizoukin asena?"*

He said, "What astonishes me about buttocks that I (already) know?"

*Yorgaz, yorgaz, a jiminaille achtitawin itakannassnat*

He walked, walked, until he encountered eyes that fought

*Tinass, "Elis, wur tojeba?"*

She said to him, "Mister, aren't you astonished?"

*Yinass, "Ma dejiyoujilben achtitawin asena?"*

He said, "What astonishes me about eyes that I know?"

*Yorgaz, yorgaz, ajingnosa aghiwan iyan*

He walked, walked, until he arrived at a house (or camp)

*Yosin tamtot iyat*

A woman arrived (the female spirit)

*Tinass, "Iyaw"*

She said, "Come here"

*Yekna echik, tela chaghatnet egotnen, agotnen*

She prepared a meal, she had many, many children

*Toukousdou asiroui*

She took a stick

*Wa yilighe wa yilighe*

He licked it

*Echik yekna*

The meal was finished

*Tekna iyan arwan*

She prepared one (another) again

*Tiqalle tiskadawe iyan*

She returned it (again) to the fire

*As tilagha asiroui, elis wounin yigiware yiswadis*

When she licked the stick, the man was seated, and he looked at her

*Yilla ekijinet*

He had his rooster

*yilla ibisnet*

He had his cat

*Arwan tiqalle tisskadawe iyan*

Again she returned (the meal) to the fire

*As tilagha asiroui yinass, "Siliroui, siliroui"*

When she licked the stick, he said, "Let us lick, let us lick"

*Arwan ilirouen koufou*

Again they licked (the entire stick)  
*Ajakasawe*  
 It was finished  
*Elis wounin yiswadis*  
 The man looked at her  
*Tibisin istinaille inka*  
 The cat when it saw that  
*tagaze teghajamt*  
 it dug into the adobe (in order to escape)  
*Elis wounin ajidare tamigi abatat*  
 That man had not eaten  
*Yensa*  
 He slept  
*Mara tisawale azikiznet*  
 Then she sharpened her knife  
 “Kikikiyako,” *ekiji yinou*  
 “Kikikiyako” [onomatopoeia], the rooster cried  
*Tinass, “Tiqadamanake!”*  
 She said, “May God burn your soul!” [pronounced a curse]  
*Ekiji wourninisou wa*  
 The rooster did not sleep  
 “Kikikiyako!”  
 “Kikikiyako, kirchitt-kirchitt!”  
 [Repeated refrain; vocables, onomatopoeia]  
*Tisawale azikiznet ta, kastoutisarwalle de fel atougzoum amagar*  
 She sharpened her knife in order to cut the throat of (slaughter) the guest (or stranger)  
*Koum! Tibisin tagaz tibada teghajamt se!*  
 You! The cat in the process of digging (into) the adobe over there!  
*Tidtakass kaya, atintikas koulou*  
 She (the cat) picked up and took away all the baggage, everything  
*Toubaze dou talem tichigentat*  
 She (the cat) caught the (female) camel, she sat it down  
*Tiqal arwan tichafe*  
 Again she (the female spirit) began  
*asouwouille tazigiznet*  
 sharpening her knife  
*Ekiji yina, “Kikikiyako!”*  
 The rooster said, “Kikikiyako!”  
*Tiqalle tisinset*  
 She returned it (the knife), put it down  
*Tensa*  
 She (the female spirit) slept  
*Elis yigmadin*  
 The man went out  
*Yisiwar kayanet*  
 He lifted his baggage  
*Yirdafa tibisinet*

He attached his cat  
*enten ekijinet, yigla*  
 and his rooster, he left  
*Yorgaz, yorgaz*  
 He traveled, traveled  
*Adou tinkarre, da abatan*  
 She woke up, there was no one  
*Ina yiga teklin nijil yimdan*  
 He traveled for only one day  
*Tinkar dou*  
 She got up  
*Tilkam as*  
 She followed him  
*Tasaghadijina damadalle*  
 She was very tall, (extending) from sky to earth  
*Teklenet inkan tafrafaroutte*  
 She went along like a sand devil  
*Wourin wouratte, wourin wouratte*  
 Like that, like that  
*Atoutoga yisirtakasdou tibisin*  
 Until she saw him drop the cat  
*Tourolaqatatte, tilkamas*  
 She swallowed it (the cat), she pursued him  
*Yisirtakasdou ekiji*  
 He dropped the rooster  
*Tourolaqatatte, wourin wouratte*  
 She swallowed it (the rooster), like that, like that  
*Toga adre in talam chtinin titlagatou*  
 She saw a paw of the camel and she swallowed it  
*Talam chtinin tozal sadore adire*  
 The camel ran foot by foot  
*a dou yqal adar iyan*  
 until it arrived at (had only) one (paw) left  
*Mara tozalle*  
 Then it (the female camel) ran  
*Tinass, "Immochara achrin iyan ika, kininechirou da attasse win"*  
 She (the female spirit) said, "Even if it is only one paw, I am  
 going to try to bring you over to the tree over there"  
*Azal, azala ajinteyade atisse wounin*  
 Run, run until (it) arrived at the tree  
*Adarre iyan wounida tighassechtidou, tozga talam chtinin, adoutichta talam chtinin*  
 The other only paw also was pulled out, she ate the camel, until she ate it (all)  
*Toufoulawe atiss wounin*  
 She looked high up into the tree over there  
*Elis yiwarre afala*  
 The man was (had climbed) high up in it  
*Mara tifilawoutou*

Then she looked at him  
*Wourtilla atiga*  
 He did not know what to do  
*Teghatas dou, agadgadnet,*  
 She tore off his penis,  
*touge tazoufe*  
 she transformed it into an axe  
*Tika atisse*  
 She cut the tree  
 “*Ghitisse ghitisse*”  
 [Onomatopoeia]  
*Achahoze ajikatikate tamasse tawoutte, “Akfidou”*  
 When she tried to cut the entire tree, the chameleon said, “Give me that”  
*Takfas*  
 She gave it to him  
*As dastibaze tighatas*  
 When the chameleon began, he cut  
*Tinas, “Similmila similitte”*  
 It said, “Become what you were before”  
*Mara tawoutte tibizasse taghatas timalle*  
 So (then) the chameleon seized the axe and cut, it said  
 “*Similmila similitte, yismillitte*”  
 “May you (You must) become as you were before”  
*Atisse, yiqille inkanadtlet*  
 [Repetition, refrain]  
*Mara yigharou yibikasnet*  
 Then the man called his dog  
*Yagherin, yagherin*  
 He called, he called  
*Yilla bikasnet ichin*  
 He had his two dogs  
*Yilla chtidodennet*  
 He had his wives  
*Yinasnet*  
 He told them  
 “*Astinaymat ibikass*  
 “When you (two) see the dogs,  
*wouna itajyaten, tariwaten*”  
 over there, try to run and unleash them”  
*Inanatas*  
 They told him  
 “*To*”  
 “Ok”  
*As tininaynat itajgatten iyatte tinasfi*  
 When they left him, they tried to run, one said  
 “*Nariwaten*”  
 “We are going to unleash them”

*Iyatte tinass*

One said

“*Ma tounariwaten*”

“Let’s not unleash them”

“*Abe warge adinina asse tininay itajgaten wage yinana atinarou*”

“He just said when we see them, we must unleash them”

*Yibikasse younin, adosen ikan tamtot chtinin ichtantat*

The dogs ran, they arrived, they saw the woman (spirit) there,  
and they ate her

*Zekfankaladan tat, inanas*

They tore up everything, they told him (the man),

“*Zabadou*”

“Come down”

*Yinasen*

He told them

“*Wour dejinazabe koul, tikasamtat, ji, tifradamin yighasanet*

“I do not want to come down, you must pick up (all her bones)

*Alaqaille ajiinazabe*”

After that, I am going to come down”

*Yina, “kiya, nakou ineya ajabe”*

He said, “Oh, me, I have seen the marvelous”

*Tchadoden tatinat botounora taye yimijaytat*

(From among) those women, she who said not to unleash the dogs, he divorced her

*Atisse wa iritte, wakgen zigrinzigrin, yisoughilekike, inkan taduboute mananin*

That tree, the thing that grew very tall, had to be cut down<sup>16</sup> so he could descend

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<sup>16</sup> Shortened; literally, “to the size of my mother’s bed.”