The Workshop at Home. Making Sense of Craft as a Social Practice among Tuareg Artisans in Niger[1]

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Abstract: This article draws on my dissertation on Tuareg craftsmanship in Niger as a social practice, which was published under the title 'Die Unbeständigkeit der Dinge: Handwerk, Familie und Mobilität bei den Tuareg in Niger' (The Impermanence of Things: Craft, Family and Mobility among the Tuareg in Niger) (2024). It explores craft as an embodied knowledge acquired and shared within the family. First, I show how I approached handicraft methodologically from an anthropological perspective. My entry into craft was my own bodily experience in touching, treating and shaping leather, wood and silver. I understood craft as a perception of the world, of tools and things, and studied the materiality and possibilities Tuareg artisans see in them. Second, I aim to show how I made sense of craft as a social practice. Most often, Tuareg artisans work at home in the middle of everyday family life. The same way the family was involved in the workplace, clients and craft-related conversations have been part of and thus shaped family life as a matter of course. Children grow up acquiring handicraft skills just because participating in everyday family life means practicing the trade. The family informs the perception of things and merges with technical routines and innovations that arise in the workshops at home. My concern is to capture the ordinariness of craft, how craftmanship is socially made, just as the family members relate to each other in technological terms.
[craft, embodied knowledge, family, tools, research methods]

One morning, shortly after breakfast, Hali[2] came to Inna with her youngest daughter, who was about five years old, and squatted against a post of the shed under which Inna, Lolo and I were already sitting and working. While we were still greeting each other, Hali pulled a rolled-up piece of leather out of her handbag and smoothed it out on her thigh, examined it, put her palm on it, told us how her family was doing, and pulled a needle and thread out of her headscarf, which was loosely looped over her hair. She looked at me, showed me the needle, said: 'Always working, you see, always working', and continued embroidering a pattern she had started that morning at breakfast. Ufadi, who arrived a short time later, also wanted to spend the day with Inna and work. Under her arm she carried a rolled-up goatskin that she had dyed red the day before.

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2 All the names have been changed.

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She first wanted to smooth it out and make it shiny, and then cut fringes from which she wanted to make key rings. She joined us under the shed and asked for a workbench. The workbench (called *elkelib* or *elkelem* in Tamashek, the language of the Tuareg) looks like an elongated, flat stool. The slightly curved work surface is reminiscent of the back of a donkey '*eshed*', as the workbench is also called in the Tamashek dialect in northern Mali. Inna needed her workbench for herself. Hali, who lived nearby, sent her daughter to fetch hers. Ufadi was still holding the rolled-up leather in her lap, waiting for the workbench and chatting with her mother Inna and Hali. A short time later, the girl came back and handed her the workbench. She took it, placed it on her thighs, continued talking, and ran the flat of her hand over the back of the bench.[3]

Craft is a tactile and material enterprise. But craftsmanship is more than tools and techniques: it is also about a certain skilled perception of the world that is passed on within a community. I consider craft to consist of professional embodied knowledge and to involve a specific approach to the world of things, tools and materiality that is shared, acquired and developed further within a 'community of practice' (Wenger 2008[1998]). For Tuareg artisans, the 'community of practice' is the extended family. In this paper, I aim to show how in my doctoral thesis, published in 2024 under the title 'Die Unbeständigkeit der Dinge: Handwerk, Familie und Mobilität bei den Tuareg in Niger' (The Impermanence of Things: Craft, Family and Mobility among the Tuareg in Niger), I make sense of craft as embodied knowledge that is shared within the family.

Tuareg artisans form a descent-based occupational group called *inadan*. The craft of the women is to sew leather bags in various sizes, which they embroider with fine patterns, while craftsmen carve mortars, beds and also their women's workbenches. The latter also forge garden tools, knives and silver jewellery depending on specialization and demand. They specialize in the production and repair of such items for which global goods do not yet offer a cheap alternative, such as special and robust garden tools, the decorated *takoba*- sword, camel saddles, special Tuareg silver jewellery, leather pillows, and leather bags for various purposes. The carving of spoons and bowls made of wood, on the other hand, is very time-consuming, the payment is small, and often their customers prefer to use the imported cutlery and dishes made of plastic or aluminum anyway. Some couples work side by side in a shed that serves as a workshop. Sometimes women and men work in separate sheds. Sometimes the women join the men, who are not mobile with the forge fire, and may or may not move back when the blacksmiths have guests. In any case, as many Tuareg artisans in Niger work at home, whether in the city or the countryside, their children learn to forge, carve and work leather as a matter of course (Nur 2024:202; see also Casajus 1987:293). Certainly not all *inadan* work as artisans, but for those who do, the making of camel

3 This section refers to the diary entries from 14 February 2015.

saddles, the sewing of leather bags and the forging of silver jewellery, swords, axes and hoes are part of family life.

Previous studies of Tuareg artisans have mainly examined their special social status and the supernatural powers attributed to them. Susan Rasmussen, for example, analysed the role of the *inadan* as go-betweens, tricksters and magicians in several studies (1995, 1998, 2003, 2007, 2013). The *inadan* were despised and respected at the same time, as has been repeatedly noted (Bernus 1983, 1998, 2006; Casajus 1987; Gabus 1957; Lhote 1984 [1955]; Nicolaisen 1962; Nicolaisen and Nicolaisen 1997, Sáenz 1991), and some Tuareg who did not belong to the group of *inadan* also spoke like this. I was told that they had different blood and were therefore forced into a strict endogamy. In fact, the *inadan* are often described by other Tuareg as beggars, liars and as fearful, despite their also acting as intermediaries who take over certain rituals as well as confidential and intimate tasks (at weddings and naming ceremonies, as intermediaries, musicians and hairstylists, and as companions of the bride or newborn children), even though they are also accused of disloyalty. The *inadan* do indeed have an ambivalent social status, yet, their craftsmanship and practical skills, which surely distinguish them from others, have rarely been studied. In spite of the suspicion and caution with which other people approach them, the *inadan* are also regarded by the other Tuareg as skilled and knowledgeable people.

Craft was ubiquitous in the homes of those Tuareg *inadan* who worked as artisans. Materials and half-finished artefacts were scattered all around the work-place, and this was also the area where the family spends time and where guests were received. Traces of craftsmanship run through the yard: the children played with old paint pots and red, green and yellow strings, and the wind blew colourful pieces of leather across the place. The sound of hammer and axe blows and the hissing of the bellows can be heard beyond the walls of the courtyard. Traders came by and offered leather and paint to the artisans. Clients pick up finished craft objects, bring materials, negotiate, pay or promise to come back another day. Men and women at work thought about technology, the cost and quality of tools, materials and their product. In addition to family matters, these were the main topics they discussed in their daily conversations during my research. Thus, my aim was to explore the *inadan* approach to craft and to determine how they were connected to each other in technological terms in an everyday manner.

Listening

I was puzzled at first about what craft was and how I should write about it. Actually, my entire research was a search for what craft is. There are a few investigations of the artefacts made by the *inadan*. These studies focus on objects that are certainly special, valuable and specific to the Tuareg, such as the sword, the silver jewellery and fine

leather embroidery of the craftswomen (Seligman, Loughran, Bernus 2006; Zöhrer 1943, 1948, 1953). The literature does not mention the manufacture of tools and simple utensils such as files, hoes, axes and undecorated knives. There is one study that looks more closely at the *inadans'* craftsmanship. In her book 'Le style touareg ou la function sociale des techniques' (2005), Catherine Hincker provides an impressively detailed and unique study in which she describes the techniques for working iron, metals, leather and wood of *inadan* artisans in Mali and Burkina Faso, analyses the social significance of different styles and explores the political organization they express. I wanted to go more deeply into the tactile dimension of handicraft looking beyond descriptions of tools, artefacts and abstract production processes, understanding craft as an approach to the world of things, as a sensory experience and a shared family practice.

More generally, I was interested in how to understand craft and in how craft informs a specific approach to the material and human world. For although physical and material activities are considered simple, and terms taken from the crafts are even used as metaphors to explain social processes, anthropology and all the other humanities find it difficult to grasp craft. Thus, in their article on the state of research, Greiner and Pröpper (2016:201) note that, although there are single anthropological studies of crafts, there is still a lack of conceptualization and localization within the discipline.

Since I did not know any better, I observed what Lila Abu-Lughod has advised: 'The only advice I ever give is to listen. And stay a long time. And write everything down – you never know what it will all mean. There are no shortcuts' (2019:39). Actually, I did not ask many questions throughout my research, not at first, because I did not know what to ask, nor later, because I was already in conversation with the artisans, so that questioning was neither necessary nor appropriate to the situation (any more, and maybe would never have been). As a student, I often heard that we anthropologists had to annoy people with our questions. Only if we were known as the annoying questioners would we get it right. This made me very uncomfortable. I often felt it was inappropriate to come up with an 'anthropological question' and to take people out of their work or their thoughts, or so it seemed to me. The craftspeople were actually very talkative at work and happy to have company. Nevertheless, I preferred to join in the conversation or just listen.

In any case I wanted to know what was on their minds. So, I listened and wrote down everything that was going on in the workshops. My first notes often consisted of rather technical terms, names, sketches of tools and patterns. After all, it was a good way to learn Tamashek, especially the craft-related vocabulary. I noted the names of things, patterns, tools, colours, materials and techniques such as hammering, splitting, cutting, dyeing, embroidering, sewing, polishing, grinding, filing and sharpening. However, these notes no longer made sense when I read them later. I found these descriptions boring, and only later understood why. They were dull because they were meaningless. Technology has no inherent logic of its own. Pierre Lemonnier, a French scholar of material culture, speaks of 'technological choices' (2002). Tracing these choices, we can learn about the people's comprehension of things and materials, cultural values, aesthetics and social relationships. Craft is a meaningful practice.

And I stayed for a long time, 21 months altogether. I first came to Niger before my PhD in 2011, then again in 2013 and 2014/15. I started my research with *inadan* artisans in Niamey and travelled to their relatives in Maradi, Dakoro, Gadabedji and Agadez. Through the long-term research assistant of my supervisor, Gerd Spittler, I established contacts in Timia, where I met the *inadan*, whose family in turn spread across the Aïr mountains to Agadez, Zinder and Niamey. I always stayed with *inadan* families who were involved in crafts and preferably those who did not manage French and did not speak Hausa at home in order to improve my Tamashek skills. I spent my research with women, children and men at work, at home and in workshops. I compensated them for the expenses I incurred with gifts in kind and money, as well as food purchases. I also paid key informants as research assistants. I informed the respective families that I was granted a budget for the research by my graduate school and that I was not paying for it out of my own pocket. By outsourcing the money issue and not presenting myself as the donor, I allowed the recipients to accept the payment without shame. At the same time, it was also easier to maintain a friendly relationship in this way. It was not until I had spent several months with artisans at work that my memos became more comprehensive and vivid and gradually made sense.

Feeling

The remark in the diary entry in the opening paragraph about Ufadi running her hand over the workbench was not jotted down out of cluelessness. When I wrote this down, I knew already how important this touch was for the work she was about to carry out. Actually, this was the reason why I recognized this seemingly random hand gesture at all.

Craft is a specific knowledge about things, a feeling for things. In order to grasp this feeling, I had to feel my way around with my own hands. I explored how the artisans handled, touched, examined and shaped the materials and tools they worked with, what possibilities they saw, and how they dealt with materials and things. I took the knife in my hand, coloured and cut the leather and spread the sticky millet paste with my fingers. And only then did I realize, for example, why women usually used their middle finger to put the glue on, even though you get a much better feel with your index finger. However, the index finger is needed for all other activities such as holding, turning, embroidering, etc. If you spread the glue with your index finger, everything you touch afterwards will be sticky. It was this experience that allowed me to recognize subtle but crucial moments in the craftsmanship. I learned that there are different kinds of leather, wood and metals, and that not every workbench is the same, which in turn is crucial for the work.

The workbench is the work surface on which the craftswomen carry out much of the leatherwork, from cutting, colouring, smoothing and painting to punching

patterns and drawing lines. To cut short fringes, the leather is rolled up and placed on the short end of the workbench. With great effort, the women push the leather knife through the compressed leather roll. With each cut, the blade passes through the leather and into the wood, making a sound that gives these fringes their onomatopoeic name '*kareshkaresh*'. This work leaves furrowed round bulges at the end of the workbench (and pain in the joint of the hand that pushes the knife through the leather). The workbenches change over time and acquire a patina. In some places they become smooth, in others uneven. Each workbench therefore has its own surface. Ufadi ran her hand over the workbench to familiarize herself with it, to learn about the surface, the curves, furrows and dents, and figure out how she would place the leather she wanted to smoothen.

Through my engagement, I got an idea of what embodied knowledge means, or how Tuareg artisans put it: *'afus ǝyasan'* (the hand knows). I experienced for myself how my attention focused on the tip of the needle while I was sewing, as if the needle had become a part of me. This was exactly as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2010 [1945]: 173) and later Michael Polanyi (2009 [1958]: 55) had explained using the example of the white cane. The white cane becomes an extension of the body, so that the blind person 'feels' the ground with the point of the stick. I was then able to talk to the artisans in a situated and more competent manner. I raised questions that went along with the work flow. And so, my notes have changed. I now included the sensory aspects. This also taught me how fundamental routines are: I realized how clumsy my hands felt when I was doing tasks for the first time that looked so easy for the craftspeople. And then I experienced how my fingers became more skilful with practice and got used to the new movements. I experienced for myself that craftsmanship does not consist of one-off actions. Practical skills are routines that become ingrained in the body over many repetitions, which François Sigaut so aptly describes as 'forgotten knowledge' (Sigaut 1993: 106) because they are only mastered when you are no longer aware of them. However, this does not mean that the work is automatic (Hänisch 2017).[4] I now felt with my own hands that routines train sensory perception, the feeling of a surface, of materials, the palpation of the quality of a leather or a cord. It was only through this experience that I comprehended for myself how right Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2010 [1945]) and Cristina Graseni (1999, 2008) were when they wrote that our knowledge and our ability determine how we perceive our world and move through it.

This sounds abstract, but in fact it made me aware of the way *inadan* artisans organized their work. Toolmaking is a case in point. The *inadan* smiths not only sharpened their tools as they worked, they also forged new ones when they needed them (Hänisch 2018). Sometimes they would use a tool they did not need at the time: An awl became an engraver, a screwdriver an awl, a file a knife or a scraper. A look into the toolboxes of the *inadan* blacksmiths certainly does not show the entire inventory they actually

4 I published under my birth name Hänisch till 2018.

work with. In my dissertation, I argue that the never complete and ever-changing set of tools is not a sign of a lack of order or means. They did not forge the tools because the markets were too far away or too expensive. They forged their tools exactly to be most suitable for their work, just as they require them. Toolmaking is a sign of competence and certainty. It involves a certain way of organizing one's work and one's tools, and bears a particular perception of things and grip (in the truest sense of the word) on the material from which they are made. Many craftspeople all over the world are able to make their own tools and do so. Unlike consumers, craftspeople do not just see things as finished and permanent objects. Precisely because things are material, they are not durable and can be dismantled, repaired and rebuilt. It is time for anthropology to pay more attention to the manufacturing of tools. Toolmaking is a way of accessing the material world and harbours a certain way of dealing with the environment.

The Family in the Workshop

Professional craftsmanship is not an individual matter, but a shared practice. This can happen in very different ways (Beck 2009; Hänsch 2009; Marchand 2009, 2012). Among the *inadan*, craft practices are carried out within the family. In addition to Inna, Hali and Ufadi, Inna's daughter-in-law and niece Lolo was also working in the shed that morning. She was sitting in a back corner, concentrating on embroidering a large decorated travel bag for a camel (*shăkwa*), which she had made together with Inna at her husband's request for a herder in the countryside. She held the leather so close to her face that she disappeared behind it and carefully placed stitch after stitch. Her son crawled onto her lap; she continued working and put in a few stitches. The toddler was crying and wanted to pull the needle out of her hand. Lolo held the needle, focused the work piece, laughed and sent Ilias away. His grandmother Inna gave him a few words of comfort. Ilias was furious and slapped Lolo on the shoulder. She ignored him and carried on working. A short time later, she stuck the leather awl into the knothole of a tent post, high enough that Ilias could not reach it, wrapped the leather together, pushed it between the post and the mat wall, and pulled herself up the tent post. Then she wrapped her skirt tightly around her waist and walked towards the kitchen. It was Lolo's turn to cook that day.[5]

What this diary note shows is how craft, family and household merge in everyday life. This is not only true for women; men who work at home are also integrated into family life (or they integrate family life into their work). I often experienced how one blacksmith in particular kept asking his grandson to come to him. Then he would give him tools and let him play with them. One day, when he was forging an amulet, his

5 This section refers to the diary entries from 14 February 2015.

one-and-a-half-year-old grandson also hit the silver sheet lying on the anvil with a file. The child's eyelids trembled with every blow. His grandson was allowed to open all the boxes and take out the various files, pliers, tweezers, sandpaper, wires and scraps of metal. The old man kept an eye on him and made sure that everything was put back in its place and that he did not injure himself with the many sharp and pointed tools, but he let the child examine the work materials. He thought it was important that his grandson was in the workshop, and he was happy about his curiosity, as he told me (Agadez, November 18, 2013; Nur 2024:203). Another time, I made a note of how a blacksmith was looking for his file and finally found it in the kitchen, where his daughter was using it to sharpen the kitchen knife. And when I once wondered that a blacksmith asked his daughters to keep the smith's fire alive when he went to the mosque for Friday prayers – I saw women and girls in the workshops all the time, but never before working at the anvil or operating the bellows – his wife explained to me with a shrug that she had often assisted her husband with the forging. Any blacksmith's wife could sharpen a blade, she claimed confidently.

Working at home allows children to participate in craft activities from the very beginning. They approach the craft as toddlers, who still touch and put everything in their mouths. Not all the men worked at home. The father of the toddler just mentioned shared a workshop with cousins in the town centre. None of the men in Inna's yard worked in the trade. Her son-in-law worked as a broker. Her older son, who normally forges and sells silver jewellery in Algeria, had followed the gold rush and travelled to a mine at the time of my research. So had her youngest son. He had worked as a silversmith in Niamey for more than ten years; during my research he too decided to try his luck in the gold mines one day. Later, the older son set up his workshop in his mother's shed.

While I examine embodied craftsmanship in this article, artisans, for their part, want to earn a living from their work. Until the turn of the millennium, many *inadan* profited from Saharan tourism by trading souvenirs. But with the increase in terrorism since 2007, the tourists stopped coming (Scholze and Klute 2023). Since then many artisans have been increasingly seeking out professions with a regular income as teachers, doctors, soldiers or chauffeurs, or they try their luck in the gold mines, like Innas' sons. Nevertheless, their skills offer many *inadan* a way to earn a living, which is not to be underestimated in view of the high youth unemployment in Niger. However, two of Inna's relatives in the immediate neighbourhood worked as blacksmiths every day. Every family is unique, and is constantly changing: with each marriage a child moves out, or a child-in-law moves in, the sons go to the city, or work as migrant labourers, or take a casual job with another relative. So, some children learn from their parents' brothers, sisters, or their grandparents, or from another relative who is working in the neighbourhood. In any case, children barely learn only from their own parents. Some *inadan* did not learn the craft at all because it was not practised at home and they had therefore not been surrounded by the craft in their childhood. But when a trade is part of everyday family life, children grow up with it

and acquire craft skills as a matter of course. Handicrafts are not seen as a duty, but as a special skill that opens up lifelong income opportunities.

In my dissertation, I describe how the conversations with the workshop guests, the jokes and the children playing are interwoven with the manual practices. Technical operations merge seamlessly with the handling of a mobile phone or radio. Tea is boiling on the stove in which the iron is being heated at the same time. The daughter comes to sharpen the knife to cut the meat for lunch. This total intermingling of craft practices with everyday family life contributes to the fact that many *inadan* identify themselves with the craft in an essentialist way.

Endogamy as an Everyday Work Experience

It was only during my research that I realized the extent to which the family in the workshop was not just an ordinary backdrop, not just a source of disruption or entertainment, but part of the craft practice. Only gradually did I allow the family to enter my diaries, until it was as omnipresent as it was in the workshops. I have countless quotes of artisans, like: 'I came here because my mother's sister lived here; In the first big drought, I went to Kano with my cousin to make and sell camel saddles; I learnt how to make bangles from my wife's brother; When I visited my sister in the south, her husband, my cousin, forged a leather knife for me to help her, then I learnt to embroider these patterns from her.' Finally, no entry was left without a reference to a sister, a mother's brother or a cousin. Through endogamous marriages, the craft was again and again intertwined with the family from generation to generation, and it affected the participation of children as much as the everyday working life of adults and competent artisans. Endogamy is thus not only crucial once (or twice or three times) in a lifetime when choosing a partner. For the *inadan*, who live, work and learn from each other within the family, endogamy is an everyday experience that also connects them to each other by craftsmanship:

Inna and Lolo had been working on the *shăkwa*, the large camel bag, for several days. While it was Lolo's first time, Inna had sewn many such bags in her life. She left the fine embroidery work to Lolo. Firstly, her eyesight had deteriorated, making it almost impossible for her to do the fine stitches, and secondly, she no longer had the strength in her fingers. Each stitch through the leather had to be predrilled with an awl. This requires strength in the fingers and wrist. Inna had cut the leather to size and told Lolo exactly what the pattern should look like. She arranged the circles, dots, diamonds and squares, and chose the colours. Lolo followed Inna's instructions with great diligence. This is how she would learn to make a *shăkwa*, she told me. One day, Lolo was sewing a zigzag pattern with a white plastic ribbon. Shortly before noon, she put the embroidery aside and went into the kitchen. It was her turn to cook. Her aunt Hali sat with us and talked to Inna. She picked up Lolo's work, inspected the stitches

and praised Lolo. She told me that Lolo was her child, like a daughter. Then she picked up the needle and awl and continued embroidering, explaining to me the meaning of the design.[6]

My genealogical studies showed that the *inadan* in Niger actually practice a very strict endogamy. Marriage does not mean forging new ties, but rather confirming and strengthening existing relationships. With each marriage, distant relatives become direct relatives again. As the young married couples often live with one or other of their in-laws,[7] family life may also be very close in spatial terms. This is what makes endogamy an everyday experience. Just as closely as the *inadan* marry, many spend their working days together. The bonds of family are then the bonds through which knowledge and practices are passed on. The older relatives are the masters, and the children are their disciples and successors. Cousins learn together and from each other. Depending on how they marry, the young people expand their craft skills with another relative. This is especially true for the women, who, unlike the men, cannot travel so easily: Lolo, for example, learnt leatherwork as a young girl from her mother, her sister and her father's mother, who also lived on her parents' homestead in Niamey. After marrying her cousin, she moved in with his family, who lived in Agadez, and where she has been assisting her mother-in-law (the wife of her mother's brother) and learning from her ever since.

Over the course of their lives each artisan acquires their own set of skills and specializations through interaction with many relatives. Craftsmanship is not passed on as a ready-made package with a fixed body of knowledge in only one line from mother to daughter and from father to son. For the *inadan*, learning handicrafts is rather an active acquisition of knowledge and skills, a formation of one's own body, the development of an understanding of things and their materiality, and an awareness of one's own abilities, and it is always linked to social experiences.

Craft as a Social Practice

My goal is more than to provide an anthropological account of Tuareg artisans' embodied knowledge and participatory ways of learning and working. I want to make this

6 This section refers to the diary entries from 14 February 2015.

7 The Tuareg are divided into different *tiwsatin* (pl. clans, Singl. *Tawset*; see Lecocq (2010, p. 4). The Kel Ewey Tuareg, among whom I conducted research in Timia, at least prefer matrilocality. In recent years, however, more and more husbands have built a mud house in a new neighborhood, partly because there is no more room for more yards in the main town, which is located in a valley surrounded by mountains; on the other hand, the prosperity brought about by large gold discoveries is contributing to a change in house construction. In turn, many young married Kel Ferwan Tuareg couples with whom I conducted research in Gadabedji and Agadez move in with the husband's family in accordance with their virilocal residence rule.

material to speak back to assumptions on African descent-based occupational groups. In oral discourse among anthropologists, African artisans are till today casually referred to as castes. Current research on these groups is scarce (one exception is Epple 2018). The concept of caste, in turn, evokes ideas of predetermination, oppression, restriction, rigidity and inbreeding. But initially, endogamy only means that people preferably marry within a particular social category or group (Stone 2018:21, Vivelo 1995:237). As rigid as endogamy may seem, it allows a wider choice of partners than cousin marriage, which is actually what we are talking about here, and which is widely practiced in many parts of West Africa and beyond. What is special is that marriage within the group is also linked to a profession. This can happen in very different ways. However, there is never any compulsion to practice a craft, even though it is quite common for crafts to be in the hands of endogamous occupational groups. Furthermore, one's inherited status does not always go hand in hand with a despised or inferior position, which is implied in the colloquial use of caste.

Instead of thinking of endogamous knowledge transfer as restrictive and determinative, I conceive of the *inadan* as a community of practice with specialized knowledge and skills. By looking at how they practice, communicate, develop and make sense of their craft, we can learn much more about their ideas, their own capacities, self-confidence and social life. *Inadan* smiths are sometimes mocked by other Tuareg for spending the day at home like 'good wives'. The presence of the father and other male relatives, however, creates a family life that differs from that of many other families in Niger and elsewhere. It has often been described that children spend most of their time with their mothers, and only the sons are gradually introduced to the world of men from about the age of three (Lancy 2010:89f.; and for the *inadan* Tuareg: Hincker 2000:119). I have met babies in the workshops and girls who have grown up in close contact with their fathers. Rather than conceiving descent-based occupational groups as restrictive, in such contexts extraordinary relationships are possible, which may be characterized by special closeness and intimacy. A blacksmith once explained that they would all sit in a pile: women, men, brothers and sisters, cousins and in-laws (Agadez, January 1, 2015). Of course, this does not mean that all *inadan* enjoy a close and happy family life. I have also met *inadan* who avoided their homes because they were afraid of their fathers and wished they were travelling with the caravan for months on end, and for this reason did not learn the trade at all or learned it from another relative.

My aim was not to generalize. I am not drawing conclusions from single artisan families to the whole group. On the contrary, with the many ethnographic accounts close to the diaries, I aim to let individual women, men and children speak, to allow a look at the many different situations, motivations and relationships to craft and to the family. My aim is to challenge the assumption that the *inadan* are a homogeneous group. 'Each has her own hand' (*Ak iyat tila afusnet*), a mother once explained to me when I asked about her daughters' craftsmanship, so as not to make a judgment (Agadez, April 15, 2015). The craft has its own meaning for everyone, and it can also change over the course of their lives. I met a woman who, for the sake of her father-in-

law, practised the craft for some time after her marriage. At the same time, she trained as a teacher, her dream job, which she pursued for a few years. But when she became a mother, it was no longer possible to combine teaching with childcare and household duties. She stayed at home and went back to crafts. Especially in descent-based occupational groups, it is important to show the heterogeneous life paths in order to challenge stereotypes.

This is also true for practical craftsmanship. I do not give theoretical descriptions of how to make a camel saddle, precisely because everyone has their own hand and does it in their own way. Some are more skilled and find it easy, while others put a lot of effort into it, but the stitches are still uneven. Others are fast and imprecise, but want to earn more and don't care so much about quality. Yet others are so passionate about their craft that, as one blacksmith once jokingly told me, he would like to slap anyone who does a bad job. Not everyone sees it that way. Certainly not the mother who, looking at the very sloppy work of one of her daughters, told me that each has her own hand. Some are hardworking, others are limited by poor eyesight or do not have the strength in their hands to make clean holes. Access to materials also influences craftsmanship and motivation. An abstract description of how a sword is forged or a bag is sewn does not tell us anything about how people engage in the craft, what skills they have, or how, informed by their skills, they perceive materials, make decisions, recognize and seize opportunities. How individuals experience family life and work, who trusts in the anvil (as a Tuareg saying puts it), or the spouse, or the parents, or luck in the gold mines, gives more insight into the meaning of craftsmanship for different craftspeople. My aim is to capture the ordinariness of craft, how craft is socially made, as well as the technical aspects of everyday work and family life. My main concern, however, is to bring African artisans back to current discourses in anthropology. Certainly, there is much to be learned from artisans about socially embedded approaches to things and materials.

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