

SUSAN RASMUSSEN

PERSONS OF COURAGE AND RENOWN



TUAREG ACTORS, ACTING, PLAYS,
AND CULTURAL MEMORY IN NORTHERN MALI

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Susan Rasmussen

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names in this book are pseudonyms. Quoted and paraphrased materials derive from my own oral interviews, orally-performed plays, tales, and monologues and other verbal oral arts recorded and transcribed, and guided conversations. Photographs, also, are by this author.

Introduction

Malian Tuareg (Kel Tamajaq) Theatrical Performance: Creativity in Crisis, Vulnerability, and Resilience

Acting is good for the heart and soul, but now, it (creativity) is difficult because there is no liberation (from oppression).

—actor and comedian, Kidal, northern Mali

The importance of the actor is to make a presentation, to show oneself to spectators, to bring harmony among people. Of all arts, theater brings the most love and ties of unity.

—actor, playwright, and singer, Kidal, northern Mali

ARRIVALS, DEPARTURES, AND RETURNS

To the north of Mali's Talemsi Valley and the bend of the Niger River, the Adragh-n-Ifoghas massif rises up to 890 meters. In years of sufficient rainfall, its rains flow into the valley, leaving patches of green pasture and even an occasional wildflower, conspicuous in the predominantly thorny, rocky Saharan landscape. There, before French colonial domination and Malian independence, emerged aristocrats, clients, warriors, and peacemakers among the Tuareg (sometimes called Kel Tamajaq, after their language). Within their ranks arose poets, singers, musicians, artisans, and clients and subordinates of various statuses. In the past, these specialists with inherited occupations ideally served and balanced each other, with some tensions but also mutual dependence. Recently, they must navigate new forms of uncertain, negotiable, and shifting powers in their changing society. Their mutual rights and obligations, though modified, still include praises and critiques by verbal art specialists, often veiled in subtle wordplay of poems, songs, tales, and plays.

Actors, called *ibaraden*, are among these verbal art specialists. They are important because their artistic and social roles are crucial to witnessing lived experience and local perspectives of a people who have suffered in the “cross fire” of wars and been misunderstood by some popular media. In the past, many of these actors fought for the Tuareg aristocratic elite and protected aristocratic women through poetry and tales. They now perform plays in an emergent new genre, inspired by older verbal arts but also transforming earlier genres.

This book explores long-standing and emergent but also vulnerable acting, actors, and plays among Tamajaq-speaking, predominantly Muslim, traditionally stratified, and semi-nomadic Tuareg people in northern Mali, West Africa. Most actors with whom I worked were from the Adragh-n-Ifoghas region originally and resided in and around the regional town of Kidal for varying time periods. Kidal and its immediate rural surroundings are the primary, though not exclusive, sites of data for this book.

In parts of northern Mali, urban, state, and NGO bureaucracies have sought to reshape Tuareg verbal art performances to comply with official agendas aimed at transforming local culture. Some militants in more radical Islamist-reformist (revivalist) movements have attempted to forbid public performances and have threatened beloved performers, whom most Tuareg consider central to local cultural survival.

My first encounter with a staged theatrical play was in another Saharan town, Agadez, Niger, during a national holiday. I was a Peace Corps English teacher there at that time. Along with some friends, I attended this play, organized by officials at the mayor’s office and composed and performed by members of the national youth organization, at that time called Samariya. During one scene, young men and women characters greeted each other, on the surface portraying typical social encounters between the sexes but with a striking difference: at intervals, the male characters spat. The audience broke into uproarious laughter. Shocked and puzzled, I inquired about this small but (to me) disturbing detail. Others in the audience reassuringly explained that the spitting did not convey disrespect for the women but rather was intended to “criticize men who did not respect women.” Hence there were hints, in this “official” spectacle, of both respect for traditions and social critique.

My exposure to a “budding actor” occurred very early in my research on a different topic altogether, in a semi-nomadic rural camp. In one household, a small boy approached my spouse, who was visiting me in the field. The boy was fascinated by my spouse’s wristwatch, then rare there. Although he was only about three years old, he very playfully chattered, joked, played with the watch, using elaborate mime gestures, and asked us many questions about the device. He giggled each time its tiny, tuneful alarm was set off. With only brief instruction from us, he figured out how to at least turn off (if not set) the

alarm. I was really impressed at how creatively and vividly he mimed wearing and checking the watch. At one point, he also expertly wrapped a small cloth around his lower face, imitating adult Tuareg men's turban/face-veil. This small "performance" was prophetic. Many years later, upon a return research visit, that "little boy" on adulthood had become a specialized type of actor, a comic, called *kel seghsegh*, widely admired in the region.

Over many years, during six ethnographic field residences and research projects in Saharan regions of Mali and Niger, over approximately thirty-five years of studying rural and urban Tuareg communities, I stumbled upon additional (aural) verbal art performances that piqued my curiosity. Some were staged by civic officials, others by Tamajaq-speaking actors and poets or local families, more spontaneously, the latter described by many local artists as "inspired from the heart, spirit, and soul," prompted by coming upon some striking event, person, or situation that prompts creativity. A few performances were held in secluded areas, suggesting some sense of vulnerability and need for protection.

On one occasion, at dusk, a friend and I walked to a musical spirit possession ritual, also considered by Tuareg to be a kind of performance. He urged me to extinguish my flashlight beam and leave the road, so that approaching military vehicles, some of whom reportedly harassed Tuareg walking after dark, would not see us. On our safe arrival at the ceremony, I noticed several persons I knew in the chorus, and, to my amusement, these singers broke the "ritual healing frame" and began performing songs later explained as "for this guest" (*tamagart*, also denoting "stranger" and "foreigner").

Over the long term, these incidents inspired me to someday study Tuareg acting, actors, and theatrical plays more intently. I studied and wrote on various topics in Tuareg communities, including local verbal arts more generally, the musical exorcism ritual, healing specialists, smith/artisans, life histories and mythico-historical narratives by elders and other persons, and songs of all kinds. But I remained intrigued by these earlier "sample" performances, curious about the connections between their aesthetics/poetics and their politics/power elements and by the fact that many actors refer to themselves, and others also refer to them, as "courageous and prominent persons . . . like warriors of the past who protected the community." Notwithstanding our differences (I am not an actor), I feel we are in some respects kindred spirits. Like the performers and many other Tuareg, I value creative independence, cultural autonomy, and social justice and worry about the rise of factionalism and hate in this world. I also admire the artistic refinement, resilience, and spunk of performers over long-term crises in their communities, regardless of physical hardships and social stress as they faced droughts, dispossession, marginal employment, and political violence. Throughout the play performances, I was struck by their carefully executed style but also emergent

quality, their interweaving of critical social commentary with subtle humor, and also, to varying degrees, their references to audiences, during and beyond the immediate performance context. Creativity here often flowed from artists' immediate and wider predicaments and from personal, individualist as well as collaborative inspirations. Aesthetics and politics were equally important.

Another factor prompting me to conduct a research project on Malian Tuareg acting and plays was a consciousness of the ethnographer's own role as a kind of performer, constructively pointed out in much critical ethnography (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009; Clifford and Marcus 1986). While sensitive to this valid point, I choose not to make the "ethnographer as performer" issue my central focus in the present book. I do, however, include references to my own experiences as one means of embedding the acting and plays in their multiple contexts and layering their multiple voices, which include that of interaction with researcher over time.

In this book, therefore, the focus includes wider social contexts: on acting practice, aesthetics, creativity, and stylistics, on the actors called *ibaraden*, and the dramatic and comic theatrical play performances (in Tamajaq, glossed as *isatsa* in general, denoting approximately, "theater") and many popularly called by the French-English term *des sketches*. Many plays are locally defined as "new" or "modern" but have strong precedents in, and continuing inspiration from, older verbal art performance genres. Other plays are based on older tales called *tenzoghén*. As noted, according to actors and others, *ibaraden* (sing. masc. *abarad*, fem. *tabarad*), in the Tadarit dialect of Tamajaq widely spoken in northern Mali, also denotes "courageous and notable (or prominent, celebrated) persons." I show how actors and their plays are crucial in continuing but also debating and redefining the meanings of older verbal art performances of tales, songs, and epics, as well as wider cultural knowledge and social practices. Their arts offer important possibilities of mediation and peacemaking.

I argue that Malian Tuareg actors belong to a special social category of persons who are considered particularly brave. Their complex leadership in their communities derives in part from some commonalities they share with other casted artisans in Tuareg and other societies across the Sahara and Sahel, namely their sanctioned crossing of the social boundaries of hierarchy, gender, and age. Whereas Tuareg actors' differences with those casted artisans—unlike the latter, actors are neither rigidly hereditary nor exclusively endogamous—make it possible for persons of all statuses to act in theatrical plays. More broadly, I contend that personal as well as social history must be attended to in order to understand whose interpretations of historical and current events are enacted in performance. This principle underlies the many case studies presented in this book and, hopefully, makes for a rich ethnographic tableau of storytelling but also theoretical engagement. I show

how performances both challenge and reproduce ideologies of power. These performances are an emergent form of social critique, aesthetic form, and cultural mnemonic that serve recurring efforts in Tuareg cultural revitalization/revival and repatriation in the recent turmoil faced by communities in the northern Malian Sahara.

Most data in this book are based on my social/cultural anthropological field research in and around Kidal in northern Mali, between political crises and just prior to the 2012 full-scale war between various factions in the North and Bamako, the capital of the Malian nation-state. I also incorporate some additional data over more long term from my longitudinal research and residences in Niger and my briefer research on Tuareg and other Berber expatriates in France and the United States.¹ In the Conclusions of this book, there is discussion of what has happened to Tuareg theatrical arts since the incursion of jihadists and other militants in northern Mali in 2012. Indeed, the field and field research do not have rigid boundaries in either time or space.

Fundamental to understanding this theatrical art are historic and contemporary ethnographic perspectives on the art of acting and the performers featured in the plays, their aesthetics in that performance genre, and prevalent play themes in terms of their plot contents and wider social contexts of power in and around Kidal and the Adragh-n-Ifoghas region.

ORIENTATIONS: REMOTENESS, CONNECTIONS, DISPERSALS, AND GATHERINGS

As one approaches Kidal on an unpaved desert road over vast, often treeless plains meandering past occasional oasis irrigation projects, the road begins to climb and become steeper and rockier. Faraway moving dots on the horizon remain unidentifiable, sometimes causing vague uneasiness. On closer approach, there is cautious greeting, sometimes mutual assistance, hopefully not hostility.

When I first arrived in Kidal, I felt mixed exhaustion, relief, and anticipation. It had been difficult to arrange a ride going north from a small semi-nomadic village where I had been working, a transit point about midway between Gao and Kidal but also a remote rural area where vehicles were rare and mostly going South. Few wish to go north. Many in Mali tend to view the North as a land of danger. A merchant passing through, a devoutly religious Arabic-speaking member of the Kounta group, Arabo-Berber neighbors of the Tuareg in that region, at first hesitated to give me a ride, explaining, “I normally do not give rides to strange women,” adhering to an etiquette of respect toward unrelated women, even when his own wife was present. But his wife, seated in the front of the van, urged him to relent, and he signaled me to climb in.

On the road leading to Kidal I saw signs indicating the town's name. More arresting to the eye were hints of the town's cultural/ethnic diversity, but also its strong Tuareg presence: designs on the rocks in the beginning foothills of the Adagh-n-Ifoghas Mountains that included painted motifs of the Khomessa, popularly called the Kidal cross, one of a number of distinct regional Tuareg cruciform pendants found in jewelry, leatherwork, and woodwork throughout northern Mali and Niger, and a very few faded rock art drawings.

On entering the town's outskirts, one is struck by more and more prominently displayed Tuareg cultural symbols (chalk-white Tifinagh, the Tamajaq alphabetic script, and graffiti designs resembling those on silver and leatherwork) near the entrance with its small customs outpost.

Inside this town, just before sunset, the merchant and his wife dropped me off on its dusty, rocky unpaved main road. Striking there were reminders of past colonial and recent postcolonial state military presences: French-constructed stone buildings, some vaguely "medieval" in their architectural towers, turrets, and archways, an old, rusty cannon on a roof, and a former prison dating from the colonial era, closed later, but with its weather-beaten sign "Prison" still over the door, slightly askew. On and off, in the wake of democratization in Mali around 2000, there were plans to convert it into a museum. Some children pointed me toward a "hotel/camping" nearby and helped me with my bags. This was to be my temporary lodging; I would also spend part of my field project's duration with a local family on the town's desertic outskirts.

Kidal, like some other remote corners of the Sahara such as Bilma and Agadez, was until recently considered a punishment post even by non-prisoners; most soldiers and civil authorities from the southern regions were reluctant to be posted there, hoping to leave soon. Others were less fortunate: this was a penal and garrison town for much of its colonial and postcolonial history, a place where the French and later authorities brought prisoners from, first, French West Africa and French West Sudan and, later, from independent Mali.

Despite the frequent mobility of many in their semi-nomadic transhumance and other travel—most recently, also including labor migration and flight to and from refugee camps—most actors and other residents of northern Mali feel attached to their mostly desert and mountainous region, geographically remote and of difficult access but also a crossroads of cultural encounters and connections. Vast and beautiful, its shifting sands, like human and spirit powers, can become dangerous, many residents assert, "if they are not respected."

Kidal and its surrounding Adragh-n-Ifoghas massif are homes to several semi-nomadic groups of Tuareg: the Kel Adagh, the largest regional confederation, and within it, several descent groups including the Ifoghas, a clan (*tawsit*) of aristocratic background, and the Kel Essouk (or Kel Souk), a

clan of Sufi-influenced Islamic scholars/marabouts traditionally serving the Ifoghas who also reside nearby in and around the town of Kidal and to the east, toward Tin Essako. Their nomadic camps once totaled approximately 50,000 persons, their tents filling a desert space of solitude with social community. Their oral traditions are highly elaborated and still vital in practice, not solely in memory. Many Kel Adagh actors and play performances mediate between past and present and are inspired by a vision of history and culture that restores pride and hope in times of trouble.

The town of Kidal is located in a surrounding region of the same name, which was designated the eighth region of Mali around 2000, and this region merges with the Adragh-in-Ifoghas Mountains, seen as foothills beyond dried riverbeds on the edges of the town. Kidal is multiethnic, but has a large Tamajaq-speaking population who define themselves as culturally and linguistically Tuareg and are proud of their performance traditions, both older and recent theatrical genres of plays, poems, songs, tales, and dramatic, comedic, and mimetic routines. “Cultures” and “traditions” are terms some anthropologists now eschew, favoring nation-states as primary units of analysis. But many local residents, in particular the *ibaraden* actors and other Tuareg as well, insisted to me that culture is important and often used their local language term for this, *temoust*, to express identity and community.

Thus guided by local residents, I also deploy here the so-called “culture concept,” albeit not in its older unitary or static sense but rather with sensitivity to contexts of fluid and emergent social identities, debated and negotiated rather than consensual or primordial ideas and practices, and simultaneously overlapping and dissonant relationships with a sense of place (Redfield 2007; Tsing 2009).

The North of Mali, in 2012 declared an independent state called Azawad by Tuareg dissidents but not officially recognized, subsequently experienced alternations between armed conflicts and peace accords, still ongoing sporadically as of this writing. Communities once filled with people are intermittently abandoned, as Tuareg and other residents alternately flee adversities of war and drought, return home in peaceful intervals, and flee again. Some more settled and urbanized residents hoped for shelter in towns such as Kidal and Gao, but these locations prove to be precarious havens; for they are still subject to attacks, and many Tamajaq-speaking residents perceive towns and their bureaucracies as challenging their cultural autonomy. These shifting politics, in particular the sporadically recurring hostilities since 2012 with their deeper history of violence going back to the earlier years of Malian independence, caused a reverting of some oases, camps, and villages to desert and the wild (*essuf* or *tenere* in various Tamajaq dialects). *Essuf* is a social and psychological space of nostalgia, as well as a literal space of desolation, but also one of creative inspiration (Hawad 1979; Rasmussen 1995).

During peaceful intervals, Tamajaq verbal art and its artists serve a protective, psychotherapeutic role, evoking long-standing cultural ideals and giving supportive comfort and advice. Performers also conduct a critical social commentary, thereby mediating between past and present cultural concerns in their commemorative but also forward-looking performances. In effect, somewhat like anthropologists in ethnography who are cautious about using the classic “ethnographic present” and who also, on a more personal note, miss their past interlocutors and their communities but must sometimes move on, the actors and plays transpose older cultural knowledge, sometimes nostalgically, sometimes ironically, onto new goals in settings of competing agendas and meanings.

Since the latter decades of the twentieth century, residents returning to their homes risk finding external, literal as well as internal, psycho-social desert *essuftener* spaces. Recently, the concept of *essuftener* is also used by poets, singers, and other artists to express a yearning for reconnections in now-dispersed human communities (Hawad 1979; Kohl 2009; Rasmussen 2008). Historically and currently, Saharan regions have also been crossroads for peaceful trade and fortresses against political violence, simultaneously centers and peripheries (Rasmussen 2017). Throughout it all, vibrant artistic and cultural traditions emerge, recede, and reemerge.

ACTING, PERFORMANCE, AND CULTURE: PRELIMINARY REMARKS

The acting, actors, and plays analyzed in this book are interesting and challenging for anthropological studies of culture, performance, and memory because, although composed and performed by predominantly Tuareg in the Tamajaq language, and before mostly Tamajaq speakers, they are performed in a place that is culturally diverse. Thus acting and plays in northern Mali offer insights into broader issues in anthropology of the connections and disjunctions between culture and local and global places (Appadurai 2000, 2013; Hannerz 2010). Ethnographically and comparatively, they offer insights into local Tuareg cultural variations on vibrant Malian and other African traditions vividly described in the African arts literature: for example, puppet theater, masquerades, and other verbal arts, media, and narratives in popular culture (Arnoldi 1995, 2009; Cole 2001; Diawara 1990; Hale 1999; Hoffman 1995, 2000; Reed 2007, 2016; Schulz 2011, 2012; Weiss 2009). The Tuareg play performances also open up new perspectives on more general connections between theatre, play, spectacle, other verbal art, mythico-histories, and the political constructions of cultural memory and forgetting (Handelman 1990; Hannoum 2005, 2008; Stoller 1995, 1998). Both the older plays,

tenzoghén, based on monologues, tales, and the more “modern” plays/sketches using newer staging styles and emphasizing current events and issues offer rich commentaries on historic and emerging social, economic, and political processes in situations of cultural encounters.

More broadly, this book also engages and hopefully contributes to additional wider concerns in anthropology, namely: problems of translation of genres of verbal art performance and theater across different cultures, from both anthropological and interdisciplinary (folklore, theatre, and performance) perspectives (Bauman 1992, 1993, 2004; Fabian 1990; MacAloon 1984; Schechner 1985); the nature of connections among verbal art performance, aesthetics in popular culture, and power (Ahearn 1998; Bourgault 2003; Brink 1982; Cole 2001, 2010; Donkor 2016; Drewal 1991); critiques of Euroamerican concepts of modernity (Brenner 1998; Rofel 1999); and social memory and narratives of nation (Anderson 2006 [1991]; Connerton 1989; Ricoeur 2000; Werbner 1998).

This book also articulates with anthropological efforts to rethink emergent cultural formations in ethnography (Clifford 1988; Marcus 1999) and promote more nuanced portrayals of Islamic communities (Abu-Lughod 1993; Mahmoud 2001; Masquelier 2009; Schulz 2011).

The ethnographic setting offers rich insights into these concerns, for although many Tuareg residents in northern Mali have repeatedly fled and returned home, their home is no longer the same. The creative spaces of the plays, as a kind of “second home space” for actors and audiences, conveys this predicament. Regional leaders over the years of alternating violence and peace pacts have called for cultural unity based on the Tamajaq language, but there has also been the simultaneous pull toward repatriation based on nation-state borders and boundaries—traditionally foreign to many more nomadic Tuareg (Kohl 2009). Indeed, subsequent events in 2012 pulled the North even farther apart, and the future of this region, its performing artists and their art, and other residents is difficult to assess over long term.

Rather than neatly illustrating “globalization,” “modernity,” or “relocalization,” I show, acting, plays and their social contexts suggest how cultural spaces emerge as local residents rethink and contest sometimes dissonant and ambiguous ideologies of memory and identity over time and space but also suggest that specific, remembered, and still valued sites of dynamic creativity are important. To deny this would be to insult local residents struggling for cultural survival, varying degrees of autonomy, and language revitalization. One cultural site where this process occurs especially strikingly is in those dramatic and comical sketches many local residents call “modern,” in which *ibaraden* actors evoke the past but also the present and the future. Additional sites where this occurs are social contexts of interaction between actors and others (including but not limited to audiences). Acting offers critical social

commentary as well as nostalgic remembering and more: also therapeutic healing of microcommunity rifts, for example, between the generations, between women and men, and nomads and town-dwellers. Hence the need for caution in sweeping generalizations about globalization influences. The performances and specialists analyzed in this book emerge as somewhere in between the often polarized binaries of “global” and “local,” and their aesthetic styles and plot contents as rooted in the historical, social, political, and economic experiences of their Saharan region.

There have been valuable studies of griots and artisans (Hoffman 1995, 2000, 2017; Hale 1999; Belcher, Hale, and Johnson 1997), and of Tuareg and other oral arts and artists in both Saharan and Sahelian regions (Ag Erless 1999; Ag Soliman 1999; Arnoldi 1995, 2009; Casajus 2000; Diawara 1990), all “speaking” as unofficial “voices” of power. Tuareg acting and plays enhance comparative anthropological understandings of cultural variations in performance genres as well as “thick” ethnographic understandings of their role in reflecting and shaping local and emergent relocalizing imaginations and agendas (Beeman 1993; Kapferer 1988; Handelman 1990, 1998).

As Arnoldi observes (Arnoldi 1995, 21), many participants in a “new” performance genre see no contradiction or degradation of their traditional beliefs and values in selective juxtaposition of images and expressive forms drawn from the sacred and the mundane, past and present. The Tuareg actors, as *ibaraden*, are prominent but also ambiguous and liminal today. Though many continue to identify with the ranked social legacy of the *imghad* “tributary” fighters for the *imajeghen* aristocratic elites, this identification is not always literally one of descent but rather of inspiration from their more general Ifoghas Tuareg cultural heritage. For only in the past were they supposed to literally, physically fight for their noble overlords.

Age is also relevant to acting. Some urban civic programs have encouraged youthful pride in the modern plays, by referring to the old regional battle heroes. Today, most actors attempt to protect the community, their Tamajaq language, and Tuareg cultural autonomy through primarily their words and embodied reenactments, as purveyors of past cultural memory in ostension, as critics of present social turmoil, and as counselors for future action. In this, their contemporary role is both inspired by, and inspires, that of other verbal art specialists.

In its wider ethnographic and theoretical significance, this analysis suggests that the power of verbal art performance resides not solely in its plot content but also in its varying contexts of performance dynamics and wider social dynamics in the local community and beyond: for example, in oblique and subtle references to local, state, and nonstate forces. Since many Tamajaq speakers tended to describe some newer performances to me in French translation with the adjective “*moderne*,” the question also explored here is

whose notions of modernity are intruding into Tuareg society and verbal art performance? Those from vestiges of the colonial rule, in appeals by some NGO and aid agencies and youth centers to long-standing ideals of “troubadour” and “warrior”-like heroism? I agree with theorists (Brenner 1998; Rofel 1999) who argue that modernity is not a unitary or monolithic process; rather, there are multiple modernities. Local and regional cultural responses to global, national (colonial, independent state, and nonstate) processes are not passive, but active and powerful, and reformulate and reinterpret these forces.

Tuareg acting and plays constitute arenas for expressing both resistance and respect, with ultimate goals of reconciliation: between rural and urban residents, men and women, youths and elders, local and state forces, and persons of more and less “conservative” or “orthodox” religious (Muslim) orientations. These relationships, the main focus of many play plots and important concerns in actors’ and others’ social lives beyond performances, need healing in the wake of the turmoil and upheavals in Tuareg society over at least the past half-century. Performances in their aesthetic styles, plot contents and themes, and immediate and wider social contexts reflect on and suggest ways to cope with dilemmas and contradictions in religion, politics, and kinship domains. Plots express both heartfelt reminiscence on cultural heritage issues, in some respects recalling Benedict Anderson’s (2006 [1991]) concept of large-scale, collective “imagined” communities and narratives of nation, but they also ponder more personal, intimate experience of dispersed communities and suggest multiple ways of coping with this predicament in the future.

Central to my method and organization of this book, therefore, is an interaction of poetics (aesthetics, style in the sense of making or doing with flair) (Herzfeld 1988, 2001), and politics (power, practice, and agency, in the performance themes and contexts of “playing” with cultural time and space) (Arnoldi 1995, 2009; Ahearn 1998; Hoffman 1995, 2000; Reed 2007, 2016; Snodgrass 2006). Overall, the book explores the significance of acting, roles of actors, and their prevalent play plots in northern Malian Tuareg society, with emphasis on their creative inspiration and acting styles, as well as actors’ social roles and subjective experiences beyond the performances.

Important here are both ethnohistorical (in describing the development and changing roles of actors and changes in Tuareg society) and ethnographic arguments (presented in the recent/present, though not glossed entirely by the ethnographic present of classic ethnographies, but sensitive to context and change). I am interested primarily in tracing the way in which *ibaraden*, in applying their verbal art skills and critical but also supportive and protective social perspectives, recast continuities and transformations in cultural identity and have additionally transformed these skills and perspectives, for their play performances both reflect and respond to wider changes in Tuareg society.

Also relevant are historical and political relations between the northern Saharan communities and the nation of Mali—with its distant capital city, Bamako—and relations with more international NGO and aid organizations who in peaceful interludes have taken an active interest in the *ibaraden* actors and their plays. But the primary focus here is cultural: on Tuareg acting, actors, and play performances locally glossed as Tamajaq theater (*isatsa*). This point needs some specification, even belaboring, given a growing tendency in some anthropological works to overemphasize the nation as a unit of analysis and avoid names of cultural and linguistic groups almost taboo-like, an overcompensation, in my view, for some past essentializing of cultural identities.² Even in the ethnically and linguistically diverse town of Kidal, the plays I studied are performed almost exclusively in Tamajaq, are strongly identified with Tuareg culture, and feature Tuareg acting ensembles (i.e., comprised of persons who speak Tamajaq as their first language and self-identify as ensembles of Tuareg actors performing plays composed by other Tamajaq speakers, and/or drawn from older folktales). Also, the plays are performed predominantly, though not exclusively, before audiences whose first language is Tamajaq and who self-identify as “Tuareg,” though these persons are of diverse social backgrounds (i.e., different inherited social stratum origins in the traditionally-ranked system, now more flexible but varying in salience in different Tuareg groups).

In other words, there are salient (though not static or isolated) local cultural elements in this art form, even in the urban setting. There are also dialogues with others—both welcome guests and unwelcome intruders—into the performance space and beyond it. Some Tamajaq speakers have intermarried with different linguistic and cultural groups, such as the Songhai and the Mande/Bambara. However, most of my interlocutors and assistants, even a few whose households and relatives include other ethnicities and languages, identified as culturally Tuareg, considered the Tamajaq language as their first language, and practiced customs they regarded as Tuareg, namely: wearing the men’s turban/face-veil much of the time (most Tuareg women do not veil the face); assisting rural relatives with herding where families still hold livestock property; engaging in conversations over tea in daily sociability; feeling an emotional, even romantic, connection to the desert; a love of poetry, song, and music; and staunchly defending mixed-sex festivals—these latter, as noted, sporadically under attack by some more militant Islamist-reformist movements in the region.

Many consider language (*iles*), speech (*awal*), and culture (*temoust*) to be the most salient markers of identity and belonging. Despite past slavery in Tuareg society as well as their neighboring societies, many cultural revitalization leaders now insist, “We are all under one tent” (*ehan iyen*) and urge more inclusive unity based on the Tamajaq language. Different regional,

social backgrounds and newly emergent socioeconomic classes, dialects, and occupations challenge this idea of a unified Tuareg society, however, and even prior to these calls for unity, Tuareg groups have long resisted central leadership. Unsuccessful efforts to unify the Tuareg go back almost a hundred years (Bourgeot 1994, 663). For example, in 1908 and 1916 rebellious Kel Antessar (maraboutique Islamic scholar) descent groups tried to rally the noble warriors, attempting to defend the integrity of their mandate to educate youth in Islam (Hoffer 1998, 18). Acting and plays, I show, express contradictory pulls toward nation-state affiliation, on the one hand, and toward cultural autonomy, on the other. Thus I recognize a unity and a diversity in culture and favor approaching society as relational and processual.

I also pay careful attention to my interlocutors' own notions of identity and relatedness. Here as elsewhere, spatial concepts are culturally significant (Redfield 2002; Tsing 2006). Indeed, the North of Mali matters as a context for these plays. Thus I emphasize both culture and locality in the present book: the unity and diversity of Tuareg culture as expressed in situated performances and interactions between Tuareg in northern Mali and others from elsewhere—insofar as the latter are relevant. Notwithstanding some rich transcultural inspirations from neighboring African and global (French) theatrical traditions, Tamajaq theater in Kidal is simply not the same as Mande theater miles away. These art forms share some general features of African (continental and diaspora) performances and narratives noted by other valuable studies (Arnoldi 1995; Cole 2001, 2010; Diawara 1990; Donkor 2016; Edmonson 2018; Hoffman 1995, 2000; Reed 2007, 2016). A few new plays in Kidal have incorporated several nontraditional, outside influences (controversial among some socially conservative, religiously devout, and/or older persons), for example puppets from Mande theater. But Tuareg performances are in other ways aesthetically and stylistically quite distinct, and take place in a specific, though not neatly bounded, locality in place and time. These two art forms have connected in encounters but not thus far merged, though there occur some processes approximating concepts of “Creolization” (Barber and Waterman 1991; Hannerz 1997, 2010).

In sum, this book discusses some plural cultural performance traditions in Kidal but focuses on Tuareg performers' roles, Tamajaq performances, and wider social life in and around the town of Kidal and its region, the Adraghn-Ifoghas Mountains, because this is the emphasis of Tamajaq-speaking actors (in and usually, also, out of character beyond the plays) and acting.

The wider goal here is to do justice to prevalent local viewpoints expressed to this researcher, which prioritized protecting cultural autonomy in times of draconian pressures toward uniformity and homogenization—from both state and nonstate forces. But this book also looks beyond in time and space, toward wider historical and social relations and connections in a town and

region experiencing rich diversity and exchanges of ideas but also waves of invasion.

Methods

I observed predominantly live-performed plays in both their rehearsal and finalized performances and, in addition, heard some recorded plays broadcast on a Kidal Tamajaq-language radio station, with transcriptions, translations, and exegeses provided by assistants, composers, actors, and some audience members. I studied actors' social and economic backgrounds, professional organization structure, and their informal relationships to one another and to the wider community. I also documented their residential, kinship, household, neighborhood, marriage, and descent patterns in order to assess their significance for Tuareg acting and plays: for example, whether this suggests a kind of emerging guild organization similar to that of casted griots (bards) and smith/artisans in some other Saharan and Sahelian towns (for example, in Agadez, Niger, and Gao, Mali, griots tend to reside in certain neighborhoods, and in the Air Mountain countryside of Niger, smith/artisans tend to cluster in certain neighborhoods). Unlike griots and smiths, the *ibaraden* actors do not constitute a strictly hereditary unified stratum based upon descent but are of diverse social backgrounds and are not endogamous. Nonetheless, additional social and kinship data on them revealed some interesting patterns: namely, predominantly backgrounds (in the precolonial system) of *imghad* (tributary) or *ineslemen* (Kel Essouk marabout/Islamic scholar clan) origins, and a few actors of servile origin. Although actors explicitly distinguished themselves from griots, there is some overlap as well as contrast between their roles. There is also increasing divergence of the more youthful *ibaraden* actors from other older actors and comedians. These patterns, I show, reflect both continuity and change in wider Kel Adagh Tuareg society.

During my field residences in Kidal, I resided in two different places: within a family's household in the farthest outlying neighborhood called Intedeaban, located past several gardens along the dried riverbed, merging into the desert beyond, and in a room near the main route in the center of town, not far from Kidal's Radio Tisdas Tamajaq radio station, since I worked with staff there during one phase of this project. In more rural research residence in northern Mali, I stayed with a family in a small semi-nomadic village between Gao and Kidal.

Specific techniques I used included participant-observation, informally as an audience spectator, as well as an anthropologist and ethnographer, in both spontaneous (locally organized) and arranged performances and in some rehearsals, all of which were improvised, oral, and did not involve any copyrighted written scripts. The purpose of these methods was to elicit the

relationship between aesthetic style, acting, play themes, their contexts, and changing constructions of rural-urban, gendered, age-related, kinship, religious, and other social affiliations and identities. I also collected a number of life histories and case studies of actors and nonactors, conducted structured and unstructured interviews with not solely actors but also audience members and other local residents, and visited informally with many women and men of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, occupations, and ages.

With artists' permission and assistance, I recorded, transcribed, translated, and analyzed many verbal art performances, especially the play performances and also, where relevant, songs and regional mythico-histories. Thus although the present book is about the plays and actors, for added insights where relevant I refer briefly to mythico-histories, monologues, conversations, and other genres and specialists, for example, from more specialized *kel seghsegh* comedians within the *ibaraden* category, poets, religious scholars (marabouts or *ineslemen*)—in particular the Kel Essouk who act as religious scholars and sociopolitical mediators for Ifoghas noble elites and a few of whom also present moral-themed tales, plays, and commentaries—and from artisans (*inadan*) and griots (*iggawen*).

Following their transcription and translation, I later played back recordings to performers and audiences for local exegesis and commentary, in unstructured discussions with actors and audiences, and also conducted informal, guided conversations with many residents of Kidal and outlying areas in order to explore the dynamics of disputed and prevalent cultural memories as these are reconstructed during the ethnographic process, in a “meta-commentary.” I also observed other festivals and spectacles held for youths at youth centers and spontaneous recitations of poetry and oral histories by individuals during tea-drinking, mutual visits, and other sociability.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The organization of this book reflects several levels of analysis. On one level, emphasized in Part I, I examine the intersection of poetics and politics (aesthetics, stylistics, and power) in traditional and changing performance in Tuareg society, as situated historically and currently in Kidal and its surrounding region, and as revealed in acting in predominantly urban theatrical play performances, in terms of their relationship to the social construction of local culture and memory—as well as forgetting and moving forward—and as expressed by actors in and beyond these performances. Also important here is their relationship to other genres of Tamajaq verbal art. On another level, emphasized in Part II, I explore the play plot themes' content in terms of their wider contexts—of performance and also, more broadly, of their

relationships to socioeconomic, political, and religious practices, processes, events, and issues engaged by the community at the time, with illustrative social cases and vignettes of experiences of actors, audiences, and other local residents.

In Part I, first, the purpose of this Introduction is to set the scene: namely, a preliminary general situating of acting, actors, and play performances in space and time and how I approach them. Chapter 1 offers historical and ethnographic background on the Tuareg generally to orient both specialist and nonspecialist readers to the wider context, crucial to understanding the central question here of what is meant by description of the *ibaraden* actors as courageous persons in their own and others' viewpoints. I also situate, more specifically, the Tamajaq-speaking (Tuareg or Kel Tamajaq) communities in and around Kidal, Mali, and its Adragh-n-Ifoghas region. To bring this alive, I also include the life story of an actor whose experience though not representative of all Tuareg or all *ibaraden* actors nonetheless is not atypical, either, and illustrates the importance of actors' art in providing hope and pride in cultural survival/autonomy in difficult times. I also briefly discuss how works on performance, culture, and memory inspire me and guide my understanding of Tuareg acting, actors, and theatrical play performances, and how the present book hopefully contributes to that body of work. Chapter 2 closely examines and analyzes the roles of these actors, the history of their profession, and their relationship to other verbal art and performers/specialists in Kel Adagh Tuareg society. Chapter 3 delves into the meanings of the theatrical plays/sketches, in particular the urban ones most emphasized here, performed in Kidal and on this town's surrounding desert outskirts, and attitudes about them. Many plays are primarily an urban art form, though other plays are based on older and more rural Tuareg verbal art forms and many refer to not solely issues of modernity, but also inspiration from the past. Chapter 4 unpacks the meanings of "traditional" and "modern" (as locally defined) acting as simultaneously resistance, accommodation, and resilience in crisis. Finally, I explore the processes of inspiration and creativity in the experience of composers and actors, in the plays and more generally in Tuareg verbal art performance aesthetics. Interspersed throughout these discussions are the "voices" of a number of actors, their personal stories, and other illustrative examples and cases.

In Part II, I proceed beyond these poetics and politics of aesthetics, style, and genre concerns into closer analyses of popular play plots and their broader themes. Each chapter focuses on one prevalent plot theme, analyzing the immediate and wider social contexts. In chapter 5, the focus is on play plots about encounters and relationships between nomadic and sedentarized, and rural and urban, persons and institutions; in chapter 6, the focus is on gendered and embodied issues in performances and in social life beyond them; in

chapter 7, on age-related and intergenerational tensions in socioeconomic and political upheavals and psycho-social healing of traumas; and in chapter 8, on religious and moral predicaments and concerns, in both the wider sense of religion as a cultural belief system and also, specifically, Tuareg cultural and “popular” interpretations of Islam as these have encountered and responded to more “orthodox,” Pan-Islamic, and Islamist-reformist influences. Each chapter therefore concerns not the texts of plays but rather their contextualization, analyzing one salient theme that emerged as prevalent in many plays’ plots that I observed. The plays are analyzed in relation to their immediate and also broader social contexts and referents, including audience reactions, but also events “offstage” over more long term in the community relevant to the actors and nonactors, thereby directly and indirectly relating to their plot themes. In other words, plots are interspersed with social vignettes, case studies, and life histories relevant to their themes.

In the conclusion, first I sum up findings and discuss their broader implications. Next, I offer some recent (as of this writing) updates on what has happened to Tuareg theatrical arts and artists since the 2012 war in Mali and its aftermath. These latter data in one section of the Conclusions derive from correspondence with a few local residents and interlocutors, meetings with a few performers as they later toured the United States, and Internet material on the fate of performances and their artists.

NOTES

1. Over the years, my main research projects have included studies of spirit possession, the life course and aging, medico-ritual healing practices and specialists, smith/artisans’ social and ritual roles, gender, youth cultures, conversion, and verbal art performance and specialists, including but not limited to acting, actors, and plays (the primary focus in the present book), memory, and mythico-histories. In these projects, conducted in Mali, Niger, and France, I am grateful for support from Fulbright-Hays, CIES, Social Science Research Council, Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Committee for Research and Exploration at National Geographic, and Indiana University and University of Houston.

2. Anthropological focus on nation-state and transnational and other borderlands spaces is valuable, but in my view should supplement rather than replace cultural emphases because these latter remain important to many persons “on the ground” who are threatened by ethnocide and genocide. Yet I am also aware that place is constructed symbolically and sociopolitically (not solely literally or geographically), by perspectives and perceptions of those who consider themselves “local,” and this also informs my analysis. A psychological “rootedness” in cultural space remains important for many residents, even (or perhaps especially) in their migrations, dispersions, and among the Tuareg, continues to powerfully propel return, not solely exile.

The challenge many anthropologists face is that in the rush to join the “bandwagon” of global studies, there is a tendency to ignore local subjectivities. Although a robust critique of the older culture concept as unitary and static is constructive, in my view this effort can overcompensate for past reductionism and essentialism regarding culture, and there is a risk of aligning with, or at least echoing unwittingly, powerful hegemonic forces (whether transnational corporations or oppressive regimes) threatening to demolish cultural autonomy, though the opposite extreme, of xenophobia and denying of all interconnections, is also a grave danger in some more reactionary anti-globalization and nationalist movements.

Part I

**THE ACTORS, VERBAL ARTS,
AND PERFORMANCE**

Chapter 1

General Background on the Tuareg, the Kel Adagh, and the Town and Region of Kidal

ETHNOGRAPHIC AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

Traditionally rural-based, many though not all Tuareg have migrated to Saharan and Sahelian towns in Mali, Niger, Algeria, Libya, and Burkina Faso. Today, most tend to be semi-nomadic, combining their long-standing occupations of livestock herding, gathering, and camel caravanning with oasis gardening, itinerant truck and market trading, artisanry, and labor migration. Others have been pressured to become fully sedentarized (settled), for such populations are easier to keep track of in censuses and taxation (Chelela and Childs 1994; Claudot-Hawad 1993a, 1993b, 1996). Some farm on oases (Bernus 1981; Bouman 2003). Those who are new to towns tend to yearn nostalgically for home, which to many implies fondly remembered nomadic camps as idealized places of once-plentiful pastures, herds, and milk with people living in community, their moral center the female-owned tent. Until recently, many more transhumant groups customarily nomadized during the months of August, September, and October (Boilley 1999; Brett and Fentress 1997; Nicolaisen and Nicolaisen 1997).

There have been both continuities and transformations over time in the ranked system, which traditionally included inherited and endogamous but also flexible and negotiable social and occupational categories. Aristocratic or “noble” elite descent groups (*illallen*, *imojar*, or *imajeghen*) elected leaders of regional confederations. Tributary (*imghad*) groups earlier subjugated in wars tended to own smaller livestock (Nicoliasen and Nicolaisen 1997) and fought and collected tribute for *imojar/illalen/imajeghen*, who also monopolized large livestock and weapons, controlled the caravan trade, and were militarily dominant over subordinates of varying client and servile (*ighawalen* and *iklan*) statuses and others who were, and still are, of ambiguous status (smith/

artisans, *inaden*), toward all of whom aristocratic elites have owed protection and other duties (Bernus 1981; Boilley 1999; Claudot-Hawad 1993; Keenan 1977; Rossi 2016). For example, until French colonial modifications of powers, elites in the Ifoghas descent group ideally guaranteed protection of clients and subordinates against abuses of tribute *tiwse* payments in livestock, butter, and cereal. There are regional variations and recent transformations in the contemporary significance and roles of these social relationships. There is some breakdown of client-patron relationships in towns. Most occupations today no longer correspond rigidly to inherited social statuses in the “traditional” stratified system, conventionally but only approximately translated into English as “aristocratic” or “noble,” “tributary,” “smith/artisans,” “clients,” and “(former) “slaves” or servile (owned) persons. Descendants of servile persons are now widely known as Bella and Buzu in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (Ag Wacawalen 1988; Bouman 2003).

The *ibaraden* actors, like *ineslemen* Islamic scholar/marabouts, do not today rigidly belong to a distinct (i.e., strictly inherited or endogamous) social stratum and, in contrast to many smith/artisans, tend not to practice a single occupation. But it is significant that many contemporary actors explicitly identify with, and some trace descent from, *imghad* tributaries, and a few also belong to the Kel Essouk maraboutique clans (Qur’anic scholarship is open to any person who is viewed as mastering the Qur’an and practicing “correct” religious devotion, but many Islamic scholars/marabouts tend to cluster in clans). All actors I met in northern Mali are inspired by past heroes—initially tributary *imghad*—who fought to protect their communities and gallantly courted and praised women—initially noble elite women. Their acting today celebrates, but importantly, also re-defines and re-channels this local concept of heroism into new directions. In many actors’ own perception, their new occupation helps to revise some outsiders’ negative stereotypes of Tuareg as “bandits,” and to correct some erroneous projecting of western pseudo-scientific categories of “race” onto Tuareg society. Protecting the cultural community is therefore one important performance goal.

Some social client-patron roles and relationships, especially in the countryside, persist in modified forms (Boilley 1999; Lecocq 2005; Nicolaisen and Nicolaisen 1997; Rasmussen 2001, 2006a, 2006b, 2013a). Previously-inherited and ranked social backgrounds continue to have some meaning and function in some contexts. For example, chiefly and aristocratic families, some of whom are impoverished but still socially prestigious attempt to maintain prestige and acquire wealth through arranging marriages between their daughters and Tuareg men of similar background, preferably also with socioeconomic means, or lacking this option, by marrying daughters to well-to-do ethnic/cultural outsiders (e.g. Arabic or Mande speakers). Some parents appeal to aristocratic mores, for example, of dignity, modesty, reserve, and restraint for

both sexes, in socializing children in order to underline a moral point. Past slavery, as elsewhere in Africa, has been officially abolished. The positions of former slaves and their descendants vary across different regions (Bouman 2003; Rossi 2016), though social stratum origins remain known and, while preferably not mentioned directly, are expressed symbolically in some contexts such as rites of passage, as for example in some rural dances associated with distinctive social strata (Casajus 1987, 2000; Rasmussen 2013a).

Several descent groups and factions arrived in the Adragh-n-Ifoghas Mountain massif area around a water-point later known as the town of Kidal from different regions, such as Gao and Menaka (Ag Wacawalen 1988, 34), but most belonged to the Ifoghas descent group, within the larger regional Kel Adagh confederation, this latter still headed by a traditional leader called *amenokal* with modified powers. In a 2007 census count, the population of Kidal was about 20,000, though this fluctuates markedly, since many Tama-jaq-speaking residents there are still semi-nomadic, and alternate between the town and its rural areas. Many retain some property and continue to have close ties with relatives in the countryside. Since 2012, some residents who fled the Azawad armed move for independence and other armed conflicts are now in refugee camps, predominantly in Mauritania (verbal information, Dr. Pierre Boilley, CNRS, Paris, France).

Within the wider regional Kel Adagh Tuareg confederation predominant in and around Kidal, the Ifoghas and the Kel Essouk are the two major *tawsiten* (descent groups, sing. *tawsit*). Within the Ifoghas *tawsit*, are several small fractions or “clans.” Originally, Tuareg and other Berber groups clustered in North African Saharan mountain massifs, having fled the Arab conquests. Later, many migrated south toward the central Sahara and the Sahel (Brett and Fentress 1997). In each Saharan and Sahelian region (Tuareg cultural/ethnic regions now cross nation-state borders), aristocratic descent groups or “clans” together comprise a large regional confederation, as for example the Kel Adagh in the Adragh-n-Ifoghas and the Kel Air in the Air.

According to Pierre Boilley (1999), the Kel Adagh have been vulnerable, but also adaptable, in their long history of migrations. Strategies have included mobility, flexibility, and diversification in exploitation of regional resources. Kel Adagh also have attempted to follow a strategy of autonomy, which tended to insulate them from their powerful neighbors for a time. According to one oral account of Ifoghas origins collected by Boilley (1999, 57), the Ifoghas came from Morocco, and married daughters of the Taghat-Mellet noble *tawsit*. As they were also *echerifan* (descendants of the Prophet) they took power. But they did not become regional leaders (sing. *amenokal*) until the time of Illi, the father of Attahar, grandfather of Intala and great-grandfather of Mohammed Ag Intala, who came to office in 2014 upon his father Intala’s death. It was Illi who constructed a defensive wall

against the Ihaggaren Tuareg invaders from what is now southern Algeria. Later, in order to ensure their independence, Ifoghas and other Kel Adagh had to increase their power and find alliances. For the French arrival introduced a new additional, outside political intruder, which the Kel Adagh tried to exploit to their advantage (Boilley 1999, 59).

In the town of Kidal and its surrounding countryside, residents' occupations today include semi-nomadism, commerce (market and small boutique), overland trading, nowadays usually by trucks but occasionally still by a few camels, Islamic scholarship, artisanry, and governmental, functionary, and military work. Many new nongovernmental and other aid projects, as well as some plays, implicitly encourage sedentarizing, or at least keeping track of nomads, but play plots' subtleties and actors' sentiments "offstage" reveal some contradictions, debates, and dilemmas on this issue, for they also voice a nostalgia and preference for autonomy in their lifestyles of freely crossing borders during labor migrations, stockbreeding, and itinerant trading. Many actors, as well as other Tamajaq-speaking residents, are spirited independent souls who resent close surveillance or limitations on their mobility, but also feel responsible for, as they put it, "warning the community."

Most residents in northern Mali are Muslims of Sunni orientations with Sufi influences. Generally popular is the Maliki branch, based on analogical interpretations by later Muslim scholars instead of a strict reliance on the Hadiths. Matrilineal influences persist in mythico-historical accounts, some medico-ritual healing practices, and those legal and social practices predating Tuareg conversion to Islam between the eighth and eleventh centuries C.E. (Norris 1975, 1990). Most Tuareg women enjoy high social status, independent property ownership, and free mobility, and most are not forcibly secluded or veiled, though both sexes should ideally dress modestly in local cultural, as well as Muslim ideals. Women may visit male nonkin, travel, and initiate divorce. There is relatively free social interaction between the sexes, great cultural valuing of courtship, witty conversation, plays, poetry, and musical performances by both women and men of all social backgrounds, and festivals and mixed-sex gatherings are very important (Ag Erless 1999; Borel 1988; Gast in Yacine 1992; Loughran-Bini and Seligman 2006).

French colonial policies in West French Africa and West French Sudan, which included what are now the nations of Niger and Mali, tended to favor the sedentary (settled) farming peoples predominant in these countries' southern regions: Hausa, Songhai, and Bambara, marginalizing many Tuareg predominant in the northern regions, which the French initially neglected until later, upon discovery (in northern Niger) of uranium deposits. Historical marginalization of many Tuareg and massacres of them by some national army units and nonstate militias have culminated in the recent armed rebellions of the mid- and late twentieth century and first decades of the twenty-first

century, still simmering despite peacekeeping efforts in northern regions of Mali and Niger against the central state governments (Moseley 2017).

The causal roots of these conflicts are beyond the scope of the present book, but merit some attention here since their legacy continues to impact experiences and shape memories in the Kidal region. The armed conflicts, though having some divisions along ethnic/cultural lines, have been based primarily on regional and economic development discrepancies. Ethnicity is also a factor here, but there is no neat political division according to rigid ethnic categories, and most contemporary Tuareg cultural revitalization leaders emphasize identity based on culture (*temoust*) and language, (*iles* or *awal*), not “race” (Ag Erless and D. Kone 2013; Dayak 1992).

Historically, there have been both conflictual and trading relationships between Saharan and Sahelian communities (Baier and Lovejoy 1977; Boilley 1999; Bourgeot 1990, 1994; Fugelstad 1983). Conflicts have been exacerbated by expanding farmlands, erosions, and increasingly erratic alternations between droughts and floods in the Sahara. Most recently, there have also arisen religious conflicts among those with differing interpretations of *shar'ia*.

The Peace Accords ending the 1990–1996 Tuareg rebellion in Niger and Mali promised to integrate more Tuareg into national infrastructures and to bring more roads, hospitals, and other “development” to northern regions, but these promises have been unevenly kept, in large measure due to the widespread poverty and low national budgets in these countries as a whole, generally caused by recurring droughts, but also by legacies of some early misguided aid programs. For example, forced cash-cropping depleted soil nutrients and compelled southern farmers to move farther north into pastoral zones, where this conflicted with herding strategies. Some aid programs threatened the ecological balance: in, for example, installation of gasoline powered water pumps that encouraged herders to cluster animals around them, thereby disrupting the balanced distance between water and pasture. Some nomads, particularly in northern Mali, were coerced to settle down in exchange for access to food distribution during droughts. In northern Niger, a region rich in uranium deposits, tensions arose around 2007 over contracts offered to transnational companies and intrusions of the uranium industry onto local lands without local residents’ participation in decision-making.

In the late twentieth century, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank’s restructuring and privatization policies mandating austerity measures and withdrawal of state services caused regional economies to decline. In northern Mali, some Islamist-reformist piety organizations, most of them peaceful, moved in to fill the gap, establishing clinics and *da'wa*-influenced Qur’anic schools. Some intermarried with local families, and purchased live-stock from impoverished herders, paying several times the standard price.

Later, some violent Islamist and other jihadi militants entered the conflicts, around 2012 upon the declaration of the Kidal region as independent Azawad by a Tuareg dissident organization called *le mouvement national de la liberation de Azawad* (MNLA). This movement, like previous Tuareg rebellions, began as secular, demanding equal economic opportunities, varying degrees of cultural autonomy, political representation, and integration of more northerners into the national armies, functionary jobs, and universities (Claudot-Hawad 1993a, 1993b; Dayak 1992; Decalo 1996; Fischer and Kohl 2010). This MNLA movement later split up into factions, however, and some Islamist-reformist sympathizers among them formed alliances with more militant jihadists.

Throughout these events, the region has been continually crisscrossed by several generations of Tuareg and other labor migrants, who have returned to Mali and Niger in several waves over the past three decades, and have faced unemployment there. Other waves of migrants and refugees from farther South flee in the opposite direction: across the northern Sahelian and Saharan regions of these countries, toward the Mediterranean and Europe. Some have become stranded in northern towns such as Kidal, where I met one woman who, rescued from a capsized boat in the Mediterranean, was obliged to take in laundry in order to save up for a return trip to her family in Nigeria, but whose life in Kidal was precarious economically and marginal socially.

THE TOWN OF KIDAL

Kidal, perched on a Saharan hill at the gateway to the Adragh-n-Ifoghas Mountains, is a place of beauty: dotted with buildings of naturally-tinted local igneous stone and richly creative with verbal and visual arts and dynamic cultural encounters. Yet it is also a tense place from successive invasions. There is also a water shortage.

The French brought Tuareg traditional ruling families to Kidal. Politically, traditional leaders such as the *amenokal* now have modified powers, and though some have been active in peace negotiations, they face competition from nation-state authorities and nonstate forces, and are caught politically between urban and national politicians and armies and more localized family and descent group interests.

An older renowned actor, comedian, and poet, whom I'll call Atakor, elaborated on these historical and recent predicaments. Over tea-drinking, central to Tuareg sociability, he explained that the name Kidal derives from a Tamajaq term *egdela*, from the Tamajaq verb denoting "to refuse or resist." Atakor then likened Kidal to a "well-secured house or camp." "This," he explained, "refers to the local refusal to be dominated. Kidal is on the hill

(gesturing) over there, which was fought over.” The large machine-gun and rusty old canon that I had seen on the roof-top of a French-built building as I was approaching the town now had meaning. Atakor and several others traced the name of the prominent descent group there, the Ifoghas, to a Tamajaq term denoting “to be strong.” Before the twentieth century, Kidal was used as a water-point/well by Ifoghas and other Tuareg nomads in the larger Kel Adagh regional confederation, but was not initially settled by them. For given the choice, many preferred, and still prefer, to avoid the towns.

Thus Tuareg descent groups fought over the hill for its value as a water-source before it became a town, a transformation that occurred as French colonial forces used the well, and began to settle there around the late nineteenth century. By early in the twentieth century, the area came directly under French colonial domination. Later, following Mali’s 1962 independence from France, around 1963 during a drought, the first Tuareg armed rebellion in Mali broke out, preceding several more recent and larger-scale ones in both Mali and Niger.

In those circumstances, many Tuareg dispersed to flee violence and find remunerative jobs. At that time and since, many have been propelled into labor migration and more long-term exile farther afield in refugee camps, military training centers, or political exile and asylum (Kohl 2009; Fischer and Kohl 2010). Many animal herds have been lost, stolen, or much diminished from a series of droughts and wars. Most persons, however, ultimately seek to return to their homes.

Consider, for example, the story of Atakor, the older actor, comedian, and poet who explained the origins of Kidal and the etymology of its name to me. During several visits, he related to me how, as an adolescent around the late 1960s, he was compelled to migrate for work to Niamey, the capital of Niger:

“WHEN I COMPOSE, THIS GIVES ME THE DESIRE TO LIVE”: ATAKOR’S STORY

(Around the mid-1960s), my family was suffering greatly from the drought. We lost our animals, camels, cows, and goats, except for one camel, which my parents told me to take with me to find a better life since there was neither water nor pasture in Kidal. I followed some other refugees . . . we walked and walked, we were often very thirsty and hungry. At first, I went to Menaka (a town in Mali near Gao). Then I decided to go to Niger. Finally, I arrived there, and stayed in that country for several years, first in Lazare, a refugee camp, now closed, then located near the Niamey neighborhood of Boukoki, (formerly housing many Tuareg from Mali escaping the 1963 first rebellion over food aid distribution and taxes, and later, fleeing the 1969–74 drought). Then later, I moved to the

Plateau (a neighborhood along the River Niger, above the city center, where at the time, mainly government buildings and European villas were located). I was looking for work, and I had luck (at that). I became a cook and messenger for the American ambassador at the U.S. Embassy on the road between Yantala (a small village near Niamey, where he eventually resided) and the *Plateau*. I also watched his place (compound) well, very well! I made sure that bandits and other brats did not enter.

In that era, amid the hardships from the lengthy drought, Atakor found the embassy to be very open and welcoming, not guarded as it is today by marines with several external locked doors and metal-detectors. The diplomatic community there at that time was very small, only about sixty to seventy personnel and their families, with programs intensively focused on famine relief. There was widespread sympathy for the victims of this disaster, which affected many people in Niger, as well as Mali. Atakor undoubtedly found a very personal and supportive atmosphere there. The American ambassador often invited everyone working there to holiday parties. Guests and staff could pick grapefruit from trees there, with permission. In this atmosphere of relative social intimacy and valuing of his skills, Atakor flourished. He continued:

We became great friends! He (the ambassador) and his family were so nice! Sometimes, I used to cook Tuareg and other foods for them and their friends . . . *tagale* (a delicious wheat dish with a broth), rice dishes, macaroni. I arranged these foods carefully on nice plates. Once, we had a special dinner of American, French, German, and other diplomats at the invitation of my boss, and they loved my food. But I missed my home back in northern Mali, with my family and friends there, and so I returned home later when things seemed to be (going) better.

Thus for Atakor, in effect, working for the American ambassador was a performance, enabling him to transform his experience as refugee and his feelings of nostalgia into art (cooking, and later his story-telling to me). He could also, in the tradition of the *ibaraden* actors' legendary warrior-like courage, protect his new patrons. But ultimately, his missing of family and friends drew him back home.

Sometime after Atakor returned to Kidal, he became affiliated with the acting ensemble called The Visionaries (or Those Who See Far). These talented performers became renowned in their live and broadcast plays at the Radio Tisdas in Kidal under the director there, a journalist.

In Kidal, Atakor was very kind and hospitable to me. I frequently visited him and his family in their compound of several nomadic tents and a small two-room adobe mud house in a neighborhood of Kidal near the homes of

the founder of the Tinariwen guitar band and the prefect (later governor). His elderly mother, now disabled, resided in one tent, cared for by her daughters. During our tea drinking Atakor would sometimes spontaneously recite poems he had composed, true to the expected gallant and witty conduct of *ibaraden* toward women. He would also occasionally spray me lightly with perfume, an act which in Tuareg society expresses a host's friendship and generosity.

The point is that the acting aesthetic ideally extends beyond the borders of literal performance, becoming part of life. Other residents indicated to me that such actions are "the sign of a great actor who really knows things!"

Atakor believed that the *ibaraden* actors and the *kel seghsegh* comic specialists among them "point or orient people in a good direction, and defend the culture." He also enjoyed composing poems, he explained, "When I compose poetry, this gives me the desire to live." He started acting in public as an adult, though his brother was also an actor. They learned this skill at home during informal conversations, improvisations, and rote memory, rather than formal apprenticing.

He explained that there are broader senses of *abarad*: "this term can also refer to someone very nice, gracious, generous, and protective, for example someone who gives to the poor." In his opinion, the difference between the griot and the actor/comedian is "like the difference between the ugly and the pretty." He preferred the older themed plays based on *tenzoghén* traditional tales, hinting that he found some aspects of the new play performances, often requested by urban bureaucracies, to be less "pretty" than the older plays.

These new plays were becoming more frequently performed, since many were organized in conjunction with official events. During my research/residences in Kidal and the rural region between Kidal and Gao, civic and non-governmental organization officials in peaceful interludes were encouraging more refugees from regional battles to return, assuring them of security. One way officials attempted to reassure them was by holding festivals and performances at Kidal's stadium, its old and new youth centers, and a radio station, live in this latter's courtyard and recorded for broadcasting.

Atakor belonged to the Kel Tasalit and Kel Regenten clans within the Ifoghas descent group, who predominate in the larger Kel Adagh regional confederation in northeast Mali and were only recently settled when the French colonial administration brought their traditional leader, the *amenokal*, elected by aristocratic descent groups, and his family to Kidal. The colonial powers artificially imposed state borders across herding and caravanning areas, and nomads became marginalized economically and politically—first by French colonial policies in the regions then called French West Africa and French West Sudan and later by some postcolonial independent state and nonstate aid programs that tended to inherit the former colonial bias against nomads.

Causes of the 1963 conflict in Kidal included tensions over problematic drought food aid distribution, taxes, and some military commanders' atrocities there. A commander whom Modibo Keita, first president of newly independent Mali at that time, chose to preside over the Kidal region forced Tuareg in the town to dig a pit and then shot and buried a group of elders and Islamic scholars in it. In 1968, he was brought to justice by then-president Moussa Traore and sent to a notorious prison at the Taoudeine salt mines (now closed), where he died.

Although the massacre was not portrayed overtly in any local play I saw or heard of, other reminders of it persisted. Many residents bitterly recalled that massacre by the army in hushed, private conversations, and indirectly alluded to it in oral histories. The Tamajaq radio station, Radio Tisdas, was later built over that mass grave of elders and marabouts, perhaps an attempt to bury that memory with its lovely conical buildings of locally mined, naturally tinted stones. The radio station, its built forms, and verbal art broadcasts in effect entomb the trauma of earlier experiences. What cannot be explicitly, directly expressed verbally receives silent expression in built forms and actions at a place that eventually became a popular venue for performances, live, broadcast, and recorded. As Stoller (1997, 61) has pointed out, "the power of collective memory does not merely devolve from textual inscriptions."

Accordingly, acting reconstitutes or reimagines in self-conscious cultural revitalization, autonomy, and survival as performers cope with disruptions: periodic refugee flights by many from their region during droughts and armed conflicts, massive returns, resettlement into towns and more sedentary communities, and simultaneous "top-down" efforts at peace and repatriation, in policies some persons perceive to threaten cherished lifeways.

Much acting in fact represents attempts to recover from those remembered traumas and to offer hope for the future. In their overt plot content, at least, many plays are "forward-looking," not solely memorializing. If one looks carefully, however, beneath the surface and away from formal performances, one finds reminders. A radio staff member related to me how his mother, a secretary to a soldier in Kidal around the time of the massacre, once arrived late for work, and her boss struck her with the butt of his rifle, knocking out several of her teeth.

Others remember more symbolic violence. In the early 1960s, an army commander forced Tuareg adolescent girls to sing in Mande (Bamana), Bobo, and Songhay languages, and forbade them to sing in Tamajaq. A woman composer, actor, and singer with whom I became friendly, whom I shall call Tekres and whose full story appears later, had been one of those girls. She later wept whenever she heard some songs broadcast on the radio from that era. She nonetheless eventually married a prosperous Bambara/Bamana man from the South. Decades later, Tekres founded an acting ensemble called

Tilwat (“Joy”), and nowadays, she composes what she and others consider “modern” plays, popularly called *des sketches*. Yet her early experiences inspired her to also become an advocate for youths, and her plays and other activities in town often engaged youth-related issues.

In the years leading up to the 2012 war, already palpable were tensions from both the past violence and the gathering “clouds” of approaching conflicts. There were contradictory pulls of calls for various degrees and types of Tuareg cultural and northern regional autonomy, on the one hand, and desires for repatriation into the Malian nation-state, on the other. Around 2006, Tuareg dissident/rebels demanded a paved road, a second, larger and better-stocked hospital, more pharmacy supplies, and greater access to communications, and criticized the Malian army for what they considered to be foot dragging in withdrawing bases from the Kidal and the Adragh-n-Ifoghas region. A few former rebel fighters were recruited into the national army, but later, dissatisfied with the government’s progress on policies promised in the peace accords of the mid-1990s, they stockpiled weapons, defected, and subsequently conducted sporadic attacks, primarily on military rather than civilian targets until the 2012 escalations.

PERFORMANCE VENUES, MEDIA, AND CULTURAL, SOCIAL, AND POLITICAL LIFE IN AND AROUND KIDAL

The most internationally famous performances, predominantly musical but also including a few modern plays, began in the 1990s at the Malian and Nigerien “Festivals of the Desert” where local artists have performed primarily for tourists. These performances have become vulnerable as targets of violence from militants opposed to French and other outsiders’ presence in the Sahara. Partly for this reason, as well as because they were rather expensive and organized by numerous “middle-persons,” my friends, assistants, and interlocutors all favored performances held in smaller gatherings nearer their homes, though some *ibaraden* actors, musicians, and singers occasionally performed at those larger and more distant festivals.

From around 2002 until just before the heightened 2012 violence, USAID and nongovernmental organizations were also a significant presence in the North, replacing state agencies as sources of local aid in the privatization and restructuring policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and in the Malian democratization program. Like the Islamist-reformist piety aid organizations, these agencies were also becoming integrated into the local social system. For example, aid project workers established fictive kin relationships with locals: some rural women named children after them

and composed poetry and songs about them, appealing to them to return with more food aid. Kidal men gathered outside aid offices to look for not only food but also employment and to socialize. In peacetime, NGOs are important as job-training, entertainment, and sociability venues, and on conclusion of programs, they often honor participants by staging festivals with performances. Thus until the outbreak of war in northern Mali in 2012, when many NGOs fled Kidal and the surrounding region, these existed alongside more peaceful Islamist *da'wa* piety organizations, though their coexistence was uneasy, addressed directly in several town controversies and indirectly during some play performances, as soon shown.

What is striking about Kidal and relevant to its urban performances, therefore, are sharp fault lines, but also encounters, in its negotiations of modernity. This is a site of rich local artistic/aesthetic traditions (actors, comedians, musicians, singers, poets, composers, and silversmiths and leatherworkers); multiply-mediated influences of diverse cultural and linguistic groups; and also a highly militarized ambiance, which, given the history of invasions, many local residents associate with alien occupying forces.

Kidal's population also includes descendants of coastal West African infantry (*tirraillieurs*) brought by the French colonial forces in the early twentieth century to subdue the Tuareg; descendants of Tuareg slaves, *iklan*, or Bella, who speak Tamajaq and usually (though not always) identify with Tuareg culture; Bambara and other Mande speakers; and Songhay, Arab, and Senegalese merchants. Still present in Kidal are descendants of past prisoners, some of whom became servants for local families later on. There are many neighborhoods whose names end with the suffix *bougou*, a Mandelanguage term for "town," reminders of encounters with these waves of influence. Everyday sociability, however, tends to be conducted separately within each cultural/ethnic group, though there are trading partnerships and some intermarriages between them. The *inaden* (or *inhaden*) artisans, who include leathersmiths, woodsmiths, goldsmiths, and silversmiths, have organized into artisan workshops and cooperatives. The world-famous Tuareg rock musical band musicians, Tinariwen, lived in and around Kidal at the time of my research residence, though some fled in 2012. This band has performed abroad, including in November 2011 in my home town in the United States, as well as in Kidal at a new youth center called *la Maison du Luxembourg* and at Radio Tisdas, venues where actors also perform plays.

The turn of the twenty-first century saw much new technology introduced in communications and the media: for example, cell phones and the Internet (set up in 2006 by USAID in a project called "Clique"), which in turn produced marked social changes. Cell phones and nongovernmental organization (NGO) work schedules were producing more precise and segmented senses of time, and new transportation systems were emerging, such as

motorcycle taxis. By around 2006, approximately one-third of Kidal residents owned televisions, with programs aired mostly at night, mainly soap operas (*les feuilletons*) and edutainment programs in health, beamed from Bamako, Abidjan, and Brazil.

There are about eight neighborhoods in Kidal, which comprise very significant social units, overlapping but not coinciding exactly with kinship ties. The oldest is the Centre Ville. The next oldest is Aliou. The Adragh-n-Ifoghas mountain neighborhoods overlooking Kidal are Kazzabougou, Bellagoubou, Ghambougou, Intedeban, and Quartier Lafiyabougou. This latter, on the mountain next to the main army base and across the Kidal *oeud* (dried riverbed) from a small motel, was first settled by the military, and in recent times has a mixed ethnic and linguistic population of Songhay, Bambara, Tuareg, and a few Hausa. These older neighborhoods on the rocky hill overlook the center of town. Kazzabougou is predominantly inhabited by Bella and Bambara, and Bellabougou has mostly Bella residents.

In Quartier Aliou, across a main *oeud*, reside the *amenokal* and his Ifoghas chiefly family. Next door is his Kel Essouk council of Islamic scholars/marabouts and elders, their families, an attached client smith family, and few Bella families. Several Arabic-speaking families reside farther out. In Aliou, striking landmarks I noticed were the *amenokal's* palace with a green steeple-shaped roof, its summit pointing heavenward, one clinic, two dried-up wells, and one large water tower for the chiefly family. In peacetime, Aliou is very quiet at night. No plays or guitar concerts are allowed there because of the devoutly religious presence there. Secular (i.e., non-liturgical) music during my research residence was not forbidden anywhere else in town. Until the Islamist-reformist militants briefly occupied the region later, frequent popular concerts were held in other parts of Kidal, not only at *Radio Tisdas* and *La Maison du Luxembourg*, but also at a new (much debated and reluctantly allowed) bar/club located on the outskirts of town and in a small hotel courtyard near the market. Later, when the Islamist militant jihadists wrested Kidal from the control of MNLA Tuareg secular rebels for a time, all plays, dancing, and music were banned everywhere. There were extensive lootings and other destruction.

The neighborhood called Etember, popular with European aid workers and United Nations peacekeeping personnel, has more reliable electricity and water, very limited in other parts of town. Nouveau Quartier contains many more modern government and administrative office buildings, for example, the *Gouvernat* of the *Prefet*, and Kidal's one *lycee*, built in 1996. There are in addition to the *lycee*, two secondary schools and three or four primary schools. The Islamist militants during their occupation also threatened secular schooling. Since their retreat to desert border areas after the arrival of Malian and French forces in 2013, and since peace negotiations began with

the Tuareg Azawad separatists, violence against performances and secular education has declined in scale, but has sporadically resurged.

As in many other Saharan and Sahelian towns, in Kidal there are growing socioeconomic gaps between more rural persons and the urban bourgeoisie with its technological and bureaucratic spheres of influence. These gaps between the newly emerging classes are prominent themes in many plays. On one level, some of the newer plays/sketches organized by NGOs and health and education agencies were organized as a vehicle not solely to repatriate all residents who have periodically fled conflicts, but also to encourage rural and/or nomadic Tamajaq-speaking persons who predominate in the wider Kidal region to adopt sedentarized and urban lifestyles (for example, in teaching “modern” health and education).

The point is that the past is neither completely a foreign country nor a template. While past events in this region and town contributed to shaping the creativity and aesthetics of Tuareg acting and plays, and endure as such on one level of their significance, these historic currents neither constitute all their meanings, nor dictate the present, nor overwhelm future dreams. For against this political backdrop, many actors, play plots, and aesthetic styles do not solely nostalgically address problems of vulnerability and loss but also create hope and continue to revitalize a rich local art form, conduct cultural critiques, and make recommendations for the future. The significance of these plays includes, but also transcends, a politics of vulnerability woven into an aesthetics of nostalgia and protection. As many of my interlocutors explained, “actors protect the community.” But as we shall see, this does not imply a defensive blocking out of all change or connection; rather, there is also an openness to social transformation. In other words, protecting does not imply mere preservation or salvaging. Actors’ nostalgia is for the life of their community, in the sense of drawing back together gatherings of loved ones who are dispersed.

The aesthetics of this theatrical genre of verbal art performance and acting specialty, which I call “emergent,” is at once old, new, and future-oriented, and both nostalgic and critical. Acting retains some elements from long-standing local poetry, song, folktales, and older plays, but there are also transformations and incorporations. In other words, the contemporary theatrical performances and performers present dramatic and satirical enactments of past and present predicaments. As we’ll see, in these popular cultural performances, actors recall their past heritage, comment in artful ways upon events in their community, and use their plays to suggest ways to reshape identities and relationships under duress from economic and political crises. In this respect, they continue some aspects of their older roles as moral commentators and courageous but also ideally gallant and honorable defenders of the community. They also ponder the future.

There are different bases for forming acting ensembles, and numerous sites for performances. Neighborhoods are frequently the basis of youth groups and neighborhood associations, which in turn form many of the urban theatrical performing ensembles. Other ensembles are also comprised of kinspersons and friends. Some ensembles are school-based. Private compounds of families, public centers such as the sports stadium, the radio, and the marketplace sometimes serve as play performance venues.

One popular performance venue during my research was Kidal's single lycee (high school), named for Attaher, father of Intala, the traditional *amenukal* leader of the Ifoghas during my field research residence, who, as noted, died in December 2014 and was succeeded by one of his sons, Mohamed Ag Intala. Attaher was a famous warrior against French and Arab invaders, but when French colonial administrators brought his family from Tin Essako to Kidal, he later encouraged "modern" (secular) education in the region. The first schools, however, were in Tessalit, an oasis north of Kidal where the former servile and client peoples serving the nobles lived. The aristocratic elites initially resisted these schools, viewing them as threats to their language and culture. To meet the enrollment quotas, they sent the children of slaves and smiths to schools initially (Keenan 1977). Consequently, persons of nonaristocratic social origins until recently tended to predominate in most urban civil service jobs and in media such as the radio station. But now many persons of diverse backgrounds compete for scarce salaried jobs.

Also popular have been two other sites, the *Maison du Luxembourg* and *Radio Tisdas*. The *Maison du Luxembourg*, a more modern version of an older, French colonial-built *Maison des Jeunes* (Youth House), a popular site for youths' music, plays, dancing, socializing, and job-training, was established as a community arts and continuing adult education/literacy center. It was funded by the *Cooperation de Luxembourg*. Its staff, comprised of French, Belgians, and some Tamajaq speakers during my field research on the plays, organized many events and programs, especially though not exclusively for Kidal youths, for example, training them as mechanics, electricians, and tailors, and staging concerts featuring a popular actor and comedian (*kel seghsegh*) as *animateur* or host and master of ceremonies, who presided over the music and dancing with witty repartee.

Radio *Tisdas*, the Tamajaq station, aired primarily Tuareg music, especially a genre called guitar/*ichumar*, whose origins were in Tuareg early rebels' compositions but became popular with youths more broadly since approximately the 1990s. Its outdoor stage was also a popular setting for some plays usually performed by its acting ensemble named *Tojehgames*, The Visionaries or Those Who See Far, live, broadcast, and recorded on cassettes and DVDs for lending out. This was also a social center where young people (i.e., adolescent and/or single persons and young people between marriages)

met in late afternoon or evening to chat over tea and hang out. These small groups were warmly welcoming and hospitable to me, and I joined them frequently there in between performances and transcription sessions. The radio compound's rooftop courtyard contained a refreshment stand, a stage and seats, a solar energy transmitter/receiver, and a cluster of small conical buildings housing a library, a transmission room, an audiocassette rental room, small guesthouse quarters, and the radio station director's office.

Radio Tisdas, whose name Tisdas denotes approximately a necklace beaded together, became a site of dynamic cross-currents of creativity, but also some debate, and occasional pauses in live performances from political (and later) armed conflicts. Hints of "culture wars" and rivalry across class, age, and rural/urban lines surfaced there. A few Tuareg of nonservile origin grumbled that the predominantly Bella staff there did not promote what they considered sufficiently "authentic" Tuareg performances. Some believed that the director of Radio Tisdas, a talented journalist, actor, and playwright who also worked in the mayor's office, had a conflict of interest. Although the director had formed the beloved acting ensemble called The Visionaries (or Those Who See Far) at the radio around 1996, comprised of mostly older, more experienced, and very renowned actors and comedians such as Atakor, these artists have intermittently felt intimidated from performing in times of political tensions with the national Malian army, Tuareg dissidents, and militant Islamists. I also detected economic rivalries between the radio and the *Maison du Luxembourg*: a few complained that the latter charged too much for performances.

SUM-UP OF PRELIMINARY INSIGHTS

This "setting of the scene" illuminates, in a preliminary way, the roles of actors in their theatrical plays and in their society and suggests how actors and others respond to these tensions and dangers. In informal conversations, for example, many recalled past and recent violence affecting their relatives and also expressed concern to me about the negative stereotypes of the northern regions held by some outsiders. Some were motivated to compose and perform their verbal arts by these concerns, insisting "We are not Mafia!"

In this context of crossroads, encounters, connections, and barriers, identity and belonging are asserted and disputed. As Arnoldi (1995, 2009), Beeman (1993, 2011), Cole (2001), Drewal (1991), Edmonson (2018), Hale (1999), Hoffman (1995, 2000, 2017), and Reed (2007, 2016) point out concerning other performance traditions, shifting styles, forms, and contents of performances respond to larger social conditions. Somewhat like the Ghanaian concert party described by Cole (2001, 5), the plays/sketches have a rather ambiguous status. The actors perform under a banner of shared Tuareg

cultural themes, despite the diversity within Tuareg, Kidal, and Malian society more generally, and Tuareg society clearly also participates in the latter two. Since some plays are staged within or in connection to other events, and acting roles extend beyond structured, formalized plays and characters into social life, performances also serve as forums for creation, dissemination, and contestation of past memories, current identities, and future directions.

Where do these background materials lead us in seeking a framework for understanding northern Malian Tuareg acting, actors, and plays in their own right and comparatively?

The foregoing introductory historical and ethnographic overview suggests that Tuareg acting and performances in and around Kidal in some respects emerge as rituals of modernity (Barnett 1997) and cultural performances (MacAloon 1984) in addressing past and current events and relations with the larger community and the new postcolonial bureaucratic policies in symbolic assertions of power. Although creativity in the face of oppression is prominent here, the plays will be shown to be more nuanced and layered than solely “crisis management,” of even those sharing edutainment agendas of plays elsewhere in Africa, such as in southern Mali and in South Africa (Bourgault 2003). Tuareg acting can also be fruitfully approached as social dramas promoting healing processes (Edmonson 2018; Turner 1974), and their performances, beyond during social interactions and wider social predicaments as well as during plays, as forums for embodied discourses on imagined community and nostalgic mnemonic narratives of nation (Anderson 1991; Connerton 1989; Fabian 1990; Stoller 1995, 1997). Yet these also include some forgetting and critical commentary with counseling on coping with modernity (Kapferer 1988; Handelman 1990, 1998).

Performing for Tuareg artists therefore emerges from a distinctive historical and sociopolitical context but not in isolation from wider social contexts, for there are hints of connections (in mutual influences) to other African performances, for example those by griots and other artists (Diawara 1990; Hale 1999; Hoffman 1995, 2000) in the emphasis upon verbal wit and social critique. Since most performances last for approximately forty-five minutes, they also resemble some television “soap operas” (widely called by the French term *des feuilletons*) popular throughout West Africa. Also, although many of these performances are preorganized, staged events, others are informally organized and quickly enacted, as in long-standing Tuareg verbal art practice. Their aesthetic styles, plots, and contexts draw connections between the past, present, and future concerns of many Tamajaq speakers in the Kidal and Adragh-n-Ifoghas region. Many performers and audiences, dispersed in nomadism, and increasingly also as labor migrants, refugees and exiles, nonetheless return and reassemble, reflecting upon their past, present, and future predicaments.

Also relevant to my argument throughout this book, therefore, are local social memory and subjectivities. In Africa as elsewhere, memory is selective and, like history, is “written” differently by diverse participants (Hannoum 2008; Malkki 1995; Stoller 1995, 1997; Werbner 1998), though I would add, this insight does not imply that historical events have no objective occurrence; for example, it would be a misreading of this insight to deny the occurrences of injustices and atrocities such as genocide, torture, and slavery.

Although many acting performances take place in Kidal, a town that is semi-sedentarized and “lightly urbanized” (i.e., semi-nomadic, where many residents retain close ties to rural society, and is neither heavily industrialized nor densely populated), acting and performances still in some respects retain a cultural intimacy, and embody social dramas (Turner 1974), in their attempting to resolve conflicts over micro- as well as macro-social issues in a setting where much daily life still features face-to-face encounters, spontaneous visiting, getting about on foot, and easy social interaction even between relative strangers. Yet Kidal’s population fluctuates, ebbs and flows like an ocean tide, and not all social units in Kidal are based on kinship; neighborhoods and bureaucracies are also key venues of affiliation in Kidal, and its markets, small restaurants, radio station, and (a few) entertainment venues during my research were becoming increasingly significant as sociability centers, not solely backdrops for plays but also destinations for informal gatherings of actors “offstage.” In sum, Kidal and its environs include both small-scale and larger-scale cultural formations.

Thus these performances are also more than classic social dramas: as cultural performances as well, they will be shown to actively construct mythico-historical narratives of nation that are pluralistic and disputed and, as such, are not merely reflections of social processes but also shape memories of the past and, I add, suggest agendas for the future. They are selective and subjective in both remembering of not solely trauma but also points of cultural pride and, as such, also inspire and attempt to fashion a future imagined community of Tuareg cultural unity, despite the actual conflicting and diverse values and identities of some members of that community. Hence the need to explore whose interpretations of memories and current events do these performances enact, how, and for what purpose, and to ask how successful are they, and how are they contested, in their intended messages?

The Tuareg performances are also in some other respects, as Stoller terms Songhai possession rituals, a “sensory arena of counter-memory” (Stoller 1997, 63) in their dramatic and satirical critiquing of past and current socio-economic and political experiences. But they also ponder and debate future ways of coping with these experiences. Hence the need to analyze the Tuareg performances and performers in terms of their search for new culture heroes, as they and others undertake psychosocial healing today, in efforts to both

mend social relationships and to critically discern friend from foe—whose boundaries have become blurred in the aftermath of the Tuareg rebellions and “lost” youthful generations who, since the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, alternately disperse and return (Claudot-Hawad 1996, 2002; Kohl 2009, Fischer and Kohl 2010). In other words, Tuareg acting provides a vivid terrain for reflecting on culture as both dispersed and reformulated, as both structured and emergent.

Thus these historical and ethnographic contexts lead toward an event-focused analysis centering upon constant negotiations of meaning and power systems situated in the wider society and over long-term historical and more immediate performance contexts, involving interactions among participants (performers, audience, and their social networks) that create both “ritual” and innovative “playful” meanings (Ahearn 1998; Briggs 1996; Kratz 1994). Acting offers contextually rich insights that expand meanings intertextually but also limit what would otherwise be an indeterminate number of possible meanings of any performance. Tuareg acting and theatrical plays in northern Mali as dynamic, emergent processes suggest more nuanced understandings of other modernities, that is, alternative cultural directions of modernity that are influenced by, but do not exactly replicate, western definitions of this process (Appadurai 2000, 2013; Brenner 1998; Donkor 2016; Rofel 1999).

In their contemporary as well as historical social contexts, including the northern Malian space, these performances challenge as well as selectively reproduce cultural ideologies of power, for example social stratum/class, gender, and age distinctions and religious and moral ideologies. For example, some conflicts exist between long-standing prevalent (Sufi-influenced) Tuareg cultural mores, local interpretations of Islam, and pan-Islamist reformist piety values concerning the public conduct of women and men and persons of different social backgrounds, concerning relative modesty in dress and gestures. Acting constructs alternate understandings, through both mnemonic devices and future guidance of social and religious practices for women and men of different ages and social backgrounds. Tuareg actors deploy their art, both during and outside performances, toward ends of both peacemaking and resistance. In effect, actors are liminal figures who walk a delicate “tightrope” of power.

Chapter 2

Situating Acting and Creativity in Culture, Place, and Memory

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE *IBARADEN* ACTORS AND THEIR PLAYS IN TIME AND SPACE

Most *ibaraden* actors in and around the town of Kidal perform two main types of plays: those that derive from rural life and older verbal art (such as folktales), and those that emerge from urban life with performance styles and plot themes encouraged by state and regional bureaucracies. Actors and nonactors alike view this art as revitalizing their ideas of local history and culture and these performers as protectors of their society, though actors also subtly critique, in and beyond their performances, aspects of their own history and culture.

Although highly skilled in verbal art composition and performance, actors are not, in their own or others' viewpoints, griots (also called bards). In many parts of West Africa, in particular the Sahel and Sahara, griots/bards comprise an inherited and endogenous occupational stratum based on descent (Hale 1999; Hoffman 1995, 2000). Some Tuareg groups use the services of griots and smith/artisans in verbal art performances, but these specialists use very different genres and styles and perform for very different purposes and in separate contexts from actors' theatrical play performances. Some rural aristocratic Kel Ewey Tuareg families in northern Niger, for example, and their client smith/artisans perform praise songs with witty double entendres at each others' rites of passage, and their client-patron social relationships are similar to those between aristocrats and griots in neighboring communities (Albaka and Casajus 1997; Casajus 2000; Rasmussen 2013a).

Actors' identities and roles in performing art and in social life are therefore complex. Some *ibaraden* do claim genealogical descent from warriors, "tributaries" of the *imghad* social category in the precolonial stratified

system. Yet not all *imghad* are actors, and unlike griots or smiths, actors in northern Mali are not formally, officially, or rigidly attached today to specific aristocratic families there, and actors may include persons of diverse social backgrounds. Although some Tuareg families have produced several famous actors, other kin in the same family do not necessarily act. Some actors' life histories confirmed literal descent from *imghad* tributaries. However, I found that this sense of belonging was often expressed metaphorically, in the sense of taking inspiration from those early heroes. The tributaries, who traditionally fought, traded for, and protected and lauded their "noble" *imajeghen* overlords thus approximately resemble some other performing artists in stratified societies such as griots in southern Mali (Diawara 1990; Hale 1999; Hoffman 1995, 2000; McNaughton 1987), and beyond Africa as well, for example also *bhats* of India (Snodgrass 2006), and troubadours of medieval Europe (Casajus 2013). But the *ibaraden* actors are not equivalent to them, for several reasons.

First, Tuareg use separate Tamajaq terms to refer to actors and griots. Also, I found that these *ibaraden* actors differ markedly in their own and other local residents' viewpoints, from casted griots and other verbal art specialists of more strictly inherited and endogamous social categories. Many actors, audiences, and others distinguish actors by asserting that griots and smiths use more overt and personal sharp criticisms, in addition to their performance of praise. Of course this assertion expresses subjective emic opinions. Although I observed that, in some of their performances, the *ibaraden* do in fact conduct much critical social commentary, what is interesting and cannot be ignored is that they themselves and their audiences insist that actors, in contrast to griots, do not have as their goal the shaming of their audiences or other individual members of their community. Rather, the actors' goal is to protect and warn the community. When I discussed their origins and roles with them, virtually all actors emphatically asserted, "We are not like griots!" Nonactors concurred on this point. I find these subjective interpretations of distinctions not necessarily indisputable "facts" but rather of interest as locally meaningful contrasts, more useful than neat definitions, classifications, or circular debates over whether or not *ibaraden* are griots. Also, there were overwhelming denials, by everyone I asked, of mutual influences, even through trade and migrations. Actors, in other words, appeal to their own history, whether literally true or metaphorical, for inspiration.

More obvious distinctions are noticeable. Most *ibaraden* also differ in their (ideal) conduct from griots' and smiths' styles of license and lack of reserve (*takarakit*) (Casajus 2000; McNaughton 1997). The actors valorize and usually practice aristocratic ideals of dignity (*imojagh*, related etymologically to "noble") and honor (*escheck*).

Moreover, although griots and smiths also perform oral art, these specialists tend to occupy more ambiguous social statuses, formerly “subordinate” or outside the Tuareg descent groups, and they are regarded much more ambivalently than actors: for example, griots tend to be equated more with journalists (Hale 1999), and smith/artisans are widely believed to possess certain superhuman spiritual/ritual powers (Rasmussen 2013a). Like some other verbal art performers elsewhere, for example the *bhats* in India (Snodgrass 2006), the Tuareg *ibaraden* cannot be easily classified linguistically or socially, thus reflecting the negotiability rather than rigidity of hierarchies in their wider communities.

In other words, although I did find some overlap in all these specialists’ roles, importantly, this was not in clear-cut or rigid familial or social stratum origins or marriage patterns. Moreover, another difference I found is that when the *ibaraden* supplement praise with criticism, they tend to do so more subtly and indirectly through dramatic and satirical play plots, not directly, and actors did not, at least during the time I studied them, sing praise songs at rites of passage, in contrast to griots and smith/artisans in some neighboring groups. Perhaps these nuanced overlaps and distinctions reflect the more general fluidity and transformations occurring in Tuareg society.

Thus perfect closure concerning *ibaradan* class identity is neither possible nor productive here. But crucially, unlike traditional griot and smith/artisan traditional statuses, one is not born an actor. *Ibaraden* are not endogamous, and thus not truly “casted” in the strict sense, nor are they considered a unitary social stratum today, though they may have once been a specialized occupational group within the *imghad* social category of client warriors subordinate to, but having certain rights and privileges such as portions of war booty from, noble conquerers. Anyone from any social background who has talent can, and does, become an actor now. Although as noted, some *ibaraden* in northern Mali belong to the Kel Essouk maraboutique clan, most identify strongly with the *imghad* warriors, who in the past were assigned to fight for and protect Ifoghas noble men and were permitted to court (if not marry), praise, and protect noble women.

Actors also work part of the time at other occupations, such as herding and mechanics, and I even encountered one whose “day job” was as a nurse. Both women and men may become actors, though for reasons explored later, men have recently tended to dominate acting in the new or “modern” play/sketch performances. Some actors I met were already famous poets or singers who converted poems, monologues, and older oral histories and traditional tales into play plots; others composed new “modern” plays/sketches for nongovernmental organizations, other aid agencies, state institutions, and individuals requesting them, and a few did both.

Given these complexities, the *ibaraden*, like some more explicitly casted bards in other stratified societies, more broadly open up new perspectives for anthropologists by challenging either extreme conception of their society as, on the one hand, rigidly hierarchical and bound to the past, and on the other, as a society where there is no memory whatever of the local cultural past, as a modern global place just like any other modern global place (Appadurai 2000, 2013; Hannerz 2010).

Following local subjectivities and my own experiences and observations, therefore, I attempt more broadly to convey nuances of social relationships and aesthetic and creative practices while also maintaining, as Snodgrass (2006, 39) terms it in his ethnography of *bhat* bards in India, “analytical precision that does justice, hopefully, to culture not as a closed system, but as a place in both human imagination and in everyday practice.”

In evoking past “traditions,” but also reworking them into visions of the future, somewhat like the performances and narratives of Mande (Arnoldi 1995; Diawara 1990; Hoffman 2000) and Dan in Côte d’Ivoire (Reed 2007), Tuareg performances in northern Mali address actions that may depart from long-standing practices, that is, plays do not commemorate strictly in the sense of repeating exactly the older Tuareg cultural patterns. Sometimes, for example, at festivals, when plays are performed in alternation or sequentially with musical concerts, their goals are complementary: both often exhort youths to remember and reenact the deeds of their heroic ancestors who repelled invaders, as also related in etiological mythico-histories, but also exhort audience members to “modernize,” for example by attending school, finding new jobs, and going to the hospital for health care. The *ibaraden* in their roles facilitate this connection to modernity in a local subjectivity by inspiring themselves and their audiences with past Tuareg mores and deeds.

But most plays are critical, as well. Many play plots—whether performed at these festivals or alone away from them on other occasions (requested by individuals, families, schools, or hospital/clinics)—also debate and sometimes transform historical consciousness and social practice; for example, the meanings of past social stigmas and taboos, such as teaching elders, may be reiterated or challenged. Other plot themes present contradictions: they deplore departures from an idealized past, for example youths’ alleged disobeying of parents. Also present in the themes are wider political critiques, for example allusions to uneven “development” of the different regions of Mali. Thus the plays act as both “ostension” (Lash 2009) or reenactments, even “recreation of re-creation” (Pinder 2006) of mythico-history and memory, but more as well: as narratives of hope for the future, thereby crossing space and time.

The performances of the *ibaraden* actors are fascinating because they simultaneously reflect and address wider social changes and debates and thus

express nostalgia for cultural autonomy, survival, and uniqueness but not rigid “primordial” identity; for they also propose future adaptations to changes and often encourage valuing of encounters, unless those processes are perceived by composers and actors as endangering the community, which they should protect as “courageous and prominent persons.” Central to these roles is the meaning of creativity in Tuareg verbal arts aesthetics more generally.

CREATIVE INSPIRATION TO PERFORM IN THE SPACE OF *ESSUF/TENERE*

Basic to the much creativity in Tamajaq verbal arts is a key cultural concept, a recurrent spatial image throughout much Tuareg popular religion, philosophy, conversation, and aesthetics that has both literal and abstract senses, called *essuf* (or *teneré* in some dialects) in its older sense, central to local ritual healing, denoting approximately the desert wild, empty spaces, solitude, and nostalgia and their spirits, called the Kel Essuf. Yet importantly, this is also a space of creativity (Hawad 1978; Rasmussen 1995, 2008).

Isatsa or theater, etymologically deriving from a burst of laughter, and *teneré* or *essuf*, deriving from an affliction, the solitude of loneliness in the desert wild, appear on first scrutiny to be incompatible. Yet they are aesthetically related, complementary rather than binary oppositions. The question is, how does inspiration from *essuf/teneré* evolve into theatrical plays, some dramatic but others comic? One must realize that, despite the suffering of isolation in *essuf*, from which most wish to escape and return to civilization and sociality, this space also enables thoughtful reflection and ultimately pulls the performer back into community.

As an employee at an NGO agency who frequently attended play performances put it, “We Tuareg are inspired to create poetry, song, and plays in vast, empty spaces because this makes one thoughtful. Often, this evokes sad thoughts, for example, a small child who died of malnutrition.”

This experience of creativity, which often emerges from suffering or at least from being powerfully touched by an experience, was also illustrated in the tragic experience of a man in a rural area whose fiancé married another man while he was away on caravan trading. He was considered a fine poet, but recited his poems only in the wild, away from villages and camps. Although poetry performances away from villages and camps are common among age mates, this man was also widely considered to be permanently insane from his grief, since he wandered about half-dressed and empty-eyed, did not veil his face as customary for Tuareg men, in ordinary conversations allegedly spoke “words that did not make any sense,” and disappeared for long time periods.

Also illustrative of these connections between suffering and creative inspiration is the name of a popular guitar band based in and around Kidal: Tinariwen, the plural form of *tenere*, in the Tadarit dialect of Tamajaq denoting like *essuf* “desert” as well as “wild,” “solitude,” and “nostalgia.” The origin of this name and reason for the performers’ frequent use of this image in their music is tragic: when one musician in this band returned to his nomadic camp around the time of the 1990s rebellion in northern Mali, he found his family murdered by militia. The same musician sometimes enters a *tenere/essuf*-based trance, that spirit affliction of the heart and soul, when he composes his songs (Rasmussen 2008, 619).

The life and career of Tekres, the prominent female composer, actor, singer, and founder of the local acting ensemble called Joy, also illustrated the “Janus-headed” quality of creativity. Tekres was at least partly inspired to produce plays for youths and to help youths by her own past traumas as an adolescent who, as already noted, was forced to sing for military commanders during the 1963 violence in and around Kidal. Later, her acting ensemble grew from competitions between neighborhood teams of artists. Often described by locals and actors in this ensemble as “president” (French term *la presidente* used for founder), Tekres was talented and renowned, a social activist as well as a singer, composer, poet, and actor. There are about fifteen adult men and women actors in Joy and about eight younger men and women actors in Joy’s youth wing, who are adolescents and in their early twenties (culturally defined as still “youths” since they are not yet married, fully employed, or independent property owners). Tekres and her family were very kind and hospitable to me, and she generously shared with me many insights into her art and life.

Tekres’s Story

Tekres considers herself first of all an artist or *kel isuha*. She primarily sings, and Joy was in the past mostly musical, but this ensemble now also performs plays/sketches she specified, “with just words and dialogue” but not music (i.e., in contrast to American musicals, in Tuareg plays music and song are not interspersed with dialogues but are an altogether separate genre performed apart from plays). Tekres is a widow and divorcee, born around 1949, of *imghad* (fem. sing., *tamghit*; masc. sing., *amghit*) tributary social background, in a small clan called Tarat Mellet. She married several times and had eight children. Her discussion of acting and her own life and work yielded rich insights into her sources of creativity, her advocacy for local residents, and her simultaneously critical and mediating position in the community.

Originally from Agelhok in the Adragh-n-Ifoghas Mountains, Tekres came to Kidal as a young girl. Her parents were not performers. She insisted that

“anyone can be a comedian *kel setsegh*, anyone who is witty and jokes. The acting of *ibaraden* (by contrast) combines different verbal and nonverbal skills.” Tekres founded the Joy acting ensemble when she saw neighborhood associations forming performing ensembles. At first, as noted, Joy mostly performed traditional songs, but later, since around 2000, Joy began granting requests from the youth center, Radio Tisdas, and Kidal’s small hospital for more contemporary edutainment performances also called in French “*des manifestations*” to raise consciousness on current issues, such as health and education.¹ *Tilwat Jeunesse* or Youth Joy (its name a mix of Tamajaq and French terms) is comprised of mostly Tekres’s children and their friends, who perform plays that she composes.

Her adult Joy ensemble has also performed in Belgium. There, before international audiences, Tilwat performed more traditional Tuareg music and songs, not plays/sketches. This choice was very significant, for it indicates that for many, “traditional” or “authentic” Tamajaq theater consisted of primarily poetry, music, and song, and for them, many plays/sketches do not fall into this category. Perhaps Tekres had been traumatized by her early experiences of being forced to perform for an occupying force in languages other than her own. At any rate, Tuareg music tends to be more often performed internationally than plays; in particular, the modern “rock” bands such as Tinariwen are more famous than acting ensembles outside Mali. According to Tekres, “a sketch/play involves consciousness raising and conversation (i.e., dialogue and lines). Their purpose is to relate the experience of youth (*tichumera*).” To Tekres,

an *abarad* (actor) is a brave or courageous person who seeks (i.e., searches for some goal; seeks to do something). Actors do that. There are many actors here: some from the Kel Essouk (maraboutique clan), some from the Ifoghas nobles, and many from nobles’ tributaries (*imghad* social origin). Their motivation is to relate their experience, since they have lived in very difficult times.

She described her criteria for a good sketch/play:

People (audiences) must receive a serious message. Older (performing) specialists usually give me ideas, and others complete them. Since my childhood, I have sung. I learned plays/sketches as I listened to others. I began (my career) by singing nomads’ songs in the countryside. There are numerous changes in dialogue: older traditions include themes based on, and directed from, our ancestors: poems and tales.

These older plays, called *tenzoghén*, often tell of ancient battles, for example the origin of nearby Essouk-Tademeket and its rock art, and also discuss moral issues, such as the need to beware of, but also forgive, thieves.

Tenzoghen, in other words, are play compositions based upon legends and epics from the past; they can make people laugh or can be serious.

Modern plays widely called *des sketches*, Tekres explained, “are (by contrast) are based on actual current events, but forbidden subjects for us are love and sex, since marabouts disapprove of their open discussion. The role of *Kel Isuha* artists in society is “to please people, earn a livelihood, and educate on serious matters, for artists must bring something to society, also.”

She elaborated:

Actors usually perform the *tenzoghen* plays with traditional themes that are organized by families in neighborhood spaces and inside household compounds. The other *tisiwey*, popularly also called sketches, are performed in more open public spaces: at the stadium, at youth centers, and broadcast on the radio. Some plays are composed with an idea of the plot and dialogue in advance, though there can be changes if the composer finds others in his/her ensemble have a good idea, during rehearsal, in discussion, and accepts them.

During a *Tilwat Jeunesse* rehearsal I observed, Tekres dictated the script orally to actors and singers. The actors in the ensemble learned their lines (words) orally by rote memory. They sat in a circle on the floor inside her house and rehearsed informally. Tekres sometimes interjected comments and prompted them. They did not rehearse with dress or props.

Over time, I learned more details about Tekres’s eventful life and rich art and how they were connected. She had won many prizes and much recognition for her advocacy of youth-related concerns, and she often received honors because of her contributions to youth-focused programs such as job training. Tekres expressed much concern about, and had been involved in, many efforts to assist abandoned children and was active in an association in Kidal promoting searches for missing children. She often played cards with her adolescent children and their friends, to keep them busy and at home until they returned to school and/or found jobs. She had informally adopted the son of a sister who resided in Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

Tekres described her trip to Brussels, Belgium in 2002 for the International Voices of Women Festival. This was held at the Grande Place, an elegant site of medieval artisan trade guilds, and had the purpose of supporting women in countries where there are wars and other upheavals and where there are missing children.

She related:

A car took us from the Charles De Gaulle airport to Brussels. There were international songs, foods, and music at the Brussels festival. (But) this was also a sad (rather than entirely happy) occasion. Many women wore on their bodices photos of disappeared and/or missing children and still did not know whether

they were alive. Some children have been abandoned, others kidnapped into slavery. This also happened here in Mali during the May 2006 attack, when many families fled from Kidal and lost children. We have found some of them, and (authorities) have arrested those who took advantage of children.

Tekres also described her own youth:

“I spent my early childhood in the countryside. My parents, like many Tuareg in the past, opposed secular schools,” she explained one day as we listened to a Radio Tisdas play broadcast encouraging girl’s education. “Many Tuareg tend to mistrust girls’ education, from fear of censuses, taxes, destruction of their culture, and in the case of girls, sexual harassment by some teachers.”

More traumatic for Tekres personally were her memories of some Malian army units’ forced performances during her adolescence, but she elaborated on this to me in some detail. In the early 1960s, a former Kidal military commander in the Kidal region who rounded up Tekres and other Tuareg girls in the countryside, separating them from their parents and nomadic camps, brought them to Kidal at gunpoint and ordered Tekres and the other girls to sing songs in Mande (Bamana), Bobo, and Songhai, forbidding performance in their first language, Tamajaq.

Thus some performances were associated with oppression and fear in some performers’ memories. Beyond personal traumas, however, there was also a motive to prevent further language endangerment, a problem many Tuareg point out as an important reason for cultural organizations of any kind. All these events undoubtedly shaped, and were reflected in, Tekres’s art and her advocacy for uprooted children.

Yet Tekres, like most local residents, yearned for peace, as suggested in one of Tekres’s later marriages to a Bambara civil servant, whose children from his other wives continued to sometimes stay in Tekres’s home and to act in her plays. Household members I met were multilingual, but they spoke mostly Tamajaq, self-identified as culturally Tuareg, and dressed and ate in ways distinctive to Tuareg (for example, household men wore the face-veil, women were generally not veiled, they consumed some dishes served in mostly Tuareg families, such as couscous and *tagele*, wheat served with a broth, and they practiced the important social ritual of tea drinking). Hence Tekres’s practicing of activism, even subtle resistance, and accommodation.

Not all personal experiences need be tragic to inspire creativity, but they must provoke a strong emotional response. For some *ibaraden* actors, inspiration for creativity consisted of being “seized” or “struck” by some event or person and their response to it. One actor in Kidal, for example, was impressed by an elder in a rural area who related a tale to him with gestures, and he converted that tale into a play.



Figure 2.1 Performing gestures, important skills in both folktales and plays. *Source:* Photo taken by Author.

Another actor and composer explained that “while walking around, I see a lot happening, and that gives me ideas: I take an object, person, or event, and expand on it. Sometimes I also find themes in nostalgic dreams, for example one I had about a young girl I miss.”

Ahoulou’s Insights

Another talented actor, poet, and founder of the local acting ensemble called *Imesli-n-Tenere* or Voices of the Desert, whom I’ll call Ahoulou, about twenty-six years old, also provided detailed insights into inspiration for his creativity. Ahoulou was born around In Bolal in the Tamesna region, and his parents were also actors. When young, while the family resided and worked in Algeria, he saw his parents’ plays/sketches, became interested, and began some compositions from poems, and also began performing plays actively. In addition to his art, Ahoulou assisted his father and other relatives with overland truck commerce of produce and appliances between Tamanrasset and Kidal. Later, he became disturbed by the dispersion of Tuareg from their communities during regional upheavals.

Some of Ahoulou’s works are very personal, inspired by his feelings of loneliness and nostalgia, as shown in one brief but poignant monologue he performed as a “one-character” play. He began that monologue, with miming gestures conveying his sentiments as a man alone in the desert whose friends have abandoned him (Figure 2.1). He lamented, “It is like a drought. Tuareg

are all dispersed. We need to return to the Sahara and be together.” Ahoulou gestured in anguish, placing his hands on his head, as he spoke. He asserted: “Even though the drought is over, we are still all dispersed, in wars, exile, work in other countries. . . . We need to return to our home communities and be together.”

In effect, for Ahoulou, the image of drought conveys not only literal desiccation and death but also the figurative drying up of community and social relationships. He lamented, “People tend to stereotype (us) northern Malians as bandits, though most of us are not!” This sentiment—widely held, but not always so explicitly stated—was what motivated Ahoulou and his ensemble to perform some sketches/plays for me. Ahoulou sometimes composed and performed plays independently and sometimes specifically for agencies and festivals.

Ahoulou described a play/sketch as like “a file, like a message to transmit. A good play is clear. In the beginning, there is metaphor or allusion (*tangalt*), but at the end, there should be clarity (*tedit*).” Sometimes he converted poems into plays with brief remarks, as above, monologue-style, and sometimes he composed a play’s dialogue in a plot directly without any preceding remarks. Then he gathered his ensemble (friends, whom he described as “like a team”) together to act in a sketch. Actors in his ensemble discussed this, but Ahoulou directed from his idea. Ahoulou’s works vary in length, the plays usually about forty-five minutes long, the monologues, about five to ten minutes.

Here, the boundaries between composing a poem, a tale, a monologue, and a play’s dialogues and plot are not always rigid. For some performers, one can lead to another. This form of creativity is not, however, typical of the newer plays often called *des sketches*, which are requested and organized by official organizations, and sometimes composed by the same artist who also sometimes composes more independently—even in a condition of *essuff/tenere*—from personal inspiration.

In fact, in addition to his more personal compositions, Ahoulou also composed additional plays for less personal and more “official” bureaucratic purposes. These plays, whose plots and wider social contexts I discuss in later chapters, included one called “Girls’ Education,” which promoted nomads’ support of girls’ schooling, and was performed at the end of the vacation and the rainy season; another, entitled “The False Marabout,” which critiqued charlatans who make false diagnoses of illnesses for financial gain; and another, called “Go to the Hospital,” which encouraged ill persons to seek biomedical care, until recently feared by many Tuareg (Rasmussen 2001, 2006).

Poets, composers, actors, and many other performers therefore often conceptualize their arts in terms of personal experience of *essuff/tenere* (the wild, the desert, and more abstractly, nostalgia or loneliness), and this initial inward

inspiration can evolve into *isatsa* theater, sometimes comic, sometimes dramatic. But more collaborative improvisation with other artists also can occur, and also, outside bureaucratic commissioning of some other plays also occurs. The long-standing concept of *essuf* or *tenere* nonetheless remains central to much contemporary Tuareg creativity and aesthetics. Ahoulou clearly felt profound loneliness upon finding youths gone from his village in political exile, refugee flight, and labor migration. He explained: “This sentiment of solitude or nostalgia prompted me to compose monologues and later (convert them into) dialogues, some of which I (then) transposed into modern sketches.”

This is one way Ahoulou and other performers redefine *essuf/tenere* as a state of political exile and call on others to return from it and join peace and repatriation processes. In this context, some actors associated *essuf/tenere* not with creativity but rather with a negative, antisocial space of resistance to peace negotiations and pacts/accords; for some dissidents continue to resist reconciliation. As powerful as it is, this concept has changing connotations and uses which reveal the dilemma felt by many over representing and speaking for much broader communities, who are not always equally represented or consensual. There can be a conflict between earlier meanings of *essuf/tenere* in healing and composing and the meanings intended by more recent poets, musicians, and actors such as Ahoulou, who expressed subtle resistance to policies and conditions causing refugee flight and social dislocation, when these artists are commissioned to compose and perform for official organizations with different goals, such as the conflation of repatriation with coerced sedentarization rather than social harmony.

CREATIVITY AS EMERGENT AND SUBJECTIVE

Fundamental to understanding creativity and aesthetics, therefore, is a focus upon both subjective personal ideas and wider social/cultural contexts of practice (Ahearn 1998). Also, how, exactly, do playwrights, actors, and audiences feel about their art and their community during and beyond the performances? Somewhat like actors in performing, an anthropologist in doing ethnography must make an effort to “enter character,” so to speak. Close attention to the emergence of multiple processes, contexts, and voices enriches understanding of creative acts in ethnographic portrayals more generally. There is always need to pay attention to nuanced dimensions of this process, in relation to each other, and not reduce creative inspiration to an “either/or” case of emphasizing solely the individual cognitive process or solely the social group or institution.

Subjective personal feelings do not exclude social interaction or collaboration. Even individually recognized creativity is embedded in a wider context

(Bilton 2007; Han 2010, 166). In the Tuareg case, there are elements of both more individualist and collaborative inspiration in creativity. In between these two poles resides a creative terrain where these forces alternate in influence, depending upon the context or phase of creativity and the genre of the work.

Tuareg women singers vividly illustrate this process, for they compose with ideas they learn from their mothers, on the radio, by attending festivals, or during nomadism while out at pasture—the latter a relatively secluded place, inhabited by spirits. Although all Tamajaq verbal art genres ultimately go back to individual composers and provide a forum for individual agency and assertion of power—either through social commentary that ideally warns and thereby protects the community, or simply through the respect and renown given the artist, regardless of social background, sex, or age—nonetheless, organized public performances of many plays, songs, and poems have been carefully orchestrated. They are traditionally performed at festivals designed to encourage flirting, courtship, and conversation, but not necessarily sexual relations or marriage, between persons originally of different social statuses who were not supposed to marry.

How does it feel for the artist to experience this world in continuity and change? The world for many Tuareg includes a yearning for community and concern with the breakdown of social mores, but also critiques of some long-standing mores, and seeking both personal respect and cultural survival and at least, semi-autonomy. On the one hand, the performance context and audience are important. There is a willingness on the part of the composer at some points in the creative process to consult with close kin, age mates, members of the same acting ensemble, or friends. On the other hand, some composers, in particular poets—whether locally defined as “normal” or as “insane”—begin their works either alone in the desert or only before one’s age mates because there is less reserve needed in this context and relationship than with elders, religious scholars, and affines.

In Tuareg verbal art—especially acting, poetry, and singing—the creative process tends to be somewhat more individualistic than in some other African communities (Arnoldi 1995, 2009; Diawara 1990; Reed 2007). But this process in other contexts can be more collaborative, depending on performers’ relationships to those present. Like some traditional play performances’ origins in often spontaneous reflections, such as Ahoulou’s more personal creations, musical genres can sometimes occur spontaneously and in public, interwoven with wider social events. Women’s *tende* singing (accompanied by the mortar drum also called by that name) illustrates this point: as with plays before their official organizing and sponsorship by wider bureaucracies, this is not always a formally staged festival but can include spontaneous or extemporaneous conversations and social commentary, in response to specific social predicaments.

A combination of both individual and collaborative elements of creativity also appears in the musical spirit possession exorcism, a ritual and a performance at once, which features the *tende* mortar drum, its genre called *tende-n-goumaten* or “*tende* of the *goumaten* spirits.” The friend who invited me to attend that ritual for the first time described this as “a small musical gathering” on the outskirts of town. These rituals are often organized on the spur of the moment for a woman suffering from what is termed *tamazai*, approximately denoting “depression.” Songs and drums addressed the spirits, thereby suggesting some inspiration alone in the wild, a superhuman spiritual ritual source of creative power. But more obliquely, the Tuareg possession songs addressed the spirits possessing the woman in trance and her social relationships and problems, and the possessed could express spirits’ preference for certain songs over others through hand gestures directed at the chorus, thereby introducing both collaborative (social and spiritual) and individualist creativity. Recall how, in this ritual/performance featuring music therapy earlier alluded to in the opening pages of this book, musicians/healers also briefly responded to our presence by reshaping the songs into a special performance acknowledging us, departing from their performance frame and song texts, inserting comments reacting to me into the ritual. They wove my own name into some verses, improvising jokes and incorporating them into the possession songs.

In contemporary performances, Tuareg singers in Mali and Niger indicated that recently there is greater flexibility concerning words, one is no longer obligated to repeat them according to older forms of prosody, and noble descent groups no longer hold “copyrights” over certain poetic scansion or drum patterns as they once did in the past. Each singer may invent her own songs, with any drum pattern or *anzad* pattern (a bowed, one-stringed lute). Yet most performers agree that song quality still depends on rapport between the singers and the instrumentalist.

Performances can therefore emerge from an artist’s observations of and reactions to the immediate, as well as the long-term, social context but morph into more collaborative practices. Whether in the genre of medico-ritual healing, songs, poems, or plays, there is often the objective of creative, witty critique. This was shown vividly in another type of *tende* drumming musical performance, which occurred spontaneously during my visit to friends, two sisters from Kidal who, like Atakor the actor, had fled northern Mali to Niamey, Niger during the drought and violence of the 1960s but who had permanently settled there. As men in their courtyard played cards and drank tea, these sisters hosting the event and few women friends began a good-natured but critical debate on relations between the sexes. A wedding was coming up, and marriage was the topic of conversation. Soon this became a heated yet humorous debate. One man present had contracted several polygynous

marriages, and announced that he was considering another. To the sisters, one of whom had a small daughter of about four years old at that time, he said teasingly, “I hope your family will save your pretty little daughter for me to marry when she grows up.” Among themselves and to me, women had often expressed their disapproval of some urban Tuareg men’s polygyny, insisting, “Polygynists do not respect women!”

On that day, near their male audience in the compound, the women improvised a *tende* drum with an empty jerry-can, began drumming and, smiling coyly at the polygynist, inserted his name into their teasing yet sharply critical song verses—in effect, indirectly warning him not to subject one of their daughters to co-wife status. This spontaneous creative performance had a striking (if delayed) effect: years later, the same women gleefully related to me how this man, once polygynous, was now single, for every wife eventually divorced him!

Like many other Tuareg women, these sisters who settled in Niamey, Niger faced a dilemma: although most vehemently oppose polygyny, most have lost sources of wealth. It is tempting for poorer families to marry their daughters to more prosperous men. Women who “marry up” often reside in more materially comfortable conditions, but at the same time there is the likelihood that their husband will acquire a second wife for reasons of prestige and integration into the towns and settled oases, where polygyny is more widespread.

SUM-UP

These examples, incidents, cases, and histories vividly illustrate how Tuareg verbal art aesthetics are often prompted by and used to reveal subjective feelings—for example, about social double-binds, as expressed through voices both in performance and in conversation. Different “frames” or “registers” can become merged, and this can occur in acting both within the play performance frame and beyond it in sociability, indeed, as in other folklore (Bauman 1992, 1993, 2004). But frames, registers, and genres in comparative perspective can be fluid and, in local classifications, do not correspond neatly to western concepts or individual versus collectivity. Across many genres of Tamajaq verbal art, including acting, much very personal creativity becomes enacted collectively, in a social context, but this often arises in the creator’s own subjective consciousness beforehand, sometimes emerging in poems and monologues in more private settings: in the figurative psychological wild of critical reflection, even resistance, in the literal wild away from the community initially or, at other times, amidst a small group of intimate friends—very subjectively, as a critical reaction to seeing or hearing something.

Yet following this inspiration, the ensuing creative process is not entirely individualistic, for in later phases, there is much collaborative creativity with the group. Like the possession ritual chorus and the women drummers and singers, actors build their art on both individual and social contexts, thereby breaking down this binary opposition. The act of creativity is neither rigidly individualistic nor entirely in a group. Tuareg verbal arts have aesthetic, social, and political significance simultaneously. This may be a near-universal attribute, but importantly, this has distinctive cultural meanings locally which are less obvious until contextualized.

Tuareg acting and other verbal arts, each in their own manner and context, evoke but also refashion the past for present and future cultural concerns. In acting, these processes are revealed in this art's immediate context and in the wider social and professional lives of the performers and audiences "offstage" over more long term.

NOTE

1. The program of democratization in Mali, popularly described as "decentralization," was formally implemented between 2000 and 2002, but its impetus over the long term was the 1980s restructuring by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, whose policies in Mali and elsewhere in Africa included conditions imposed on countries for loans and aid which mandated a cutting of budgets and withdrawal or diminishing of central state governments' support in areas of health, education, and social welfare. The withdrawal of these supporting infrastructures encouraged more privatization and alternatives to government employment and assistance, for example nongovernmental organizations, but often left gaps in social and other services and resulted in a private-sector economy not able to serve everyone. There has been some disagreement among anthropologists, economists, and political scientists (see Grosz-Ngate, Hanson, and O'Meara 2014; Martin and O'Meara 1998; Masquelier 2009) concerning the often mixed effects of these policies. Although some persons have benefited economically, many have become poorer, and new consumer products are not affordable to many. Masquelier (2009) for example, discusses the connections, in central Niger's Hausa-speaking Mawri communities, between disillusionment with economic lack of opportunity and Islamic reformist/revival movements there.

Chapter 3

The Poetics and Politics of Aesthetic Style and Genre and the *Ibaraden* Actors

IBARADEN ROLES IN ACTING AND IN SOCIETY

Acting among the Tuareg is characterized by both fluidity and specialization. Many of the newer Tamajaq plays, sometimes called sketches, feature performers glossed in the Tadart dialect of Tamajaq as *ibaraden*, locally explained, as noted, as “the brave (or courageous) notable (or prominent) ones.” A few acting specialists who perform singly in comic routines and tale-telling with gestural miming, as well as in plays with acting ensembles, are called *kel seghsegh* (denoting approximately “the people of play, joking or humor,” or “people who provoke laughter,” approximately “comedian” or as noted, “jester”). The *kel seghsegh* sub-specialty belong to the category of *ibaraden*, but tend to be older. They still inspire many younger *ibaraden* actors, but the latter now tend to dominate in new plays organized by officials.

Yet the picture is more complex, for there is also much overlap between them; some actors identify as both, and both may sometimes act in the same plays. Thus the *ibaraden* and *kel seghsegh* roles resemble but are not exactly equivalent to Euro-American performers in English glossed as “actors” and “comics.” The translation here, as with other specialists across languages and cultures, is approximate. The same performer may be both a *kel seghsegh* and an *abarad* and may perform alone and/or in an ensemble, though the *ibaraden* active in the modern plays/sketches organized by official agencies are tending to become more specialized because state (French and Malian) and urban (settled, sedentarized) bureaucracies tend to project outside concepts of “actor” onto the traditionally flexible Tuareg verbal art genre categories. The actors in the newer urban ensembles, most of whom tend to be in their late teens or early twenties, can act in both dramatic and satirical plays.

In Kidal, there are about twenty known acting ensembles, and some actors also spend part of their time herding and gardening in surrounding rural areas. Not solely performing artists but also nonspecialist audiences now clearly distinguish between the plays/sketches and the older “ancestral” verbal art genres. The older poetry, tales, and jokes tend to be those performed by the *kel seghsegh*. Although some more established *kel seghsesgh* also act in ensembles along with the predominantly younger *ibaraden*, significantly, even when they do not, younger actors and audiences say they have inspired them. In other words, many actors in the new plays continue to respect the older specialists, even as they modify the older meanings of acting. But as shown in the comments of Atakor, who considered the newer plays to be not as “pretty” as the older plays, there are hints of a generation gap and “unrequited love” in their relationships.

The newer theatrical plays/sketches are considered by many local audiences and actors as “modern.” The acting ensembles specializing in them have emerged recently, a phenomenon of settled and urban life and encounters with authorities in the towns. Some of these new sketch/play performances emerged from policies of sedentarization of nomads and intermittent repatriation of refugees.

Actors, acting, and plays therefore cannot be understood apart from the more general history of Tuareg verbal art performances. I agree with Reed (2007, 107) here, that it is necessary to follow local consultants’ and assistants’ leads for a genre, rather than deploying this as a concept with a fixed meaning; rather, genre is something that changes and is negotiated over time (Bauman 2004). Also like Reed (2016, 25) and Bauman (2004, 3), I intend the term genre to refer to an order of style, “a constellation of systematically related, co-occurrent formal features and structures that serves as a conventionalized orienting framework for the production and reception of discourse.” Until recently, Tuareg verbal performing arts were not separate from social life, and the various genres of verbal art performance, while designated with distinct terms in Tamajaq, were often not isolated but rather overlapping. Yet different specialties were once the province of different groups. In the past, different genres, styles, and musical instruments were associated with different social strata (Ag Soliman 1999; Card 1978; Borel 1990; Casajus 2000; Albaka and Casajus 1997). Yet skills at poetry, song, and informal witty conversation and jokes, as well as gestures or mime, have always been highly admired routes to respect, regardless of social background. Women and men of diverse social origins now compose and perform poetry and songs, play diverse instruments, and relate tales and legends—though there are some gendered, class, and regional differences, discussed elsewhere (Rasmussen 2000, 2001, 2013b) in mythico-historical accounts.

Thus my translations of verbal art categories, like those of their specialists, are approximate, not precisely equivalent to categories and distinctions in occidental theatre or in the French or English languages. *Isatsa* is often used to gloss theater in general, though interestingly, it also denotes “laughter.” Comedians, *kel seghsegh* or *kel isatsagh*, often described by audiences as “those who joke or make people laugh,” are sometimes also *ibaraden*, but not all *ibaraden* actors are also *kel isatsagh*, since acting and plays may be dramatic as well as humorous in plots and styles.

People who make one laugh, *kel seghsegh*, can refer to a professional performing comedian, who is often, as noted, a more specialized type of actor, or can simply refer in slang to a very witty person who makes others laugh during informal conversation but works in another occupation.

Two incidents vividly illustrate these comedic skills, the first one independent of, and the second one overlapping with, professional acting.

JOKING BY MAHMOUDAN, THE WITTY TAILOR

A more spontaneous comedic skill outside a structured performance was illustrated when Mahmoudan, a tailor who was widely considered a *kel seghsegh* but not an *abarad* in plays, joked to me in his shop near the market that some embroidery designs on a rural woman’s robe resembled cow’s urine when I enquired about the symbolism of the design. In a more serious vein, he then suggested that I ask a woman from the countryside “who really knows things,” thereby implying that I needed to consult women about women’s arts. A rural woman later explained the designs to me as standing for natural environmental features, such as millet stalks, mountains, the sun, and stars. The urban tailor’s jest was intended, not disrespectfully toward women but in fun, as his way of expressing his embarrassment at his distance from the cultural knowledge of the countryside, though he did identify the designs generally as depicting nature.

There was also a bit of jousting here expressed subtly. For urban tailors, who are in northern Malian towns predominantly men, tend to compete with rural embroiderers. In the towns, men’s greater access to sewing machines and customers’ higher demand for tailored dress has tended to give rise to machine embroidery patterns on clothing, which differ markedly from rural Tuareg women’s older handmade embroidery designs. The new designs sell, but some Tuareg disdain them as not as pretty as the traditional designs. Some urban tailors have forgotten the significance of these latter designs, and also have difficulty sewing them by hand with as much skill as the rural embroiderers. The point is that this tailor/comedian commented informally and indirectly on these rivalries through his joke, a type of indirect allusion

called *tangalt* (metaphor or “shadowy speech”), and others considered him very witty for this reason, as a kind of informal *kel seghsegh*, though he did not give formal theatrical performances.

A TEACHABLE MOMENT DURING A VISIT AND SAIDI'S BRIEF TALE

Also instructive are the aesthetic skills and career of a specialized performer, Saidi, who was widely recognized as a multitalented professional *abarad* and a *kel seghsegh* (i.e., both an actor and a more specialized comic), a musician, and also a popular host at a youth center where many organized performances took place. In a small but striking incident while I was present for an informal interview and guided conversation, he demonstrated clever use of these skills.

Saidi described an actor's role “as seeking a solution to problems. In the past, he was a warrior; now, he is someone who follows his spirit or mind and reflects carefully before doing something.” Originally from Adragh (Adrar), Algeria, Saidi had moved to Kidal several years earlier and stayed with friends and relatives there. About thirty-five years old, he was a very versatile and talented performer. His actual name was a common nickname, denoting “someone who does everything, like a jack-of-all-trades.” His father also acted. Saidi considered himself primarily a *kel seghsegh* comedian, though he also sometimes did other more dramatic acting and composed lyrics for the newly popular rap songs among Kidal's youth. He was trying to form a center for music with Tinariwen, Temekrist, and Amaanar guitar bands, funded by an NGO arts program.

Saidi's main activity lately was serving as *animateur* (a new specialty arising in Saharan towns since the first decade of the twenty-first century, denoting approximately host, emcee, or master of ceremonies) at the *Maison du Luxembourg*. There, on the stage, he introduced performing artists of many specialties, from neighborhood acting ensembles just starting out in their new plays to the world-famous touring musicians in the Tinariwen band. He entertained audiences between performances with witty repartee, directed dancing during musical concerts, and introduced the performances. During his repartee, he exhorted audiences, in particular youths, to forget tensions and rivalries, and encouraged harmony in interactions there by often repeating a mantra-like encouragement: “Always together, never angry,” thereby reminding me somewhat of the role of the “Glad-Hand” character in the film *West Side Story* who tried to bring the rival gangs together in the famous dance scene.

To Saidi, a key skill in acting—whether dramatic or comedic—is gesturing with the hands, at which he was expert. He demonstrated several kinds

of gestures and postures to me, as well as adjustments of his face-veil: for example, those conveying the ideal dignity and respect of aristocratic characters, the ideal modesty of respectable men, and those conveying age differences among characters in plays, such as the frailty of very elderly ones. Throughout this demonstration, he spoke rather slowly, in a very soft voice. This style was in marked contrast to the styles of griots and smith/artisans in many Sahelian and Saharan societies who are expected to speak rapidly and loudly (Diawara 1990; Hale 1999; Hoffman 2000; Irvine 1974).¹

Despite his very contemporary, popular skills and good rapport with youths at the center, Saidi considered “abandoning traditions” to be a problem in Tuareg society. Yet he did not deplore mixing tradition and change in his performing arts, in his roles as both a more “traditional” *kel seghsegh* and a “modern” *animateur*.

The following incident vividly illustrates the way Saidi used his performing art with flair not solely at staged performances but also during informal sociability. As we sat chatting in a courtyard, he explained, “Now, modern plays mix past with present.” Suddenly, a young man, one of the actors in a local ensemble, approached, and sat down to join us. He was affable but very quiet, and after greeting us briefly, fell silent, staring blankly into the distance. That young visitor, a talented actor in plays, had dropped out of school because, he alleged, a teacher had sexually harassed him.

Saidi continued his train of thought. As an example of a contemporary motif and concern, he related a brief comedic tale with a warning that “drugs blur thought.” This tale was about friends, sitting around smoking drugs, who debate endlessly over whether what they see in the sky at that moment is the moon or the sun. Then, Saidi explained its meaning and implication: “One character in this story was not lucid, since he took drugs. He couldn’t tell the difference between the moon and the sun, right up there in the sky!” He indicated to me and the visitor that “many Tuareg youths now do drugs or smoke cigarettes from foreign influences during travel, and because they think this is modern. In the past, over ten years ago, elders would strike youths if they smoked, but now, their authority has been breaking down since the early 1990s,” an allusion to the outbreak of the 1990–1996 rebellion and later upheavals.

Pointedly, Saidi related this brief morality tale including hyperbole—a character not able to distinguish between the moon and the sun up in the sky—during the visit by that young man who appeared disoriented (whether or not he was actually on drugs, I do not know, but Saidi told me later that he thought so), weaving the brief tale into our conversation over tea. Notably, Saidi’s morality tale here illustrates one important role of actors widely mentioned by locals: that of giving advice and warnings.

Saidi’s staged and informal social performances also show that *abarad* is a metaphorically apt term. As simultaneously metonymy and synecdoche,

this designation attaches dignity—an all-important Tuareg aristocratic cultural value—to all contemporary actors' art. An intellectual and poet who worked for an aid organization in Kidal felt that “there is no exact translation of ‘actor’ in Tamajaq, since (the new urban) sketches are not traditional.” This man defined an *abarad* as “a warrior, an old knight or *chevalier*, a man esteemed by women and courageous.” *Tabarad*, its feminine, in the Tadar dialect of Tamajaq originally denoted “a noble woman who confirms the rules of conduct, for example, she is hospitable, defends her own rights and those of others.” The term for dignity, *imouhar* or *imoujagh*, in many Tamajaq dialects is etymologically related to the term for the aristocracy. Other terms for the aristocracy such as *illilen* denote a free (rather than enslaved), proud, dignified, and reserved person.

These ideals inspire both male and female actors, who often in their youths listened to poets' and oral historians' accounts of past resistance heroes in their conversations and poetry recitations. Their themes included not solely patrilineal but also matrilineal founders of various descent groups. In the local mythico-historical past, female and male ancestor/founders and warrior heroes exemplified these qualities.² For example, in oral histories of northern Mali between Gao and Kidal, a woman called Bagara resisted Arab invaders who pursued her by dropping camel dung along a path to mislead them. More recently, lesser known but equally important women have also embodied these qualities: a woman who hid weapons when confronted by invaders; and some women who insisted that their identity cards specify them as *welet*, “daughter of,” not solely *Madame*, “wife of.” Male Tuareg heroes who fought against the French colonial forces, for example, Kaoussan and Firhun, and several other local heroes around Kidal also often inspire male *ibaraden*.

Thus despite the varied social backgrounds of actors and most actors' youthful ages, a close relationship between *ibaraden* acting, dignity, and pride persists in local traditions, expressed in the more traditional plays based on tales and not sponsored by officials. Genres and mores emerge from selective reminiscences of historical relationships. Actors and other oral historians, though increasingly identified as distinct specialists, both may relate mythico-historical tales. However, only the *ibaraden* actors perform these tales in the form of plays and sketches, and many actors are increasingly acting in edutainment orchestrated by officials. Yet there is no precise correspondence between the sense of “sketches” in the English-speaking world and the plays popularly called “*des sketches*” in northern Mali, also known in Tamajaq as *tisiwey*, or between the English term “folktale” and the older plays called *tenzoghén*. Again, the issue of genre (Arnoldi 1995; Bauman 1992, 1993, 2004; Reed 2007, 2016) arises here. Although the latter term also denotes tales, these genres are embedded in contexts and styles that do not recognize a rigid division between art and life.

In the past, *iswat* denoted “an evening festival” in the local Tamajaq dialect. Nowadays some use it to denote “theater” in general. One term heard for artistry is *le theatre*, a French loan term. Many contemporary plays/sketches have a goal described in Tamajaq as *asemeter* (French *la sensibilisation*), denoting in English consciousness-raising. *Awahetajet* denotes a role, a character in a play. *Kel Isuha* denotes an artist, and *suha* denotes songs. *Agna* denotes art, tradition. In the local dialect, *Tanfust*, *tinfulsen* plural denotes tale(s). *Tisiway* refers to poems and also sometimes is used to describe the scripted new plays/sketches. *Tanzort* denotes a riddle. *Tenzoghen*, plural, refers to traditional plays/sketches, also denoting approximately traditional tales or legends or epics. But these categories cannot be reduced, “ethnoscience”-style, to static watertight cabinets. There are blurred genres, and among the Tuareg, despite local distinctions if one asks, one might say that genre is as genre does. The very concept of genre is a western cultural category.

Many acting ensembles have poetic names, often evoking a cultural nostalgia for the desert, but also the human social community: Sons of Azawad; Those Who See Far (or The Visionaries); Sons of the Traveling Country; Travelers of the Desert; and Joy. A few founders of acting ensembles in Kidal are journalists associated with the radio. Others are renowned poets in the older verbal art genre. Some also play musical instruments and sing in musical performance.

Musical performance was most widely glossed as “theater” until around the 1990s, when plays were added to this category of performance, though even at festivals featuring both music and plays, the plays do not feature music or song within their plots. At job-training festivals, health “edutainment” performances, national holidays, and at venues such as youth centers and stadiums, performances alternate between plays presented by acting ensembles and guitar music by modern Tuareg rock-style bands. Actors who belong to both groups do not perform in both genres at the same event.

Also relevant are even finer local distinctions among the diverse verbal art performers and their aesthetic genres. *Kel sikbar* make gestures during individual storytelling. Yet some plays/sketches are considered collective versions of storytelling, for as noted, they grew out of or developed from traditional storytelling by individual raconteurs, with gestures. The same person can be two, or all three at once; others specialize in only one skill. *Ibaraden*, *kel isuha*, and *kel setsegh* roles may therefore overlap in one performer, but each specialty also involves distinct skills, and each now tends to be performed in different contexts in public.

“People of the Word,” in the Tadtart Tamajaq dialect *kel tisiwey*, is a general phrase designating all those who are clever and witty, such as Mahmoud the tailor. Within this category are artists who present more formalized public performances, however: the *kel setsegh* comedians, *kel isuha* singers/artists, and the *ibaraden* actors. Some actors are also poets.

Above all, however, the prevalent exegesis of the term *ibaraden* given by actors and nonactors alike was that “*ibaraden* denotes *les braves* in French. They are named after ancient warriors who traditionally protected nobles by raiding and trading for them.” I encountered only one exception to this: a playwright and radio journalist of Bella (former servile) background scorned this label because of its allusions to Tuareg social hierarchies. For him, rather than heroism, the term *abarad* evoked past slavery. But all other performers and audiences with whom I spoke about this matter took this term’s prevalent etymology seriously and felt great respect for these artists.

There are hints, therefore, of some disagreement over the connotations of this term, based on lingering tensions between some persons of different social backgrounds. Indeed, these tensions came to the surface in some rivalry between different performance venues, such as that between *la Maison du Luxembourg*, directed by a European aid worker and emphasizing job-training for youths, and Radio Tisdas, directed by the Bella journalist at the time of my research. Overall, however, actors’ social backgrounds and performance genres and styles did not neatly correlate with either venue. Age did make some difference, however. The Radio Tisdas performers were mostly older in local cultural definition (i.e., having adult children who were married or of marriageable age) but were not all of the same social stratum background.

How are these nuanced and fluid, yet also specialized meanings of acting arts historically, socially, and culturally constructed? The *ibaraden* actors, in the aesthetics (poetics in subjective, personal spirit) and politics (power and oppression in the wider system of constraints and issues surrounding and addressed in their art) attempt to provide voices of dignity and resistance in difficult times. They are often, though not always, successful in these goals. In some respects, their performances enact resistance, promoting cultural survival, and are often therapeutic, promoting healing of suffering from social rifts. In other respects, however, there are struggles and even “culture wars” over these performances in social life and art, and plays can become appropriated by powerful state and nonstate forces.

In Tuareg acting, some western (European, specifically French) and also southern Malian aesthetic concepts, genre categories, and performance styles are becoming superimposed upon local aesthetics via state, urban, and NGO bureaucracies, and actors’ traditionally flexible, if specialized roles are becoming more “ossified.” There are, for example, mixed reactions to performers as puppeteers, regarded by older persons ambivalently as “not real Tuareg” but southern Malian, and viewed by some more devout persons as anti-Islamic.

These and additional social tensions are high on the list of reasons for state and NGO interest in performers. One goal of the plays and other

performances, in the words of adult coordinators at a local youth center, is to “keep our youths busy . . . otherwise they make trouble.” Many adults complain that “youths are too easy prey for dissident rebels because youths today do not have enough work and want too much money.” Yet many adults also acknowledge the difficulty of living off dwindling herds, marginal employment, and increasing monetization.

Tuareg adolescents and unmarried persons approaching their twenties and thirties belong to an age-cohort popularly known as *ichumar* (a Tamajaq term some persons explain as deriving from *chemmer*, “to resist,” and others explain as deriving from the French term *chomeur*, “unemployed person”). They comprise one of several generations since the 1970s who have felt displaced from traditional occupations and alienated from some values of their parents and elders. Many have dropped out of school and have traveled and spent lengthy time periods away from their society in labor migration and political exile (Belalimat 1993; Claudot-Hawad 2002; Kohl 2009). This age cohort has a style of dress, music, and lifestyle different from those of their parents and elders. NGOs, aid agencies, schools, and clinics encourage many of these youths to form theatrical ensembles and join job-training programs.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON PERFORMING ARTS

But significantly, these modern age-cohorts and their performing arts, though targeted for special attention and modification in the town, are not entirely new or exclusively urban in origin. They have long-standing precedents in the traditional Tuareg performing patterns, as shown, in critical social commentary during musical events and in more informal visits among friends, and in rural areas, in poetry performances of age mates in spaces always far from mosques or on the outskirts of or outside villages and camps, from respect and deference to elders and religious persons. Thus despite the importance of critical social commentary in the performing arts, another element of their aesthetics has to do with, paradoxically, older expressions of respect. Even in Kidal, recall, nonliturgical performances are banned near the *amenokal*'s palace and its surrounding neighborhood.

In other words, caution, reticence, and some social restrictions based on respect, restraint, and reserve are as important as eloquence and witty critique in verbal art expression. Some tales, for example the origin myths with female founder motifs, are told only in certain situations and before audiences in private, preferably persons with whom one practices a relaxed, familiar relationship. Some tales and riddles tend to be related in fragments and debated. Tellers sometimes blur the boundaries between genealogical and mythical ancestors. Some older individuals, particularly more conservative

persons in the countryside, feeling constrained by reserve and respect toward deceased ancestors, refrain from pronouncing their names. Some also hesitate to be tape-recorded, for fear that their own voices would be heard later by living descendants after they themselves died. Some elders and devout Muslims consider the voices of the dead—whether replayed in audio-taping, broadcast, reenacted live in play performance, or simply pronounced—as simply too powerful and respected to be heard so directly and overtly by just anyone at a distance. Many prefer them to be heard through more intimate media and contexts, such as ritual divination or in small groups on visits inside tents and compounds. Also, perhaps these direct expressions cause emotional pain in personal memories of deceased persons.

These considerations still sometimes emerge in Kidal, as when an elderly man interrupted a play being rehearsed inside a family compound, demanding why actors were pronouncing “our names and (other) secrets.” The actors, mostly in their twenties, politely paused and listened to him but convinced him that they were rehearsing and knew this researcher well, indicating that I would not use their real names or reveal material they requested I keep secret, and that I was not a cinematographer intending to widely disseminate or profit from commercial films of this rehearsal. Eventually he relented, and the actors continued their rehearsal, encouraging me to continue filming, though I stopped filming that particular performance from caution and deference to that elder.

Although much verbal art of the *ibaraden*, despite their critical role, historically involves some reticence and restraint, in particular toward elders, leaders, and devout persons, recently they are also concerned with protecting wider cultural survival, a goal that often conflicts with these ideal cultural mores. Many performers now view their roles as advocates for the community, speaking more openly to, for, and about, ancestors in the past, traditionally taboo topics, and mention taboo names of elders and the deceased. One such play, later analyzed in full, concerned advice from a dying elder. Others, also to be analyzed, portrayed the reverse: elders are ignored, and youths instruct them. On the one hand, therefore, acting in plays may be considered resistance, but on the other, since actors often evoke honored ancestors respectfully, protective motives continue to assert some power in actors’ performing art and social lives.

In addition to their concern for protecting local cultural autonomy, *ibaraden* actors are also mediators and liminal figures, at times mischievous critics of both their own society and the state, in and beyond their play performances. Their mediating roles are important in relationships within Tuareg society and between Tuareg and others.³ Claudot-Hawad (1996) describes how classifications of human and cultural non-Tuareg cosmological and social space follow principles of interaction between exterior and interior, but these

categories are not naturalized or immutable. As soon as there are regular relationships economically, politically, or socially, whether positive or negative, communities enter into a complementary structure and become recognized cultural partners with more nuanced names (Claudot-Hawad 1996, 13). This mixing of cultures occurs in several degrees. In general, there is a dynamic process in encounters between interior and exterior; the interior only evolves if it is confronted with the exterior, a counterweight is indispensable, thus not an immutable or polarized entity in Edward Said's sense of an eternally, diametrically opposed "Other" (Said 1977); among Tuareg, for example, there is the importance of *tikruru* mediators and balancers (Claudot-Hawad 1996, 15). The cultural ideal is to avoid either extreme: too much disorder or extinguishing of the local. Actors participate in these processes, alternately protecting the interior and balancing this with the exterior. Actors confront and resist but also accommodate, negotiate, and mediate in their aesthetic styles of performance in plays and beyond in social life.

CONTINUITIES, CHANGES, AND CONFLICTS IN AESTHETIC STYLES AND IN SOCIOPOLITICAL LIFE

In some respects, the aesthetic style of most plays continues to reflect these strategies in actors' sociability of walking a delicate tightrope of power, in the persistence of long-standing cultural emphasis upon poetic and more general oral/verbal skill or flair. At the beginning of each play, for example, actors always greet each other, though not the audience, in contrast to some other verbal art forms such as the musical *tende* drumming performances. In most plays thus far, there are costumes but no masks or stilts, except, notably, in a few new edutainment plays influenced by European and by other Malian organizers: for example, those performed by *Temekrist* (Togetherness) at the *Maison du Luxembourg* local youth center and those by the itinerant national acting ensemble called (by a French title) *Caravanne Sans Frontieres* (Caravan Without Borders) who travel throughout Mali performing in local AIDS prevention consciousness-raising plays, on visits to Kidal several times a year.

The use of masks, stilts, and marionette puppets as props by Caravan Without Borders was controversial in Kidal during my research residence for several reasons. Many youths adored them, but some older and more conservative audience members disdained them as "not 'true' Tuareg performance (techniques)." But this opposition of some audience members was not simply because these props are absent from the older performance genres. These techniques are always frowned on by stricter Islamic scholars as idolatry, since they include iconic anthropomorphic representations, as do dolls, which

are in fact a traditional but semi-hidden Tuareg toy among small girls. I saw small Tuareg girls in rural more nomadic areas play only surreptitiously with dolls, handmade by the girls themselves, not imported from Europe. These dolls were dressed identically to their mothers. The girls never played with these dolls in the open, rather, only inside their mothers' tents away from the eyes of Islamic scholars. In areas with more numerous and influential Islamic scholar/marabout clans, I never saw children playing with any dolls at all. Since the incursion of militant jihadists in northern Mali, driven out of towns but still lingering in some desert areas, one can only surmise that these practices have become even more strictly banned.

The Puppet Play Controversy

Particularly controversial in Kidal during my research residence was one public performance by Caravan Without Borders, a puppet play in which the actors portrayed with marionettes AIDS education characters: a couple in a romantic, possibly sexual relationship, and the direct warning about AIDS (Figure 3.1). Shortly after this ensemble's performance started in Kidal's marketplace, some audience members and bystanders threw stones at the actors as they manipulated two marionette puppets of a Tuareg man and a Tuareg woman in detailed local dress and began their dialogue involving the man's attempt



Figure 3.1 Marionette puppets warning of the danger of AIDS. *Source:* Photo taken by Author.

to seduce the woman, with a “voiced-over” narrative in French explaining STDs and warning of its causes in graphic terms, with vibrant Afro-Pop music in the background.

In this performance context, the actors were viewed not as heroes protecting local culture and art but rather as invaders to be resisted by (some) audience members. These actors, while Tamajaq speakers and ethnic Tuareg, were not, notably, from the North—underlining the regional rather than rigidly ethnic political differences, and revealing the internal disagreements among Tuareg concerning religion. As itinerant performers with a technique that challenged some more conservative or devout local authorities’ concepts of modesty and reserve, they faced considerable opposition, even outrage.

The market performance, interrupted by the violence, was stopped. Only when the location was changed for the second performance to the *lycee* on the edge of the town’s administrative neighborhood was it warmly received by an audience of adolescent students and teachers. Later that evening, I saw the actors in that traveling ensemble hurriedly pack up and prepare to leave town.

These contradictions, dilemmas, and compromises carry over into the visual arts (silver, leatherwork, woodwork, and stone) produced by smith/artisans in Tuareg society: most have abstract geometric, not anthropomorphic designs. Only a few recent “modern” and tourist arts feature representations of animals and humans (as for example, figurines by artisans and paintings by a contemporary painter) (Loughran-Bini and Seligman 2006).

Even some gestures, central to performances of Saidi, the *kel seghsegh*, and some local ensembles such as Voices of the Desert and Travelers of the Desert and widely considered to be more “traditional,” nonetheless face disapproval and sometimes violence from some *da’wa* and more militant adherents to Salafist/Wahabbist influences who argue that these are distractions from religious devotion, in particular, that the beauty of women at such performances detracts men from prayer.

This merging of aesthetic stylistic and sociopolitical concerns pervades many performances and introduces some modifications in acting styles. Although there is usually more speech than physical action throughout a play—predominantly dialogues—some plays feature both verbal and action-oriented techniques in order to convey urgent advice: for example, to warn youths against going to Libya, joining armed conflicts, and other actions viewed as dangerous. The few intensely action-oriented sketches I saw include one plot depicting a swordfight in a battle over a well and another depicting a tragic death of travelers from thirst upon being lost in the desert.

Changes in acting styles and performances receive mixed reactions. Tekres’s oldest son, who sometimes acted in the ensemble Sons of Azawad, sadly commented on what he viewed as adverse changes in the Tuareg performance tradition over the past few years:

Acting in the more “modern” sketches began with schoolchildren at age twelve years, called Young Pioneers or scouts associated with the (Malian) youth department, in government and at youth centers. They had three camps, schools, where one performed sketches and other activities. Also, there were competitions between schools; these were frequent, but now they are rarer because there is a lack of recruitment (for free). . . . Youths now require money. Also, there is no more discipline between teachers and students. There are several causes of this. Because of the rebellions, youths have a different mentality now, lack of motivation except money. Before, sketches were obligatory; they were required by elders and teachers. Youths interpret democracy as implying a lack of discipline. Since the (series of) Tuareg rebellions, there are fewer plays, except at festivals. Yet there is now a real need for theater on the part of youths; it is therapeutic. But recently, performances have declined because of the social breakdown in relationships between the generations and the diminished authority of elders and teachers.

Additional changes include performer-audience relationships. According to another actor in the ensemble Sons of Azawad, “the traditional relationship between actor and audience was personal. Also, traditional theater was expressive of our Tuareg history and culture. Whereas now, modern theater is more didactic and has the goal of education. The modern actor/spectator relationship is less personal.”

Also illuminating were the opinions expressed by a group of rural Tuareg women refugees from Niger residing in Kidal who had fled a locust invasion. During interviews and informal guided conversations, these women all expressed a preference for actors who they considered “nice,” and who were their relatives, thus favoring the older pattern of personal actor-audience relationships described and idealized above by the actor.

Whereas by contrast, Tuareg women who had resided in Kidal longer, and who followed a more sedentarized and urban lifestyle, without hesitation named their favorite actors based upon more impersonal criteria of skill: these included, they specified, “conveying important messages, performing interesting plays, being courageous, and defending our town.” In contrast to the rural women, these women did not always know the actor personally and did not necessarily admire relatives’ performances more than nonrelatives’ performances. Hence the significance of cultural scale; the less intimate settings of the town tend to encourage more depersonalized ties between audiences and actors, who are in the countryside more often also kin, neighbors, and persons whom one encounters in daily face-to-face social situations.

Accounts of the origins of acting suggest that both continuity and change have impacted actors’ performing. Many actors and audience members explained that, although contemporary actors take the name *abarad* to express their continuing respect for and inspiration by earlier heroes, most

traditional sketches (i.e., based upon earlier stories) are several centuries old and were about war legends specific to that era. They pointed out that there are several more types of plays/sketches now, with diverse plots and themes. One actor, for example, elaborated on this: “Before, one followed the footsteps of the ancients (people in the past). Now, we are trying to make themes more relevant. Play plots can be original, but composers are often still inspired by old stories.”

Another actor, a member of the Voices of the Desert ensemble, said, “A sketch is like advice; for it influences people, has a message. Many plays are (still) like (traditional folk) tales (*tenzoghén*), but NGOs now request some (new topics for) sketches, at intervals, to advise people on the good road to take.”

Some actors explained that “predominantly *imghad* (tributaries) were *ibaraden* at first, although today these specialists come from diverse social backgrounds.” Recall that actors are now diverse and are not endogamous, and not all persons of tributary background become actors, but even today the actors tend to predominate in certain families and clans. Actors are also described as “notables who perform sketches intended to influence people, to change their ideas, to give moral insights.”

Some contemporary actors who belong to the Kel Essouk maraboutique (Islamic scholar) clans who, recall, interpret the Qur’an for Ifoghas chiefly clans, explained their own connection to acting, initially puzzling given the ambivalence toward acting felt by some more devout and militant persons, as being “because these actors, as Islamic scholars, customarily give advice and reconcile disputants.” In other words, among those not influenced by more militant Islamist reformist/revivalists, there was no contradiction. As Beeman (2011) points out, Islam and the Qur’an are generally ambiguous on the issue of musical and other performances. This also makes sense for Kel Essouk in particular, since the Kel Essouk marabouts, until recently non-*da’wa* but rather Sufi-influenced in their religious orientation, have historically been mediators and peacemakers and, as their name implies, bring people together as “People of the Market.” However, several actors and audience members also asserted that marabouts actors’ sketches are different, for they usually shun politics, though younger actors (among them) do both, even those in marabout clans. One person, for example, asserted, “Even marabout actors can sometimes make people laugh like comics do, in order to illustrate good versus bad.” A few such plots resemble morality tales or sermons, with themes based on old religious legends, analyzed later, for example, those about theft, forgiveness, and conflict resolution.

The important point here is that there are not solely literal warrior identities in acting and not only fighting depicted in plots. Although many *ibaraden* trace the origins of most plays to inspiration from warriors and their heroism

in mythico-histories, and all actors in performances and in life should be courageous and protect the community, this may be achieved not necessarily through literal physical violence but also by giving advice, warnings, and moral commentaries. This ideal does not, however, rule out resistance.

ACTORS' ART AS RESISTANCE, NEGOTIATION, MEDIATION, AND ACCOMMODATION

Much resistance takes an indirect form: of accommodating and negotiating in situations of potential or actual danger. Some actors follow their protective obligation in social and political encounters by resisting outside forces of danger and violence, literal and symbolic. Given the difficulties faced and the widely acknowledged challenges to actors' roles, to what extent and how are they effective in this role today? What is the efficacy of their art? This efficacy was shown in Saidi's indirect, subtle advice to the youth whom he suspected of taking drugs. This was also shown in Tekres's responses to her traumatic childhood experience, which involved some accommodation and negotiation as well as activism: she did perform in languages other than Tamajaq, and she did ultimately marry a more powerful and prosperous outsider to her community for her economic security, but later in her life, she dedicated herself to causes of children harmed by war and also, when Kidal became divided over a beauty contest, actively mediated between opposing sides.

Another way oppressors and dangers can be evaded, and critique offered indirectly, is through deception, for example, through cross-dressing—both within the plots of sketches and outside them, in everyday life. Cross-dressing sometimes occurs as a joke, or for purposes of cleverness and flair, protection, hiding, and/or as an everyday tactic or “hidden transcript” of resistance (De Certeau 1988; Scott 1992). This theme is greatly appreciated and often deployed in a comical way to conduct critical social commentary, resist powerful others, and/or elude potential harm (violence or loss of dignity).

Some male actors cross-dress when they play female characters in plays when the female actors are unavailable or unwilling to portray some characters from shyness. During their acting in plays, the male cross-dressers change not only their appearance but also their voice and way of speaking. Sometimes there is exaggeration, and its meaning in the context of play performance should be approached with caution. For the meanings of this hyperbole in Tuareg acting should not be assumed the same as the meanings in western performances; whether this was a critique of heteronormative gender constructs, for example, was a completely foreign concept to local residents or, at least, difficult to elicit directly, perhaps from cultural emphasis on

reserve. In a play entitled “The False Marabout,” for example, paraphrased and analyzed later, the character of a woman client seeking Qur’anic amulets was played by a male actor whom I shall call Bidi.

Bidi also cross-dressed “offstage” on at least one occasion. What, then did this cross-dressing mean in social performativity “offstage”? Rather than a critical commentary on Tuareg gendered practices, I contend that (in contrast to some impersonations in western cultural “drag” performances), the following incident of Bidi’s cross-dressing had the purpose of deception and resistance to oppression as a social “performance” outside play performance, and acted as a kind of “decoy” protecting the community. This vividly illustrated the protective role in acting extended beyond the play performances, as an act of political resistance eluding and mocking authorities. Consider, for example, the following episode in which Bidi extended this practice into a political situation of possible danger to Tuareg women.

Fooling the Army Commander: Bidi’s Strategy

Bidi, the actor who sometimes played female characters in plays, related to me how he once knew a military commander who wanted local residents to procure women for the commander, and how he dressed as a woman and flirted with him.

Bidi described (and others corroborated) this incident vividly:

I pretended to be available. I waited for him inside his room. I asked for 10,000 CFA (about \$20) each evening, and some more (money) for removing each item of clothing. I gave him little excuses, so as not to have sex, for example, I said I had my “period” (some Tuareg believe that during her period, a woman “loses her essence” and should not engage in sexual relations). Finally, a month went by, and I said I was still “menstruating.” Eventually, that military man found out my ruse, but he was not angry because people do this sort of thing as a joke all the time.

Bidi, as a talented actor and a comedian, therefore extended his performance skills into social life for basically two reasons. Certainly one of them was for remuneration, but the more important reason was in order to gallantly protect the local women from this commander’s harassment. Thus political resistance to the military regime here took the form of a very elaborate comical performance, mixing verbal art, dress, and gestural mime, in the grand tradition of the *kel seghsegh* and the *ibaraden* and, fortunately for Bidi, was received as such (i.e., as a joke) by that commander.

There are additional foci of resistance in these “unstaged,” transgendered performances in everyday life tactics of practice, to use De Certeau’s concept

(1988), again, in other social contexts outside the sketches/plays themselves. Some young men dress as women to get someone to treat them to a guitar concert or play performance, so they can enter for free of charge. Women, though not usually veiled about the face in daily interaction, occasionally wear the customary Tuareg men's face-veil in order to return from an evening festival or performance and not be harassed by spirits or human males. A woman walking alone at night may be attacked by a spirit, also a euphemism for human aggressors in a refashioning of spirit beliefs, reflecting fears of rape, until recently rare in Tuareg communities.

The incident of Bidi's cross-dressing in order to fool the army commander is therefore in keeping with actors' perception of their ideal roles as critical social commentators and gallant protectors of the community, especially of women, thereby approximately resembling Tuareg precolonial *ibaraden* and medieval European troubadours, notwithstanding some transformations also present in acting. The point is that life and art are intertwined here with poetic flair.

A female actor in the Travelers of the Desert acting ensemble, whom I'll call Fana, confirmed my interpretation by remarking, "*ibaraden* are champions! The role of the actor, since he (she) is brave, is to defend and protect people." According to the actor, composer, musician, and founder of Travelers of the Desert, "the role of the actor is to make people aware, to raise consciousness." Another actor explained that "(We) actors seek to be like the brave ones of the past, in spirit, in battles in the past."

In fact, some actors are currently or have been literal warriors, not solely metaphorically or in the remote past. An actor in Travelers of the Desert whom I'll call Aghaly was inspired to act in part by his father, also an actor and dissident who participated in battles at Toxamen, a site of fighting during the 1990s Tuareg rebellion. With his father as a model in mind, Aghaly's acting imagery more than some others' emphasized martial qualities and appealed explicitly to ancestry: he explained that "an *abarad* is someone who frightens, who has strength or force; actors take that name in order to imitate their ancestors." Aghaly also became interested in acting when he saw his friends performing and liked the "good message" in their plays. He learned by rehearsing with them and by practicing monologues alone. But this actor especially, in light of his family history, emphasized the direct connections of *ibaraden* to their older roles as brave warriors protecting *imajeghen* aristocratic elites.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MEMORY IN ACTING

Thus memory operates not solely as an ethereal ideal or nostalgic yearning, but, rather, inspiration from the past can involve active contemporary practice.

What Anderson (2006) terms narratives of nationhood can produce very real effects, both abstract/imaginary and tangible, and narrators “on the ground” in local intimate, not solely global settings, who are at times dispersed and at times reassembled, can alternately resist and accommodate, remember and forget. Like memory, forgetfulness is also selective. This process can occur even in diaspora settings, as well, but fundamental to understanding this anywhere is attention to intimate, face-to-face narratives (Reed 2016). In Tamajaq verbal art and plays, remembering can also be an effort to restore justice, and can implicitly address the future, as well.

The abuse of memory can produce a forced, commanded memory. Likewise, the abuse of forgetfulness can produce an amnesty without justice, which is forgetfulness commanded by institutions, declaring in effect that nothing has happened (Hannoum 2005, 131). But for Tuareg performers such as Tekres, Ahoulou, Bidi, and Aghaly, reflection on how best to cope with the future is also important. Acting, in other words, is not solely nostalgic remembering but also forward-looking, depending on context.

These connections between remembered past, reenacted inspirational heroisms, and hopefully avoided future traumas are nonlinear and nonbinary. As one actor who learned folktales first and then started acting in sketches put it,

Before, traditional acting by *ibaraden* related stories of the past, acts of our nobles and fathers. Modern acting begins with current events, for example, economic problems. Yet a good actor must have peace inside and be rested in order to defend. He/she cannot be upset. The problem now is fear and tension in the political atmosphere. Also, people have less time for the old gallant warrior traditions, and (too much concern with) money, which is not good for our traditions (i.e., monetarization and commercialization in his viewpoint are detrimental to the art).

A female actor in the ensemble Joy, whom I shall call Mina, lamented:

There are problems now; people are not in the mood for theater. But agencies (here) are trying to organize people for plays. Actors used to be male, mounted warriors like knights, (she used the French term *des chevaliers*) who accompanied noble *imajeghen* into battle, who recounted heroic exploits and gave gifts to women. They did not traditionally act for money. An *abarad* is like Rambo, like a warrior. In the past, actors were mounted knights for nobles. At first, actors represented those warriors, knights in traditional sketches. At first, these were the same people, who acted out heroic epics and deeds. In sketches now, many actors are descendants of *imghad chevaliers* (tributary knights) who accompanied nobles to war. But while griots play (music) and praise for money, traditionally, actors do homage for the sake of Allah (God) and nobles. People

now are forgetting (all that), or are too troubled and/or busy. Some themes are now provided to us actors by agencies, but filled up with dialogues by our local composers, for example, a plot about well-digging.

A female actor in the Visionaries ensemble whose plays were often broadcast on the radio, whom I'll call Lala, explained that she temporarily stopped acting because she married and had too much work as a housewife. When I became more acquainted with her, however, she later hinted at additional reasons for her hesitation to act: "the May 2006 attacks on Kidal, in fighting between dissidents and the national army (preceding the larger-scale 2012 Azawad war) spoiled everything! There is no peace."

A young male actor in the ensemble Sons of Azawad elaborated further on these ideas:

When one acts, one must not wound or do harm. One must be gallant, only protect. [He described changes:] . . . many traditional (older) plays and actors attempt to use humor to make a connection between actor and spectator, e.g., the traditional actor's role is to express more collective culture and its traditions. By contrast, the contemporary actor's role in modern sketches depends upon his or her individual personality, and he/she often educates. At the same time, there is a less personal relationship with the audience.

Nonactors who attend live plays and listen to plays on the radio broadcasts also had much to say about continuity, change, conflict, and challenges in actors' roles. One woman audience member felt that the role of the actor "is to resolve problems in life, for example, if there is a battle, they can do a sketch encouraging peace." Another woman wanted to see more sketches with more advice, "We need ideas from the brave ones."

A male tailor viewed the role of actor as "to combat bad things, such as corruption and illnesses, to correct problems. An actor teaches people, is a notable (renowned, famous) in the memory or spirit (*tayte*) of our people, does good works, is admired, and so has influence."

Other audience members mentioned that actors bring things out into the open, defend and protect relatives and parents, make people aware, and instruct. One nonactor commented, "there are few traditional *ibaraden* now, because before, in the past, they told of war; and now, people do not like that topic because they want peace." Another sadly surmised that "actors' roles with our current problems are difficult; they must create happiness, but this is difficult because of the series of invasions and occupations here."

The acting tradition in Kidal therefore draws upon a medley of sometimes contested traditions: its roots are in the chivalrous, gallant, "troubadour-like" tradition of Tuareg warriors and their courtship of women. To some extent, there is a kind of ostension or reenactment of these memories

occurring, but much more as well occurs. Now, acting remains associated with protection, warning about the future, and gallantry, but in the state and nongovernmental organization-orchestrated edutainment plays, the means of doing this can become ambiguous, disputed, and even diverted for audiences and actors. What many local residents call “modern plays/sketches” are organized in part to redefine and redirect actors’ older, classic roles under the same rubric, but the new agenda fosters often different specific goals: for example, to channel resistance into cooperation. On the other hand, as soon shown in Part II on popular and recurrent play plots, performers often also conduct social critique and political resistance both during play performance and beyond in sociality.

Peace and repatriation have always been precarious. One attempted attack on Kidal by dissidents, ambiguous in their precise identity but officially defined in the media as “Tuareg rebels,” occurred shortly before one of my research residences. This caused some to cower in their homes, and many to flee, and temporarily interrupted many nongovernmental and civic aid projects. During the time of my residence/research, there was a relative calm, and many refugees were returning to this town and its surrounding region, though a few were still up in the mountains.

Later in my research residence, one concert scheduled at the youth center was postponed because of another attempted attack on the town: an armed fighter tried to enter town with a weapon, was stopped, refused to give up his weapon, was chased through the Aliou neighborhood of the *amenukal*, and was finally caught and imprisoned. A temporary curfew was imposed. Allegedly, about 200 kilometers from Kidal, combined Algerian and Libyan Arab fighters including Salafist Islamist militants, and a few Tuareg dissident rebels, fled Algerian and Malian authorities. The mayor’s office officially opposed the “rebels,” who were led by a former army colonel who had defected from the Malian army. The army and National Guard repelled them from a base nearby and chased them toward Mauritania. Rumors flew that the attackers had a conflict with some families in Kidal, including that of the *amenukal*. Following the attempted attack, there was peace mediation, temporarily successful, with the aid of Algeria and some Tuareg intermediaries, including members of the Tinariwen musical band.

Although the Bamako-based state army remained a major source of fear for Tamajaq-speaking Kidal residents who remembered the role some units played in the massacres in 1963 and the early 1990s, increasingly, like residents of Mali more generally, many in the North also feared bandits, Salafist-influenced militant jihadists, and affiliates originating in Al Qaida in the Maghreb (AQIM) and its splintering factions, most recently, of uncertain identity but loosely affiliated with remnants of the Islamic State (ISIS) from Libya and Algeria.

More broadly, acting and performances are informed by a sense of the past that derives its meaning from the present (Herzfeld 2001, 58). This is the realm of what Victor Turner (1974) called social dramas: the infusion of present experience and action by the resurrection of key events from the past. I would add here that performance can also derive its meaning from reflections on future possibilities and hopes as well as fears. Whether as invocations of long-forgotten cosmologies or as rituals, dance, and bodily gesture, social and artistic performances may reassure actors and audiences of the continuing viability of a dynamic past. Yet as shown, this past, while inspiring, is not set in stone or a mere template for present and future agendas. The past is not merely reproduced but is redefined and selectively remembered, forgotten, and, I add, projected forward.

As also shown, in some contexts, specificity is dangerous and ambiguity a virtue. All narratives are selective, and forgetting can also be only a partial and temporary strategy. Cultural performances in John MacAloon's words (1984, 1) are occasions for reflection and commentary on collective myths and histories but also present alternatives, attempting to change in some ways while steadfastly remaining the same in others. Acting mediates between past, present, and future. Central to this creative process are the complex concepts of traditional and modern and local and global, terms thus far recurrent in much exegesis, requiring closer critical engagement.

NOTES

1. For further elaborations on the speech, roles, and styles of smiths and griots in Sahelian and Saharan stratified, "ranked" societies, see works by Hale (1999), Hoffman (1995, 2000), Irvine (1974), and Rasmussen (2013a). Such specialists are expected to lack an ideal trait of aristocrats: namely, respect/reserve (*takarakit*), which enables them to act in ways those of aristocratic descent cannot (or should not): for example, smith/artisans and griots may recite noble genealogies and pronounce names normally forbidden to descendants, and may act as go-betweens in negotiating delicate matters such as nobles' marriages. These roles have undergone much change, in both rural and urban areas, but still retain some of their long-standing practices in modified form. In the Malian Tuareg actors' conduct, (in and beyond their play performances), these performers often walk a fine line between their pronouncing what others cannot in critical social commentary and political resistance, on the one hand, and, on the other, their dignified guarding of cultural memory.

2. Many herbal medicine women around Mount Bagzan in the Air Mountain region of northern Niger trace the founding of their profession matrilineally to twin daughters of a female culture hero/founder named Tagurmat, who according to mythico-historical narratives was murdered by her jealous husband. Kel Igurmaden is also the name of a descent group in the same region, who trace their origins to these

matrilineal ties to Tagurmat and also to patrilineal ties to early Muslim holy men who founded mosques in that region. Some gendered conflicts exist, however, in the relative importance attributed to these different founders. Tuareg groups more generally vary in their relative emphases of matrilineal and patrilineal descent, inheritance, and succession to political offices. See Oxby (1990), Keenan (2003), and Rasmussen (2006) for further discussions.

3. Mediators have always been important in Tuareg society in their relationships with groups at the desert fringe. More generally, nomads have always been economically dependent on trade with more sedentarized communities (Baier and Lovejoy 1977; Fratkin 2011; Wood 1999). Through caravanning, markets, and client-patron connections, Tuareg have been socially connected to farmers and merchants south of the Sahara for centuries. Often, for example, nomads and caravanners could stay with clients, business partners, and in second households in the southlands in normal times as well as seek shelter there in times of drought and other disasters. Recently, these relationships have not been completely destroyed but have been modified in response to ecological changes and strained by regional tensions. See Bouman (2003) and Lecocq (2005, 42–68).

Chapter 4

Acting and Cultural Translation

Actors and Audiences as Interpreters and Mediators in Reformulating “Traditional” and “Modern”

LOCAL CONCEPTS OF TRADITIONAL AND MODERN: A CLOSER LOOK

“Traditional” and “modern” always require quotation marks, as do “local” and “global”; these concepts should not be taken at face value. Although overwhelmingly, actors and audiences consider some of the plays currently performed in Kidal to be “modern” (using the French term *moderne* or the Tamajaq term *ayenay*, “new”), they are still reminiscent of “Tuareg traditions,” albeit representing significant departures from those conventions, as well, yet implying a sense of “authentic”—a very relative and subjective concept, entangled in wider structural constraints and relations, whether local or global (Appadurai 2000, 2013; Duranti 1994; Hannerz 2010). Many actors and audiences regard them with mixed sentiments, thereby illuminating local concepts in the changing performance aesthetics and stylistics of acting. These insights are valuable for minimizing reified concepts of cultural “authenticity” (Keeler 2009; Kelley 1997), but also for avoiding the other extreme, of minimizing cultural particularities in aesthetic performance forms (Condry 2006; Reed 2016).

Important works on performance have constructively pointed out problems of slippage in translating local terminology of performances and other narrative genres (Bauman 1992, 1993, 2007) and, more broadly, aesthetics, into the researcher’s linguistic and cultural categories (Arnoldi 1995; Beeman 1993, 2011; Hoffman 2000; Reed 2007, 2016). In this regard, the Tamajaq concepts pertaining to performance aesthetics and performers pose challenges. For example, although as noted, *isatsa* derives from a term approximately denoting “a burst of laughter,” nowadays, performances in fact may be serious or amusing, and the *isatsa* genre is often translated into French as *le theatre* (“theater”) and the plays as *des sketches*.

These challenges in translation of Malian Tuareg verbal art forms in general and acting and plays specifically include problems of just what local residents meant when they described some plays as “traditional” and others as “modern.” Fundamental to understanding past and present and tradition and modernity in acting is the concept of “Creolization,” drawn from linguistics, which, like the concept of globalization applied to culture more generally, is often used as a gloss or cover-term to describe mixed aesthetics in performances and beyond, in other situations of encounter, for example, globalization (Appadurai 2000, 2013). Barber and Waterman 1995; Hannerz 1997, 2010). Although this concept is valuable in understanding the mutual cross-fertilization of influences on genres, its literalness, verbo-centrism, western neoliberal assumptions, and broadness in some contexts tends to defeat its own goals. Applied to such aesthetic practices as *isatsa*, this concept can sometimes distort and reduce the complexity of the incorporation of diverse influences, but also continuing Tuareg cultural distinctiveness, of acting and plays/sketches. As Asad (1986) has pointed out, the translation of cultures is not the same thing as the translation of languages. Nor, for that matter, is the translation of cultures the same thing as the translation of economic market forces.

Another problem here is that, contrary to what the concept of “Creolization” tends to imply in English-speaking ethnography, *isatsa* aesthetics do not always involve smoothly harmonious processes; rather, these mixed aesthetics are more like a chunky “stew” than a “soup” together, but still retain their local “flavor,” so to speak. Perhaps even gustatory imagery is more apt than verbal or market imagery here! As shown, aesthetic elements such as style, props, gestures, and dress are alternately incorporated and challenged, regarded with taste and distaste. For to some Tuareg, recall, the borrowed influences are controversial. There is both enthusiasm for them and subtle suspicion of them as an official force imposing structure upon longstanding local spontaneous creativity. Thus Creolization models are useful analytically and valuable in studies of multilingualism but should nonetheless incorporate local perceptions of power and conflict into their analyses.

Rather than either extreme of embracing or discarding this analytic device completely, I contend that one needs to explore carefully what sort of blending occurs, on whose terms, how and why these aesthetics combine some elements and not others, how local performers and audiences respond to aesthetic transformations, and what is at stake to them more broadly.

Tuareg acting performances prompt rich reflection on the “traditional-modern” and “local-global” divide, for they inspire both incorporation of, and resistance to, or at least ambivalence toward outside aesthetic influences. Many plays emerged from, and also remain merged with, more long-standing local verbal art traditions of poetry, songs, and tales organized by individuals

and families, or spontaneously performed. But in Kidal's culturally diverse urban setting, these plays/sketches are not simply eclectic but enmeshed in power relations: they are increasingly underwritten and organized by international NGO, other aid agencies, and state and town bureaucracies in health education and other social change programs, often with "top-down" decision-making. Some (though not all) Tuareg view them as merely a continuation of other policies of control. Although not entirely new, the scripted plays/sketches, particularly those with current events in their plots' themes and novel stylistic features, are considered by many actors, composers, and audiences to be more "modern," though not necessarily alien or unwelcome. Not surprisingly, there have always been, as everywhere, global and national influences on the local and regional.

The challenge for anthropologists is to represent these concepts of cultural autonomy/survival ethnographically without making their adherents sound as though they all promote right-wing nationalism, even xenophobia. Of course, not all Tuareg hold the same viewpoints, and ethnographers do not always agree personally or politically with all viewpoints they encounter in the field. As in any community, anti-globalization movements can be themselves oppressive. Anthropologists should be advocates for the communities where we work, but "reporting" prevalent or at least widely-held viewpoints, including stereotypes held by some local residents, does not imply supporting those viewpoints, nor that everyone holds the same viewpoints. Here, I hope to convey the complexity of the views expressed by many consultants/interlocutors I worked with on cultural encounters, though these are not views held by all Tuareg. As anywhere, there is debate. Not all Tuareg support the rebellions, and not all Tuareg oppose incorporating diverse or novel elements into acting, as illustrated by most youths' enthusiastic embracing of such novelties as stilts, puppets, makeup, and costumes. But disputes over these processes show the diversity within a cultural setting and what shapes it, thereby enriching the so-called "culture concept" in anthropology.

Whatever the politics of representation involved, therefore, it is undeniable that the Malian Tuareg plays/sketches both absorb and collide with outside aesthetic influences—national and global—and reveal tensions and conflicts within Tuareg society, as well as between some Tuareg, French colonial forces in the past, European nongovernmental organizations, and Malian civic bureaucracies. What, then, is distinct about acting and plays in and around Kidal? What is more cosmopolitan about them? Why have some elements been more popular than others?

Although in northern Malian Tuareg theatrical acting greater emphasis is usually placed on verbal dialogues and hand gestures than on dancing or props, these latter are not absent from all performances and take local cultural forms. For example, actors do intricate voice alterations to portray characters

of different sexes and ages: a male actor will speak in a soft, high-pitched voice in portraying a female character, and a young actor will alter the voice to make it sound “feeble” and make the hands tremble in portraying an elderly character. Media of expression here are not, in other words, strictly visual, but cross the sense modalities, a local variation on this widespread feature in African verbal and other arts (Diawara 1990; Donkor 2016; Hoffman 2000; Jensen and Zobel 1996; Schulz 2011, 2012). Nonetheless most Tuareg theatrical plays thus far do not emphasize highly elaborated masks, masquerades, or dancing as central to their plays, in contrast to many other African performances, particularly in coastal West Africa among the Dan in Côte d’Ivoire (Reed 2007), among the Yoruba in Nigeria (Drewal 1993), and the Mande peoples in Mali (Arnoldi 1995, 2009).

Tuareg actors in their plays do, however, alter dress to portray different characters and eras, though not in every performance, and dress, while suited to different characters, tends to be that worn as “good clothing” at festivals, for example, shimmering indigo-dyed cloth. Props and dress are not used as ends in themselves or channels to spiritual power; rather, only those props and costumes that are necessary in plot storytelling are widely used. For example, I saw swords used in a plot about a fight over a well, and saw eyeglasses, thermometers, and stethoscopes used in a plot about doctor-patient clinic and hospital encounters. The eyeglasses are interesting here; they convey the association of biomedically-trained healthworkers with “modern,” secular education, literacy, increasingly prestigious specialized skill certification, and therefore some power. But in contrast to eyeglasses portrayed on some famous colonial-era sculpted busts farther south in West Africa, for example, in Nigeria, this power among Tuareg is not a mimesis in the same sense, that is, this is not believed to constitute communication with spirits enabling the wearer to dominate others.

Rather than masks widely donned in many West African performances and rituals, Tuareg actors usually don head-coverings, and these have different cultural meanings from masks in African masquerades, the latter often signifying becoming a spiritual power, not disguise in the western sense (Drewal 1992; Reed 2007). Tuareg men’s turban/faceveil conveys several meanings: to prevent, rather than encourage, spirits’ entering through the orifices; to express male gender role modesty; and, according to some, to dress like the Prophet. Male actors, like other men, alter their head-coverings subtly to convey the different social statuses of characters and moods within their plots: for example, wear the men’s veil high on the face to portray a high-status character or one who is ashamed or angry, reflecting wider cultural and social practices outside performances. Although most Tuareg women do not veil the

face, women in northern Mali of diverse social backgrounds conventionally cover the hair and nape of the neck with a shawl/scarf, sometimes adjusting this to partially cover the face only momentarily to express shyness or fear toward strangers, or flirtation toward a suitor. Female actors carry this pattern over into their acting, regardless of type of character. When male actors occasionally portray female characters, they tend to cover their face slightly more fully than do most Tuareg women in ordinary social life. The purpose is not to critique or mock women through exaggeration but to present a realistic-looking female character by hiding the male actor's own face somewhat; this also may be an unconscious continuation of male gender modesty, the effect of the men's more customary face-veil.

Some musicians who also occasionally act in the plays/sketches wear their men's veil and robes only when performing music on tours abroad or at tourist-oriented festivals in Mali, in order to convey their Tuareg cultural identity to wider international audiences. Whereas at home in Kidal, the younger musicians tended to be a bit more relaxed about this, sometimes performing before predominantly youthful audiences in blue jeans during the cold season, with or without the men's turban/veil, or allowing it to slip below the chin—a violation of men's reserve/respect/modesty gender convention in long-standing Tuareg cultural mores, which the veil signifies worn in its most modest style: above the nose with only slits allowed for the eyes.

Perhaps this variation of the veil also reflects the somewhat more relaxed self-presentation of some younger urban-based Tuareg men, who are not yet considered "adult" since they are not yet marriageable or married and are in marginal economic circumstances (Rasmussen 1997, 2000). But ideally, all men should wear the face-veil often, particularly on formal occasions such as rite of passage and in the presence of affines, respected chiefs and Islamic scholars, and when they reach marriageable or married status (Casajus 1987; Claudot-Hawad 1993), and most still do this. Gradually, there may be relaxation of this in more familiar relationships; for example, young actors and media specialists who assisted me with some transcriptions and translations of the plays wore their veils very closely, high on the face during our early meetings, but after several months gradually let this style descend below the chin, and, later, appeared more often bareheaded. Thus any concept of "authentic" or "traditional" Tuareg dress in social life and in performance must take into account variations in different contexts and changes over time. Yet there remains a distinctiveness about the men's veil, in particular, as a symbol of self-conscious cultural assertion. Actors, similarly, "play" with this symbol in their art, not solely in plays but also in life, as was vividly shown by Bidi in his fooling of the army commander.

BROADER ISSUES OF THE “TRADITIONAL,” THE “MODERN,” THE LOCAL, NATIONAL, AND GLOBAL IN PERFORMANCE

Much valuable literature now recognizes “traditional,” “modern,” and “authentic” as more nuanced and complex, their boundaries fluid, permeable, and historically contingent (Clifford 1988; Appadurai 2000, 2013; Hannerz 1997, 2010; Reed 2016). Appadurai (2013, 47) points out that, whenever there are discontinuities in the knowledge that accompanies commodities, problems involving authenticity and expertise enter the picture. In the Tuareg case, distance between producers and consumers of verbal art need not “shrink” in order for the issue of “knowing exclusivity” to give way to the issue of “knowing authenticity.” There was not, in Tuareg verbal art performance, an issue of exclusivity based on literal geographic (global) spatial distance; rather, this issue took the form of the more rigid past associations of performance styles with social distance: between specific inherited social categories. Adoption of the guitar by some youthful musicians, some also fighters in the rebellions, in fact, was intended to break down these social distinctions and promote equality (Rasmussen 2000). Similarly, play performances are ideally inclusive; despite some tensions and “culture wars,” many acting ensembles are not strictly kinship or class-based.

Plays have indeed become somewhat commoditized in global commercial influences since some (though not all) youth centers and media outlets charge “ticket” admissions. But issues of authenticity, expertise, and evaluation are not only western or twentieth-century phenomena (Appadurai 2013, 49). These take different forms in different localities, and local criteria and categories of what is “authentic/traditional” and what is “innovative/new” do not fall in line neatly with western concepts or either local or global, traditional or modern. I am interested in local categories here, rather than grand evolutionary schemes of tradition and modernity.

To minimize the problems of glosses and slippage in addressing these issues of cultural scale, therefore, I use those local terms the consultants, interlocutors, and assistants themselves used to describe to me, in both informal conversations and interviews, temporal and spatial aspects of plays/sketches in order to more adequately convey the subjectivity and nuances of these aesthetics, and to situate the plays/sketches in time and space culturally.

In other words, I ask, to what cultural scale are Tamajaq-speaking residents of northern Mali referring when they designate a given play style or plot as “traditional” or “modern” or “local” or “not traditional” (as noted, their term conflating time and space, for not solely new, but also non-Tuareg)—sometimes using Tamajaq terms and sometimes using French terms?

To minimize imposing my own categories, I often asked actors and audience members to discuss the plays/sketches in the past, earlier, and in the present, how they have changed, etc., and how their own play performances differ (and resemble) other play performances in Mali, in both structured interviews and in unstructured, guided conversations, before and following plays/sketches, during rehearsals, and outside these performances altogether, during informal visiting and sociability. I also often asked various actors and nonactors how they would characterize specific plays/sketches performed, in context, inductively, attempting to avoid prompting them with my own cultural aesthetic categories. However, for more systematic data, I also deductively sought both translations of specialized French terms into Tamajaq, and vice versa: translation of Tamajaq terms into French (the second language for most, including myself, in that francophone country) from assistants and consultants in more structured interviews and transcriptions.

Despite these precautions against merely reproducing in translation my own cultural and aesthetic categories and structural binaries, I found that frequently, local consultants and assistants themselves expressed many categories that resembled cultural and academic designations and distinctions widely made in the English-speaking world between “traditional,” “modern,” “local,” and “global.” Rather than expressing these categories as dualistic or binary oppositions, however, many located them along a continuum, yet this range was still grounded in contrasts, namely: between old and new, youths and elders, town and countryside, and nomadic and sedentarized. There also emerged a triad of contrasts between local (i.e., tradition, culture, or identity: *agna*, *tada*, or *temoust*), national (i.e., central, Bamako-based state government—conceived by some as very remote and distant), and global (i.e., international, especially the NGOs).

The Tamajaq term used to characterize certain sketches with current events as plot themes, and the term translated from Tamajaq into French as *moderne*, was almost always *ayeney* (denoting “new”). The Tamajaq term given for plays with older plot themes and styles of performance, and translated from Tamajaq into French as *traditional*, was *airuwen* (“old, of long ago or of the past,” as in Kel Aghou or “People of the Past,” i.e., ancestors). Many residents who spoke French used the French terms *traditional* and *moderne*, even when I did not initiate or instigate such terms. Several actors and audience members explained that now, modern sketches have more national and global influences, since they are organized by UNESCO, youth centers, schools, and hospitals. Whereas traditionally, plays are done more spontaneously by an ensemble, or at an evening festival (i.e., one not organized in advance by officials or civic institutions). Elsewhere (Rasmussen 1995) I found that spontaneity of verbal art performance, still prevalent in rural Tuareg communities, is vividly expressed in the term *tan daman*, a title and drum pattern genre of

a spirit possession song, which denotes “something quickly organized and concluded, a difficult-to-recapture event.”

In a typical play/sketch in town, the audience does not usually enter or participate verbally during performances. There is, for example, no “call and response” pattern so prevalent in much of West Africa and the African diaspora, and audience members at plays do not complete and/or correct dialogues for actors. Rather, audiences encourage actors, musicians, poets, and singers by their applause. Importantly, applause is crucial throughout all Tuareg verbal arts, even those characterized by greater spontaneity and audience incorporation. Card, an ethnomusicologist, for example, found that applause was viewed as part of the performance itself, required to complete it aesthetically (Card 1981). Spirit possession song verses frequently urge the audience to applaud (Rasmussen 1995).

The implication here is that there is to some extent a give-and-take between old and new, local and outside, in performance aesthetics—a process called “a conversation” in some analyses of religious conversion (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993), and “Creolization” in studies of language, performance, and globalization (Barber and Waterman 1995; Hannerz 1997, 2010). In my view, however, this process among Tuareg is more analogous to what I term “percolation” or “simmering,” since there are underlying ambiguities and tensions concerning the extent of the plays/sketches’ official orchestration, on the one hand, and local cultural spontaneity, on the other. These terms are apt; for in fact, in Tamajaq, the term *ichumar*, the name of the youthful generation active in many popular performances, is translated by some youths as deriving from the Tamajaq verb *chemmer* denoting resistance (hence a kind of “simmering” in the sense of upheaval), resembling “percolation.”

Moreover, in the Tuareg case, influence is not necessarily always from national or global external forces. Influence is often at once external and internal to the creative artist him or herself, as shown earlier in the concept of *tenere* or *essuf*: an internal but still “foreign to the person/self” psychological “wild” experience of nostalgia, and simultaneously, also an external and literal space beyond the camp/village. Its older meaning also refers to a place literally outside the tent, camp, and civilization infested with spirits of the wild, Kel Essuf (Claudot-Hawad 1993). This external force, “wild” (or “nostalgia”), can also, therefore, invade the soul (*iman*) of the performing artist, not just external to him/her.

The point is that the wild exterior is not always identified with literally the national or global; nor is it always identified with its “traditional” superhuman spirit forces. Some are “modern,” such as loneliness from social upheavals (dispersion of kin and friends as refugees), to which Ahoulou sorrowfully alluded as the inspiration and subject matter of his art. Thus local/global and inside/outside binary oppositions come apart in some play and

poetry compositions, when the older concept of the wild in personal creativity becomes exposed to new social contexts.

On the other hand, standing in tension with this classic aesthetic concept are two terms that some more formally-educated urban Tuareg use for artistry that do come from literally outside forces: *la globalisation* and *le theatre*, loan terms from French. For many playwrights and actors, however, these involve continuity and incorporation rather than replacement of older verbal arts, as when some poems and monologues are converted into play plots with dialogues between two or more characters. Most actors and non-actors tended, nonetheless, to use the terms *isatsa* and sketches interchangeably, implying “newness” within “oldness.” For example, one actor put it this way:

Sketches are like advice, they influence people, and have a message. They are like *tenzoghén* (traditional, older) tales, but the nongovernmental organizations active in job-training and other outreach (for example, consciousness-raising about education) now request specific thematic stories, plots that serve to raise consciousness about current issues. Both traditional and modern sketches at first were not performed in public; in the past, they were performed in the evening in small groups, just as other long-standing Tuareg musical performances often still are today. Modern sketches are also more sophisticated, from travel; their ideas are more accepted.

Another actor and composer of plays/sketches explained:

Traditional plays tended to have a universal message, for example, youth/elder relationships and religious morality messages. Modern sketches are primarily urban (in the town), and transformed (using *evolues* in French, denoting “advanced” here), having more urban messages, with goals to unify people, for example, themes in plots urging parents to send daughters to school and exhorting sick people to go to the hospital.

Tekres, founder of the ensemble Joy, indicated that older persons still gave her ideas, but she and others completed them and converted them into plays. She mentioned some changes in the older monologue tradition (*majaret*), which derived from older themes “based on and directed by our ancestors,” giving as examples poems and tales: “Modern (i.e., new) sketches,” she continued, “are more based on actual current events.” These sketches were the specialty of her own acting ensemble, Joy. The reason for this was her interstitial and prominent, rather than marginal, position: she mediated between opposing town political and religious forces. Recall, for example, how despite Tekres’s earlier opposition to singing songs in Bamana, she nonetheless married a non-Tuareg man from the South.

Also illustrative of local concepts of “traditional” and “modern” performance, therefore, was Tekres’s intersectionality between tradition and modernity in her town activism: specifically, her mediating between conservative and “progressive” (as locally perceived) mores and aesthetic criteria. This role was vividly shown in her influential role during a Miss Kidal beauty contest. Immensely popular but also controversial performances in the West African media, also in other regions of Mali (Schulz 2011, 2012), beauty contests were introduced in Kidal around the turn of the twenty-first century, called by the slang term “Miss” (here, short for “Miss Kidal”). Each major Malian town stages one annually.

These contests are locally organized but modeled upon international and regional contests aired on television. The first Miss Kidal beauty contest was held in December 2006 on a stage at *la Maison du Luxembourg*, which sponsored its pageants until the 2012 Azawad-related violence.

PROMOTING THE MISS KIDAL BEAUTY CONTEST

Tekres served on this “Miss Kidal” contest’s board of judges with several other prominent town residents, including a European man, because she had won prizes and recognition for her activism in youth issues, because her plays were prominent at youth-oriented festivals, and also because of her valuable contributions to health education in her play plots. Thus her participation in the “Miss” contest was in recognition of and an extension of her interest in advocacy, a logical expression of her accomplished and prestigious position as a famous performing artist in town. This position at times held priority over her more general adherence to longstanding Tuareg cultural and aesthetic emphasis upon upper-class female modesty and restraint. Also, the beauty contest’s novel emphasis on visual sense modality appeal held sway over long-standing emphasis in play performances, on alternative sense modalities. This contest also was novel in its focus on women, in contrast to long-standing Tuareg performances’ usual inclusion of both women and men to be judged for appearance and skill.

Although sponsored by an outside aid agency in that region that superimposed to some extent western European beauty ideals on local women, this contest, in the board’s and contestants’ viewpoints, offered opportunities for the women to win monetary rewards and thereby assist their impoverished families—a view different from western feminist views that usually oppose such contests. Tekres was therefore in a mediating but also contradictory position between these contending forces, one side led by nongovernmental and other aid agencies, and the new youth center, the other led by some older and more devout and conservative Tuareg who felt ambivalent about the changes promoted by those agencies and their public performances.

Tekres related to me how, “at first, this Miss Kidal beauty contest was not well received by everyone. Some of our more conservative families—mostly nobles and the respected clan of Kel Essuk Islamic scholar/marabouts, had initially forbade their daughters to display themselves in public, from these values of and *imojagh* (dignity) and *takarakit* (reserve).”

“But they changed their minds,” she continued with a triumphant smile, “once they learned that winners of this contest received substantial monetary prizes that could benefit them and their families.” Others related how they were also placated by the dress of the contestants, who in the first part wore “traditional” or conventional Tuareg dress (e.g., long robes with a scarf/shawl that covers women’s hair, but not the face) and in the second part of the contest, wore “western” (i.e., European) dress, but not, notably, bathing suits.

Hence a compromise here was evident. Religious influences played a role in this. Even prior to the armed occupation by more militant Islamist reformist forces, Kidal’s stricter Islamic scholars and elders on the *amenokal*’s council opposed scanty dress, despite some other Malian Muslims’ recognition that there can be diverse pathways to devotion to Allah (Schulz 2011).

Yet there were additional, more subtle local cultural reasons for this initial opposition to the beauty contest, as well, which had to do with very different aesthetic criteria than those traditionally used in evaluating acting and plays. The visual was of paramount importance, and the focus, of course, was on the female contestants. For example, it was assumed that women considered “beautiful” should also be well-dressed and bejeweled. The overexposed and nearly nude female body, without elaborate dress and adornment, valued in occidental media, was not aesthetically valued in northern Mali, recalling some Indonesian reactions reported by Brenner (1999) to media portrayals of scantily clad European women.

Moreover, although Tuareg aesthetic tastes tend to emphasize the visual appeal of layered, voluminous and flowing dress and jewelry and amulet adornment during courtship, witty conversation and verbal skill are equally important (Loughran-Bini and Seligman 2006). In fact, in everyday sociability as well as during courtship and more “traditional” performances, both sexes are expected to dress modestly—men even more so, with their turban/face-veil, indeed, these qualities can also be a “pathway” for both sexes to Islamic religious devotion. Dress acts as an extension of Tuareg bodily gender aesthetics: of dignity and reserve—practiced by not solely women, but also men, albeit in different ways.

In the “Miss Kidal” beauty contest, these mores remained strong in the dress of the female contestants. In convincing parents and marabouts to approve their daughters’ participation in the beauty pageant/contest, Tekres also reminded them that, “even in traditional rural Tuareg society, there have always been beauty competitions for both men and women: for women, these

involve physical appearance. For men, physical appearance is important, but also important is how they ride their camels and dress during their *ilugan* camel-parade.”

Notably here, Tekres equated “traditional” with “rural” society—a correlation some African studies scholars have disputed (Martin and O’Meara 1998), but one nonetheless expressed by some local residents themselves.

The important point here is that, to Tekres and some Kidal parents who were persuaded to allow their daughters to participate in the controversial “Miss” beauty contest, this public performance was not entirely novel. Guided by Tekres, they came to see it as complementary to men’s “traditional” performances, and as having continuity rather than rupture with the rural “traditional” Tuareg festivals. On the other hand, the Miss contest’s focus upon the female body as a visual marker of beauty and aesthetic skill, but not the male body, and as overriding verbal art performance and other actions, was indeed novel. For in contrast to rural Tuareg communities, Kidal had no male counterpart to the “Miss” beauty contest. The closest approximation to this, once held in towns and now held only in the countryside, is the camel race, where men parade their own and their camels’ finery, expertise, and stamina. Even there, performance skills in camel-riding and the aesthetic skill in decorations on the camel (woven blanket, carved saddle, and other trappings) are more valued than the male rider’s physical attractiveness per se.

Finally, though Tekres’s argument was effective in convincing some opponents of the female beauty contest to eventually accept it, she glossed over another difference between the old and new practices: even in the rural contests, female as well as male prestige derives from skill in witty conversation and jokes, wordplay games, and music, poetry, and song, not solely from physical/visual bodily appearance, despite the importance of adornment.

The role of Tekres in influencing the authorization of the Miss Kidal contest is therefore significant. It reveals two key points relevant to “tradition” and “modernity” and also acts as an instructive “foil” to old and new play performances’ aesthetic evaluations in terms of “tradition” and “modernity.” First, the prominence of this actor in her community extended beyond her immediate performance practices. Second, the criteria of aesthetic excellence in this Miss Kidal contest, based on and expressed in visual imagery, were markedly different from the criteria of excellence and the imagery expressing them in evaluating the aesthetics of theatrical plays. As a member of the board of judges in the beauty contest, Tekres appealed to both traditional standards of modesty and to novel or “modern” standards of visual feminine beauty, though she bridged these and also added an economic incentive in order to convince parents to allow daughters to participate. Here, Tekres in some respects followed the ideal role of actors in “protecting” the community: in diffusing discord and possible violent retaliation. In other respects,

she moved traditional aesthetic criteria toward more “western” media representations of “beauty,” in active agency. Women contestants, for example, were positively evaluated if they were neither “too fat” nor “too thin,” and hair had to be “long” rather than cropped.

EVALUATING OLD AND NEW PLAYS

Although there is some importance of visual imagery in evaluating plays, nonetheless, outside this beauty contest, additional sense modalities are evoked in comparing older and newer performances and in evaluating how far old and new plays meet local aesthetic criteria. In assessing the quality of theatrical plays and other verbal art performances, the primary criterion for excellence is the metaphorical comparison of a skillful performance to food (i.e., appeal to the gustatory sense modality). For example, an older member of Tekres’s Joy acting ensemble compared the refinement and polishing of performances during rehearsals to the “filtering” of tea. Here, a comparison to cooked, well-prepared food and tea (tea is boiled with leaves and served strong, but also well-strained in several pourings, before drinking in glasses resembling shot-glasses, but holding more liquid) was used. Tea is supposed to be strained or “filtered” in order to be “ripe” before it is poured into the glasses. Another female actor felt that “a good play/sketch also has a good dialogue, like food being well-cooked or an art object being completed.”

This gustatory sensory analogy appears widely throughout Tuareg cultural criteria of excellence throughout verbal art performances: for example, songs in the musical spirit possession exorcism ceremony should blend well with the drum, calabash, and applause in a well-balanced whole, as tea is to sugar (Rasmussen 1995).

These evaluations and the imagery used to express them show that the beauty contest was an anomaly in relation to other Tuareg performances. Neither Tekres nor anyone else connected to the Miss contest mentioned oral or gustatory images in evaluating the contestants’ “beauty” nor how the competition presented them. Tekres played an important role in reformulating concepts of traditional and modern.

Additional insights into local reformulations of “traditional” and “modern” were offered in comparisons—some evaluative, some not—between types of stories presented in the plays, uses of dress, and ways of learning acting skills.

Atakor, the renowned older actor, poet, and comedian met earlier who had in his youth faced dangers of drought and war, asserted, “I prefer old play themes based upon *tenzoghén* (folktales) because they are great stories about bravery.” He further explained that changes in the newer plays/sketches occur “because people are not the same, for example, dress is not the same, and

work has also changed in life. A good sketch consists of a good word (*tawalt*) and a good composer (*amokal*).”

Lala, a female actor in the Visionaries ensemble, considered a good sketch to be one “on the subject of things of the past, or what one must do, for example, at a child’s nameday, on decentralization in Mali, or in giving gifts.” She explained that changes in plays concern new plots’ themes: for example, digging wells and planting gardens. She felt that “a good sketch must be interesting. Traditional performance follows our traditions (which Lala characterized as “rules”). Modern means “new” *ayeney*). In the past, people were nomadic; we now are *evolues* (Fr. advanced; developed).”

Notably, even within this conversation conducted in Tamajaq, Lala used the French colonial-era evolutionary term for “advanced.” Thus in her viewpoint, “traditional” implies rule-governed by older conventions, and modern implies “development” in the hierarchically ranked sense promoted by some NGOs and aid agencies with hints of colonial and evolutionary influence in the French term *evolue*.

An adolescent female actor, who was also a CEG (middle school) student, considered “traditional” sketches to be old and “modern” sketches to be new, and she explained that, “plays’ changes are in response to current events, such as sedentarization, urbanization, and globalization.” This student, notably, used more technical terms to describe these processes, likely from her classes.

Another female actor explained additional changes:

In the past, styles were different, for example, in dress; modern plays involve clothing that is modern, such as shoes, and also involve changes in plots: modern plots are usually for purposes of consciousness-raising (used French term, *la sensibilisation*; Tamajaq *asemeter*) such as health and mayorial projects (i.e., edutainment). In the past, plots included camels and swordfights. Now there are more diverse themes.

A female actor considered *tenzohen* compositions derived from tales as “older, from the past, often making people laugh.” She described traditional themes of sketches as including “old histories and stories.” When I asked her about older sketches’ prevalent themes, she described them as “often about warriors and hunters.” Specific plays performed during my research that the same actor considered “older” included one about a fight over a well, another about advice from a dying parent, and one about a dispute adjudicated by an Islamic scholar.

“Whereas by contrast,” the same actor continued, “modern themes are about current events and news.” For this actor, moreover, “Modern roles of actors today include consciousness-raising, morality, education, rights, good

acts for youths and their future in order to protect us.” To this actor, the newer plays involve what she termed “kel tisiway, or people of the script, who are special composers of sketches/plays, but they accept some ideas from others. Ideally (we) performers follow the rules of the kel tisiway (people of the script), but we usually also talk it over, round-table style during rehearsal.”

Several actors also pointed out that the modern dress of actors has changed: before, this was predominantly indigo and black, more traditional Tuareg dress colors, but now actors wear more urban dress, for example, cotton *bazin* (damask). In the play classified as “traditional” or “older,” about a fight over a well, for example, I saw actors wearing the more “traditional” dress and colors and the men fully veiled.

In learning to act, similar references to old and new performances were made. A male actor explained that “actors learn by listening to composers and by rote (oral) memory, though some poets and play composers occasionally compose in the written Tifinagh alphabet.” Some older songs were similarly written down in Tifinagh and had distinctive accompanying instrumental rhythm patterns, but this pattern is rare for plays.

The same actor continued: “One should follow composers’ compositions unless our suggested changes are accepted by the composers. Important here are the (spoken) words of elders and composers: we actors act them out. *Tenzoghen*, the ancient traditional plays, have plots that are from the elders.” Thus alongside some written versions, oral traditions passed down are important, and there is no neatly linear progression from oral to writing; each type of composition can be characteristic of either older or newer works.

Also, this person and many others associated the new *tisiwey* plays/sketches widely considered “modern” with youths, who do not always observe taboo subjects in their plots. For example, one modern sketch organized by the Kidal hospital focused on the topic of illnesses considered shameful and a private matter for many Tuareg (i.e., STDs). Yet in contrast to the audience outrage when the Caravan Without Borders play about AIDS was first presented in the marketplace, the hospital-sponsored play was successfully presented because it was performed in more secluded spaces: in several family compounds in town and also in a few surrounding rural villages. It was not necessary to move this play to a lycee. Thus even in this hospital-sponsored play about a “shameful” topic, there was sensitivity to the long-standing Tuareg emphasis on modesty and reserve concerning sexuality.

The point is that while many of my interlocutors often associated “traditional” and “modern” with distinctions they perceived as pertaining to old and new, for example, between ancestors, elders and youths, parents and children, and between observing taboos and breaking taboos such as modesty in sexuality and dress, in actual practice these categories sometimes overlapped or straddled boundaries. These flexibilities reflect the alternating

cultural orientations in that region: many Tuareg in Kidal remain semi-nomadic, moving in and out of town seasonally following herds to pastures and fleeing droughts and wars, and then returning. There persists a fluidity to even semi-nomadic town life that also permeates urban performing arts. But many newer plays/sketches organized by nongovernmental organizations and state institutions and by their official authorities (directors and other staff) portray these contrasts in more oppositional and ossified terms: for example, as shown in subsequent chapters, their play plots often equate rural nomads with nonliteracy and portray them as “country bumpkins” as opposed to literate and “civilized” urbanites.

Therefore, although some ensembles in Kidal perform plays with both old and new themes, there is nonetheless a widely expressed sense of some contrasts between old and new, rural and urban, old and young, and alien and local, and these involve changes. But changes in aesthetic themes, practices, and styles are in practice not neatly linear or sequential; innovative forms do not always replace long-standing forms. However, prominent in these interlocutors’ subjective distinctions among play performances is a temporal frame referencing back to memories of elders and ancestors for older cultural themes and aesthetic styles. Town bureaucrats as representatives of the nation-state and regional governments, who intermittently extend and withdraw their presence and power, media and nongovernmental agency directors (the latter evoking historic colonial forces), and local youths as critics of the state and also sometimes of their own elders and parents, thus become “new” and “modern,” and even “outsiders” (i.e., nonlocal) but not necessarily “global.”

A few actors called traditional themes *ajew*, which involve not staged plays at all but rather festivals where a woman sings and/or plays the *tende* drum or the *anzad* bowed one-string lute, and where there is flirting and courtship, still practiced in many rural and urban Tuareg communities (Card 1981 [1978]; Borel 1988; Casajus 2000). Yet one female actor and player of the *tende* drum from around Kidal, also in the Joy acting ensemble, felt that “sketches are different from *tende* drumming and other musical festivals: (the modern) sketches tend not to have the *tende* in them.”

Thus local exegeses of “traditional/authentic” and “modern/innovative/new” plays and acting include some pervasive observations, but also some disagreements. There are multiple voices, but not always having equal say. Useful here is Duranti’s observation that “the license to perform certain genres is an indicator of power relations in a community” (Duranti 1994, 6). The plays, particularly those popularly referred to as *des sketches*, considered “modern,” are used strategically by officials to benefit particular persons and institutions, enabling them, at least on the surface and in official intent, to meet goals. The actors, NGO directors, state and global bureaucrats all

attempt to manipulate and establish genre, style, plot theme, and specialist boundaries and oppositions, but some actors respond by trying to defend long-standing cultural concepts of not rigidity but aesthetic fluidity and flexibility of performance genres. Official agendas are certainly important in enacting the plays, but there is also independent creativity and collaborative input still encouraged by most composers and performers.

The intertextual integrative processes involved in performances therefore echo, but also suggest, modifications and refinements of some processes related to Creolization suggested by Ulf Hannerz (1997 [1987], 2010), Appadurai (2000), and Karin Barber and Christopher Waterman (1995). Barber and Waterman describe Creolization as “what happens when locals selectively appropriate elements from metropolitan cultures in order to construct their own hybrid medium in which to articulate their own, historically and socially specific, experience” (1995, 240). Barber and Waterman discuss three advantages of the Creolization model: first, it stresses the active, creative role of people as culture producers. Second, it draws attention to the fact that, in colonial and postcolonial African cultures, we witness the creation of something qualitatively new, with its own dynamics, rather than just a dilution or corruption of something formerly “authentic.” Third, this new thing is represented as a language-like generative system; the function and significance of heterogeneous elements are determined by their place in this system and not by the meaning they had formerly in their source culture (Barber and Waterman 1995, 240). Appadurai (2000) and Hannerz (2010), on the other hand, in their focus on globalization process relating to Creolization-like encounters, move beyond a linguistic analogy but nonetheless still tend to situate local and global, tradition and modernity in frameworks emphasizing models of economics.

More broadly, analyses of cultural encounters and transformations with Creolization-like models contribute much valuable insight, though not without limitations, to understanding how heterogeneous elements in artists’ creative processes are given new significance in new contexts. Tuareg performances, like the Dan Ge performances in Côte d’Ivoire (Reed 2007) and the diasporic narratives of Ivoirian immigrants in the United States who remain in communication with other immigrants and also with their homeland (Reed 2016) are neither a “corruption” of formerly authentic practices nor something qualitatively new. On this matter, I agree.

On the other hand, the Tuareg performances are unevenly recontextualized, without necessarily being either extreme of “authentic” (an essentialization) or “qualitatively new or corrupt” (a value judgment). Also, local performers in northern Mali tend to disagree about the significance of certain changes in performance aesthetics, and diverse influences are differently received by play composers, actors, and audiences, thereby introducing more nuanced

understandings of these processes. As anywhere, Tuareg actors in and around Kidal have always creatively combined and juxtaposed different influences. Thus processes of “Creolization” are not entirely new, and this concept needs to be situated in multivocal contexts of power. If used too carelessly, it tends to become a gloss or cover-term eliding more complex, varied, and disputed processes.

PERFORMANCE AND SPACE

These dynamics are further illustrated by continuities and transformations in spatial orientations of performances. Spatially, Tuareg performances have not, until recently, involved a restrictive raised or otherwise delineated stage, or an audience in a closed or limited space such as at the Radio Tisdas courtyard or *la Maison du Luxembourg* stage. The only enclosed space of performance in the countryside is the female-owned tent, and performances occur here only in cases of small, intimate groups visiting a single artist (for example, a woman musician, male poet, or tale-teller), often spontaneously performing. In one rural more nomadic community, I observed a woman fall into trance while listening to *tende* drumming songs on a radio. I also frequently heard women and smiths spontaneously tell tales and riddles during informal visiting. However, in rural areas most larger-scale festivals and performances (for example, musical choral and drumming, camel races with drumming, and musical possession exorcisms) are presented in an open space, their only restriction being that they must be held far from mosques. Usually these open performances are very inclusive, free, and performed for anyone who happens to be there, or wishes to attend, and audiences mill about freely, rarely seated or still.

In Saharan towns such as Kidal and Agadez, grid-like streets and sedentarized geometric house forms have not entirely eliminated the open performances. Nor is there a raised stage in all performances there. There persist some spontaneous or privately organized performances. Nonetheless, urban politics’ sensitive topics, commoditization/commercialization, and built forms all coalesce to encourage some performances to be held either within clearly delineated spaces and buildings (inside walled family compounds, at youth centers, and sports stadiums). At youth centers and stadiums, these are held on a raised stage or platform. The most novel element is the raised platform stage, but solid walls (in contrast to tree-branch fences surrounding rural tents) also introduce change. The public enclosed spaces (though not the private family compound walls) usually charge entrance fees, and tend to create more economically exclusive and restricted audiences (i.e., audiences who can pay money to enter these spaces).

On the other hand, some urban performances still take place in a space nearly resembling that in the countryside: for example, in outlying neighborhoods, in Kidal's case, far from the neighborhood of the Ifoghas *amenokal* and his council of elders and Kel Essouk Islamic scholars/marabouts, who forbid secular music and play performances in their Aliou neighborhood.

Another venue popular in Kidal that resembles more closely the rural performance space pattern of open space is the marketplace. This carries some risks, however, as shown in the Caravans Without Borders performance, when actors had to retreat to a more remote space (the lycee on the edge of town) because of attacks by those opposed to their style (with puppets) and theme (of mixed-sex sociability, courtship and "sex education"). Ironically, however, even here, there was also continuity: as with rural performance spaces on the edges of villages and camps: this space (at a lycee on the edge of town and on the opposite side of Kidal from religious leaders and mosques) was still distant, and again like many rural performances, this controversial "modern" play/sketch attracted a predominantly youthful and nondevout audience: students and teachers.

THE FUSION OF IBARADEN AND TROUBADOUR IMAGERY IN MODERN ACTING AND ISSUES OF POWER

The question arises: in these selective and disputed incorporations of diverse cultural influences, to what extent is this percolating from "below," and to what extent is this process orchestrated from above?

Instructive here is the overarching trope of actors as gallant and brave warriors. Some European-sponsored aid programs aimed at youths have selected the long-standing Tuareg cultural theme of gallant, "troubadour-like" warriors and their courtship of noble women, with a distinctive goal: to inspire, by evoking and linking the imagery of both Tuareg *imghad* and French medieval troubadour traditions, as new goals for actors specifically and youths more generally. In comparing the contemporary actors metaphorically to ancient gallant warriors in an interesting selective "blend" of these traditions, the purpose is to promote self-esteem, to inspire, and also to rechannel some persons' ambitions away from fighting in wars toward dignity and courage in acting and in society. Recall for example, Bidi's fooling of the army commander and, in so doing, his protecting of women from the latter's possible harassment.

In the past, gallant men who fought for, defended, and composed praise poetry for noble elites, particularly for the women, whom they also courted but in principle could not marry in the then-endogamous stratified society,

were in fact similar to medieval French knights, the latter described by Casajus's work on French troubadours (Casajus 2013). In Kidal, NGO and aid agencies are not the sole organizers of plays. Local families and individuals also organize them, and older actors and comedians themselves identified with the ancestors and their cultural knowledge and words in the older plays, even before agencies organized the newer plays. Acting ensembles perform not solely at the youth center or radio station but also within compounds of families and at festivals outside the more "official" venues.

But the point here is that there are both long-standing local inspirations and outside reworkings of them in this acting trope. In other words, the official purpose of civic agencies in organizing some acting ensembles and plays is to encourage the more youthful actors to act in new plays/sketches that are often interspersed with job-training programs, education, and socialization, replacing older Tuareg socialization and education that many younger persons have missed, and to divert their meanings of "warrior" toward peaceful ends.

Hints of some strategic evocations of the French troubadour role, and fusions of past French troubadours, Tuareg warriors, and contemporary actors, are neither "distorted" nor "inauthentic" representations, however. For among the Tuareg, *ibaraden* are already associated with social criticism, protection, warning, and gallantry, and they arose in their stratified society well before French colonial and Malian state influences. But in the state and NGO-organized edutainment plays, particularly those organized at youth centers such as the *Maison du Luxembourg*, power is unequal, and the focus of protection has shifted. There have arisen efforts to protect not solely nobles or women but also men's damaged self-esteem and missed gender role socialization caused by social and economic turmoil and political violence, in hopes of restoring men's respect toward and by women. The goal is to highlight connections between the new *isatsa* theater and a single aspect of its older referents: the long-standing "troubadour"-like traditions, evoking local memories in which many take pride but now reoriented toward different new agendas. Yet this process risks essentialization of Tuareg culture and some reduction and ossification of actors' roles, which include protecting the community but more, as well.

ENDANGERED BUT RESILIENT ACTING AND PERFORMANCE: WHAT NEXT?

Additional wider forces reshape acting. In many respects, increasing bureaucratization and militarization of powerful official infrastructures impinging upon Tuareg communities threaten acting traditions. In other respects, these very challenges inspire new forms of creativity. The sporadic violence,

ultimately culminating in the conflicts over Tuareg dissidents' declared Republic of Azawad in 2012, further complicated these processes. Even prior to Azawad, there arose uncertainty about the future of acting and other verbal art traditions in the diverse and competing militant factions already emerging in that region—most invaders from outside, but later with a few local recruits, as well. Some militant dissidents presented themselves as “secular,” or at least adhering to Tuareg cultural interpretations of the Qur'an, with very “liberal” attitudes toward performances, festivals, and mixed-sex gatherings. Others favored a narrower, more “orthodox” (Arabic cultural) interpretation of *shar'ia* and where they later seized power, forbade all public performances, and persecuted performers. Over longer-term, regional peacekeeping efforts dating back to the 1990s have produced uneven results for local performers.

What is certain is that what is “traditional” and what is “modern” continue to be much contested—not solely in play performance styles but also in plot themes and wider social practices.

As the Malian civil war drew near in the North, the emergent category of a “modern” sketch/play represented to a large degree an attempt by official authorities from “top down” to impose a crystallized or “freeze-frame” genre upon more fluid long-standing cultural traditions of Tamajaq verbal art performance and to fashion some plays into official state spectacles to discourage resistance. There were also constructive intentions, in these policies, to reassure residents' safety from dangers, to heal rifts, and restore self-esteem. However, the “top down” messages were not the only messages in acting, which alternately reproduced, resisted, and modified them.

In sum, there are external constraints in sociopolitical hierarchies of cultural knowledge and verbal art expression. But there are also contexts available for personal spontaneity and maneuvering that enable specialists to critique official cultural representations. These processes receive further elaboration in play plots and social life.

Part II

THE PLAYS

*Popular Plot Themes and Their
Wider Social Contexts*

Chapter 5

Rural-Urban and Nomadic-Sedentarized Encounters

Nostalgia and Disdain

One prominent theme in many play plots concerns the predicament of rural persons, many of whom are also semi-nomadic herders to varying degrees, but whose characters in these plays are all always glossed as “nomads,” and often portrayed encountering representatives from sedentarized and urban bureaucracies in Kidal. Many Tamajaq-speaking persons in Kidal, as well as in the countryside, alternate seasonally between rural and urban occupations: for example, in market trading, artisanry, and, where rural relatives still own livestock and oasis gardens, in herding and planting.

Yet many Tuareg in Kidal express widespread nostalgia for their rural homes, kin, property, and lifestyles. One actor expressed this sentiment when, at sundown, he mused dreamily, “If I were in the countryside right now, I would be bringing my animals into camp. We follow our animals.” A woman who graciously hosted me during one of my research projects resided on the outskirts of Kidal but still attempted to practice herding skills of tent repair, goat cheese preparation, and leatherworking, insisted, “Maybe houses are better looking, but I prefer to be under the stars (which could be seen from inside the arch of her elliptical nomadic tent)!” She also worried about thieves in the center of town; for this woman and some others, the town space was the “wild” in its moral uncertainty. Another Kidal resident associated the town with remembered political violence when he observed, “Of course, we want peace, but we also have many bad memories (of massacres) here.” He found it difficult to forget the pressures on rural persons to enter towns for food relief during droughts and the violence between the Bamako-based army and Tuareg in the Kidal region.

Some local cultural revival leaders believe that settled and urban environments endanger Tuareg culture and the Tamajaq language. In response, they promote a perceived unity in language, arts, and dress. While I was visiting a

family in town, for example, the household head eagerly called me to come over and see a rural camelier, in full “traditional” Tuareg dress, arriving in his compound perched on a camel with beautiful trappings, rare in Kidal, insisting, “this man is a real Tuareg!”

A number of plots reflect on and rework these issues and tensions. In particular, the more “modern” edutainment plays/sketches requested by officials tend to portray rural and nomadic persons with disdain, albeit also with varying degrees of empathy, to depict rural/nomadic and urban/settled as polar opposite “types” rather than nuanced subject positions practicing a range of lifestyles, and represent encounters and interactions between them as stressful and conflictual. In these portrayals, townspersons (usually specialist/professionals) often instruct, or simply scorn, rural and semi-nomadic Tuareg.

Play plots, of course, regardless of theme, do not directly replicate social life. Still, I contend, like myths (Levi-Strauss 1962) and mythico-histories (Hannoum 2008; Malkki 1995), they reveal prevalent preoccupations in culture and memory. Also, like soap operas, films (Drummond 1995), and online games in cyberspace (Boellstorff 2009), play plots refer to widely experienced predicaments, sometimes explicitly as social commentaries and sometimes subtly as logical mental classifications. Yet plots and actors also critically respond to and rework these themes.

In other words, ideas portrayed in plot themes described in this book do not go uncontested. Plots’ meanings and uses emerge neither in a prepackaged recipe nor in an abstract vacuum, but rather from practices, negotiations, and reinterpretations. Accordingly, I analyze the following play plots in the present chapter with characters described as rural “nomads,” and also other play plots with different themes in the remaining chapters, not solely in terms of their contents or their abstract symbolism but also their wider contexts: historical and social processes to which they refer, as well as more immediate subjective critical responses to them. In this, I contend, despite powerful agents and constraints, several possible meanings are constructed: intended, unintended, and “carried away” from performances by organizers, actors, and nonactors. In other words, these plots have agendas, conscious and unconscious, and consequences, intended and unintended.

Many plots address differences and tensions surrounding rural-urban relationships that emerge in social encounters and are reworked in negotiations. In these plays, two categories—“rural” and “nomad”—are often conflated. Their plots are often composed upon request from “above” by state and NGO officials as edutainment. Their goal is to persuade people to come into town, where it is presumably “safer,” and where they can be integrated into national and civic infrastructures of health and education. In most of these plots, characters include urban-based specialists who condescendingly instruct, and sometimes reproach, “rural nomadic” persons about health,

sanitation, literacy, modern secular schooling, and national political events. Thus these rural/urban themed plots are rhetorical, seeking to convince northern Malian populations to settle into the orbit of civic and state bureaucracies.

Consider, for example, the following play about AIDS education.

“AIDS EXISTS”

This play, entitled “*Le SIDA Existe*” (title given in French, denoting “AIDS Exists”), was composed by Tekres, founder of Joy, and performed by its youth wing, consisting of actors in her family and their friends. Its plot and dialogue warn residents of a small village about the dangers of AIDS, featuring three principal characters: a messenger, a doctor, and the wife of a nomad. The story is about a messenger sent by the town mayor who arrives with “news” for the village chief, who at first doubts that AIDS exists everywhere, even in his village, declaring that this is only “politics.”

The messenger holds a village meeting and teaches villagers as well as the chief and elder, thereby breaking a traditional taboo in Tuareg society against youths teaching elders about that disease: “Greetings, chief/elder of this village. I have come around with news for the village chief/elder. This sickness is known by the town mayor.”

In other words, the knowledge of the urban professional overrides respect for rural elderhood in this context. In the play’s conclusion, the doctor accompanying the messenger has the chief and elder bring a woman, described only as “the wife of a nomad,” to be examined. The doctor takes out clinic instruments and examines her. Her husband, the doctor, and the chief speak together softly off to the side. The doctor diagnoses her and her husband with AIDS.

The chief inquires, “What am I going to do for them?”

The doctor replies, “You must build a building apart for them.”

The chief then asserts, “I shall bring them outside the village into the *tenere* (desert), and then later to the hospital.”

Note how, despite its official message emanating from town bureaucratic concerns with the danger of AIDS, this statement adds a Tuareg cultural motif (the notion of the desert wild outside civilization) to this discourse, and also includes the local concept of contagion in cases of some, though not all, diseases (Rasmussen 2001a, 2006). [Although some Tuareg concepts of illness causation emphasize nonliteral pollution (i.e., human social and spirit-related causes), others recognize more literal contagion, and there is a local term, *izufnen*, approximately denoting microbes.] In this detail, therefore, a very

subtle critical “sub-text” of resistance is hinted as well, neither emphasized explicitly by the play’s general plot theme, nor mentioned in the composers’ or actors’ exegesis to me, but nonetheless salient: in effect, the wife of the nomad, allegedly infected with AIDS and isolated because of this, risks being disenfranchised from her own property, the tent, traditionally the dowry brought by women to their marriage, built by their elderly female relatives, and a secure home for women throughout life.

This plot and others with similar themes, sometimes obviously and sometimes subtly, reveal growing gaps between an emerging semi-sedentarized and settled town bourgeoisie and its infrastructure and bureaucracy and rural persons—whether “nomadic” as they are glossed by authorities, or not, and whether predominantly herders as the official conflation of “rural” and “nomad” implies, or not. The rural-urban divide, in other words, persists, but has taken on new, more complex class contours. In the viewpoint of some settled town-dwellers and authorities, rural persons in general, but especially “nomads,” a very imprecise popular gloss, are supposedly “uncivilized.”

THE WIDER CONTEXT

Policies of coerced sedentarization of nomads in northern regions of Mali and Niger during the twentieth century produced mixed consequences later for nationally planned democracy and decentralization: There was increased dependence on aid, and tendencies of aid to be more firmly anchored at the municipal level, to the detriment of long-established strategies of mobility based on extra-municipal networks of support (Rossi 2016). Even before implementation of the policy of decentralization in Mali around 2000, foreign aid projects had long targeted primarily settled populations. Across the Sahelian and Saharan regions of both Mali and Niger, these sedentarized populations since the 1980s have generally held two main sources of revenue: migrant labor and aid interventions (Chelala and Childs 1994; Kohl 2009; Fischer and Kohl 2010; Rossi 2016).

Notwithstanding some reductionist descriptions of a complex subsistence system as “nomadic,” at least since the 1960s the distinction between pastoral and farming societies has become less clear-cut (Baier and Lovejoy 1977; Bouman 2003). As noted, many rural families tend to be semi-nomadic in actual practice, combining several types of subsistence: some children farm on oases, others depart on labor migration and/or the dwindling but still existent camel caravans, others conduct long-distance trucking commerce, and others herd livestock where a household still possesses animals. Many households have responded to structural unemployment and chronic production deficit by diversifying kinspersons’ occupations, within the same household

practicing oasis gardening, herding, labor migration, and artisanry. Also, persons of different social origins now practice diverse occupations, in contrast to the former practice of occupations according to inherited rank in the earlier stratified system more rigidly based on descent.

Nonetheless, the distinction between “nomad” and “sedentarized” (or “town”) persons remains prominent in the consciousness of many persons, not solely of officials requesting plays. Some Tuareg also, in fact, tend to reify and ossify this distinction, but for different reasons than civic and state officials’ reasons: the former tend to self-identify as “nomadic” politically because of concerns for cultural survival and autonomy, given memories of forced sedentarization and other historic tensions between nomadic herders and colonial and independent state governments: for example, over school registrations, census counts, and taxation, which some past regional authorities required in exchange for food relief distributions during droughts and famines in the North.

From Malian independence in 1962 until the democratization and semi-autonomy programs around 2000, the town of Kidal was politically dominated by the Bamako-based state army, then comprised of mainly southerners, and others who were perceived as outsiders, and whose commanders initially excluded Tuareg from civil service and teaching jobs and banned the Tama-jaq language. For many Tuareg, the Malian national army, which remained in towns and settled oases in the North despite several peace pacts ending armed conflicts which promised its withdrawal, represented central state power, the heavy presence of Bamako, and especially, coercion and repression of culture and language.

Later, during the first decade of the twenty-first century following Mali’s late 1990s and early 2000s decentralization and democratization, there arose widespread hopes and optimism for the future of Mali’s democratic programs. Peace accords ending the 1990s and 2006 rebellions had initiated the integration of some dissident Tuareg rebels into the Malian national army in four training camps: at Kidal, Lere, Bourem, and Menaka. Just prior to my first field research residence, Kidal had become locally administered, and its name attached to a semi-autonomous eighth region of Mali with its own police, military, and government, with the prefect replacing the provincial army commander. During my second research residence, the town mayor was a son of the Ifoghas traditional *amenokal*. Taxes went to uses that were locally rather than centrally determined. Later, however, some former rebels defected from the national army and stockpiled weapons. Some dissident/rebel spokespersons claimed that the central government did not fulfill promises of hospitals, roads, and aid for rural as well as urban people in the North. There was disagreement, however; others pointed out that Mali on the whole suffers from a limited national budget.

Peaceful intervals became rarer, punctuated by sporadic attacks. Around 2012, residents of the Kidal region were again caught between the Bamako-based Malian national army, which around 2013 became backed by French forces, and various other “shadowy,” vaguely identified militant forces—some affiliated with AQIM. These historically recurrent invasions and political uncertainties have shaped many Kidal area residents’ ambivalent attitudes toward towns and urban life.

In these alternations between war and peace, the reintegration of displaced and returning refugees back into regions between Gao, Timbuktoo, and Kidal has remained a prominent official goal. Despite actual nuances rather than diametrically-opposed differences between nomadic and settled populations, therefore, rural Tamajaq speakers of varying degrees of nomadism have been glossed as all “nomads” and targeted in the discourse of the state and other town-based authorities as deficient, even abject, but in the viewpoint of some Tamajaq speakers who also use this gloss, this nomadic trope conveys pride and nostalgia, not condescension and disdain.

Some plays organized by town bureaucracies negatively stereotype “nomads” as all in need of civilizing, equating civilization not with the local concept, which is centered on the maternal tent-based household and the rural camp, but rather with the town and settled lifestyles. In their own discourses, as well, many rural persons tend to self-identify as “nomads,” but as noted, instead of the officially condescending “deficiency model,” many emphasize the ideally romantic past rural lifestyle, selectively and nostalgically remembered, yearned for, and described with nomadic tropes (now more metaphorical than literal for those who have lost much of their property in the countryside, namely livestock herds). Several persons, for example, mentioned missing lush rainy season pastures (droughts were erased from their memory) and plentiful milk (of livestock herds, which are now much diminished). The fortunate few who still possess significant wealth in the countryside attempt to return there as often as possible: even the *amenokal* often tries to leave Kidal, where the French settled his family, for his family’s original home was in the desert around Tin Essako. The *amenokal* considered the milk there to be superior to that available in Kidal. Others reminisced to me about the beautiful, independent women inside the tent who nurtured and instructed children in local language and culture.

Some actors echo these nostalgic sentiments in comments made “offstage,” even as they portray stereotypically “deficient” rural nomadic and “enlightening” settled urban characters during the officially sponsored play/sketch performances. Other actors, however, have more complex viewpoints, sometimes inserting mixed sentiments and messages subtly “between the lines” of plots, as in the following play, whose plot illustrates these processes of nuanced meanings vividly:

This play was given a French title by the organizers and performers, “*La Salubrite*” (“Sanitation” or “Hygiene”).

“Sanitation”

This was first performed in 1995 at Radio Tisdas. I first heard this play broadcast over the radio with friends. Assistants/interlocutors transcribed, translated, and offered exegeses and commentaries, as did the actors and non-actors I interviewed.

Also considered a “modern” play/sketch, (as are most of these nomad-urban themed plays), this play’s cast featured actors in the ensemble *Those Who See Far* (The Visionaries), playing the following characters: a nomad who arrived in town with his son, a doctor, a patient, the inspector/supervisor or town sanitation health inspector, and a butcher. Notably, one talented (male) actor played all three of these roles on the radio, altering his voice and expression. He was considered particularly skilled at altering his voice, particularly important in the radio broadcast without visuals.

This plot opens with a nomad arriving in town, who remarks on “how nice and clean this place is!” He drinks tea with his son. The health inspector comes upon them and caustically criticizes the donkey dung they have allegedly brought into the town with their animal, explaining, “this causes illness.”

But the nomad disputes this; he does not believe in the connection, and asserts, “tea is a good protection against illness.” Soon the doctor arrives, who also complains about the nomad’s “dirtiness” (*wa jerga*), pointing out flies around the dung left near his house’s door.

The doctor/homeowner admonishes the nomad to “leave, go back to the countryside. . . . You are worthless to me! You must not pour waste (garbage) anymore by my door!”

Then the inspector, insisting, significantly, “Today, I am going to apply the laws of the state (government)!” imposes a fine on the nomad, who cannot pay this, lacking the money. The doctor tells the nomad to give him two of his donkeys, important resources like savings in a bank for herders, to sell in order to pay the fine.

Yet this plot does not simply denigrate the “nomad” but also offers a critique of the urbanites’ biased spatial and social perspectives through the nomad’s rebutting the inspector: “Me, I believe that here (the town) and the *oead* I have followed here are the same thing.”

The inspector, however, insists, “those spaces ‘are very different,’” thereby associating the countryside, animals, and nomads with waste, garbage, and disease.

In effect, town authorities (doctor and health inspector) express a concept of the nomadic and rural space, not the town space, as polluting, despite

Kidal's dense population at that time and its growing problems of garbage disposal, changes which were very noticeable to me over several years between my research residences. In this encounter, the dried riverbed in effect becomes a kind of liminal stage in the nomad's journey to town, in the disconnected rural and urban spaces for the urbanites.

In the foregoing play's "official" goal, this instruction on sanitation and health/illness in western biomedical terms on one level constitutes symbolic violence through culturally hegemonic means, rather than literal physical violence, since its proponents scorn and denigrate the "nomad" at the same time they instruct him. Traveling the dried riverbed route leading to town becomes a rite of passage to "civilizing" the rural nomad.

By contrast, long-standing Tuareg concepts of contagion/pollution, health and illness, and "dirt" and "cleanliness" are quite complex. Sand, dust, and the ground are not always considered literally "dirty" and can have ambiguous significance. Some spirits, called fire *djinn*, live and work on tiny forges beneath the sand. Like their human blacksmith counterparts, they can be mischievous: if the traveler carefully walks around them, not disturbing or angering them, they are harmless; otherwise they may cause a traveler to lose the way (Nicolaisen and Nicolaisen 1997). Tuareg medicine women touch the ground before administering their cures in order to convey respect for the matrilineal founding ancestress of their profession and also to their medicinal tree spirits, who emerge from the earth through tree roots, barks, and leaves, medicines these specialists gather and administer to patients (Rasmussen 2006).

In "Sanitation," the inspector next tells the nomad to go to the (biomedical) clinic. At the clinic, the nomad's ill child is examined. But his father, again talking back to authorities in an interesting resistance revealing local cultural knowledge of some types of poisoning caused by rotten meat, asserts, "this child is ill precisely because we have arrived in town; for here, the boy has eaten bread with rotten meat."

The clinic, however, suddenly closes since there is a cut in electricity. At this point, another subtle critique can be found: this town, it seems, is not paradise either, and urban infrastructures sometimes fail. The doctor suggests treatment with broth until the next morning and tells the nomad to go to the market's butcher and purchase some meat. But flies are on the meat. The butcher insults the nomad, insists he still buy the meat (for broth) to cure his son, and the nomad finally does so.

Divergent meanings of this plot emerge on two levels here. First, there is internal disagreement embedded with alternative viewpoints within the play plot: on the one hand, the rural nomad is indeed condescendingly, even insultingly, treated. On the other, the urbanites are portrayed as too harsh, and there is a subtle critique of the town's infrastructure (electrical and waste services

break down and foods are badly preserved). In effect, the town is polluting symbolically and morally as an anomalous space, as Mary Douglas (1966) would say, as well as contaminating literally for the nomadic visitor. Yet as noted, there was also a divergence or contradiction between the positions of many actors, themselves predominantly (though not exclusively) semi-nomadic and their continuing strong social and economic ties to rural relatives and property, on the one hand, and the overt “official” messages their characters convey in these plays.

What are the consequences and implications of this latter apparent contradiction? A few actors expressed ambivalence about this to me, and I noticed that most actors who played characters in the plays about AIDS and Sanitation, which were well-intentioned as health education, if also condescending, were those who resided more long term in Kidal. For example, those in ensembles such as Joy and its youth wing and those in *The Visionaries* at the radio station tended to act more often in these edutainment plays/sketches defined as “modern” and “new.”

It is significant that despite some condescension toward nomads and other rural persons in the play plot of “Sanitation,” as in the previous one about AIDS, one finds some subtle resistance in the dialogues. Also significant are hints of critiques in contexts beyond the play performances. For in unstructured discussions with me outside performances, actors and audiences expressed some sympathy for rural “nomads” in their informal exegeses of “Sanitation.” Several persons, for example, explained that the purpose of this sketch was “to criticize town people who scorn and take advantage of rural nomadic people who travel there.” But in so doing, the plot also mocks nomads’ supposed ignorance. Hence it is open to several interpretations according to situation and viewpoint, thereby allowing audiences to “take away” different meanings. Yet as officially “edutainment” theater from the top down, this intended theme of “civilizing nomads” has an agenda backed by powerful infrastructures. In the Kidal and Adragh-n-Ifoghas region, in order to obtain adequate food and emergency biomedical treatment, one must come into town; and for acceptance in town, one must eat, dress, and groom in a specific manner. Not surprisingly, until very recently many rural Tuareg feared hospitals, complaining about mistreatment by some staff there.

On the other hand, audiences and actors can interpret different meanings in this plot and debate the “scripted” one, even resisting its overt message. This plot as a situated political mnemonic of rural life may therefore lead to a different “place” than intended: not to shame but perhaps to criticism of the town, empathy for “nomads” and rural persons, and nostalgia for the countryside. Cultural memory here is selective, obliterating the real hardships also present in the countryside but also obliterating the feeling of low-status projected onto rural characters by the urban characters. There is nostalgia, but

also spatial and temporal distancing and disdain, even “oblivion,” depending on the interests of the performers, audiences, and organizers.

These disputed and ambivalent social meanings of oral play performance are paralleled in urban visual iconography. Regional Tuareg jewelry pendants and amulets, such as the Kidal *khomessa*, and the Agadez Cross, used as icons of Tuareg identity in some northern regions, appear on windowsills, signs, and buildings in Kidal and other Saharan towns. As such, these nostalgically commemorate but also express new meanings: from protection to decoration. They convey a nonbinary and nonlinear concept of space and time as very mobile transformations, some evoking cardinal points referring to nomadic dispersion and transhumance. Like these visual arts, the play plots are simultaneously commemorative and forward-looking.

Tuareg communities—rural and urban—are internally diverse and cannot be reduced to a simple binary opposition between nomadic versus settled. Even more nomadic rural livestock herders depend increasingly on products of oasis gardens, town markets, itinerant trading, and cash from labor migration jobs rather than solely herds for subsistence, and many families realize the necessity of mixing subsistence modes in the monetarized economy. Among the more specialized artisan social strata, there is arts/crafts production for tourism during peaceful interludes (Loughran-Bini and Seligman 2006). Rural to urban and nomadic to settled interactions and alternations, even in transhumance, are not entirely new. During periods of plenty, when the size of herds becomes cumbersome or provides the wherewithal for purchase of arable land, pastoral segments may be repatriated to villages (Baier and Lovejoy 1977; Martin and Voorhies 1975). Most Tamajaq speakers in northern regions of Mali and Niger remain predominantly rural village and camp-based but often alternate between more nomadic camps, sedentarized oasis villages, and large towns, and move across nation-state borders according to seasonal needs and more long-term stresses. Many migrated south—some temporarily, as did Atakor the actor in the *Visionaries*, and others permanently relocating during the droughts of 1913, 1969–1971, 1984, and 2001.

In more peaceful times, nomads often congregate at wells and other water-points during the rainy season. During the cold dry season, some women gather plants at a distance from home, and some men travel on truck or camel caravans and other itinerant trading expeditions. Many household members are also dispersed in town and countryside at different times of the year; for example, some children board with relatives in town to attend school and return to the countryside to assist with herding and gardening tasks during the rainy seasons.

There are nomadic and sedentarized differences, but these are nuanced along a continuum or range of occupations and rural-urban residence and identity, are situational and processual, located along continuums rather

than fixed. Nomadic stockbreeding and other occupations, as well as rural and urban residences, are neither mutually exclusive nor rigidly polarized in practice. These divisions are nonetheless perceived as ossified and diametrically opposed in some official discourses and policies. Most “modern” plays organized by town civic bureaucrats tend to highlight polar oppositions between rural nomadic and urban settled life, portraying nomads and other rural peoples as “others” in binary terms, perceived and represented as opposed to everything the town and the state stand for, recalling somewhat the Orientalism in descriptions of the Middle East critiqued by Said (1977).

Also, plots with rural-urban and nomad-settled contrasts are hierarchical: they tend to portray urbanites as more knowledgeable “experts,” through a lens of conveying important information to rural residents, either on the formers’ visits to villages or on the latter’s visits to town. Significantly, although performed in the Tamajaq language, these plays’ titles were often given in French rather than in Tamajaq, thereby reflecting a “top-down” bureaucratic perspective and language endangerment in the schools, though there was resilience in the creative artistry of play composers and actors that gave them “voice” whereas schools did not.

In and around Kidal, official establishments (i.e., mayor’s office and *prefecture* or *gouvernat*) still attempt, albeit usually with symbolic rather than literal violence, to control the new mobility and perceived “unruliness” of the postnomadic society: for example, in efforts to dissuade youths from various actions, such as joining the rebellion or other battles, or going (back) to chaotic post-Ghadaffi Libya on labor migration, from overspending, and from disobeying parents and elders.

In the intensifying urban vs. rural cleavages, there is a growing gap between the town bourgeoisie with its transnational and multiethnic political and technological connections and more disenfranchised and dispossessed marginalized persons, these latter usually rural. Yet these divisions are not static or clear-cut. For example, one actor who performed intermittently in two ensembles, Voices of the Desert and Travelers of the Desert, also once participated in a national-level Malian theater festival in Segou in 2004. That sketch’s theme was arms smuggling: in its plot, which the actors summarized to me briefly, a chief’s son smuggled arms, and a woman who became romantically involved with him found out, reported this, and the authorities were able to stop him.

Another prominent motif in plots featuring rural-urban encounters is labor migration. Labor migration, despite its potential for cash income, is nonetheless controversial and fraught with dangers threatening to nomads’ wealth in livestock. Consider, for example, how this is illustrated in a play entitled “Exile in Libya” (also called *Exode*, now a widely used loan-term from French to denote labor migration; another term used locally is *Azibi*, and in

the past, *echeghel wa kawela*, literally denoting “black work” in reference to past slavery, was also used).

“Exile (Exodus, Migration) to Libya”

This plot, set in a rural nomadic camp, begins with a family’s dispute there over a son’s plan to travel to Libya to earn money and concludes with the dire outcome of this plan in its effect on his family and the pastoral economy. I saw this play, composed by Ahoulou, founder of Voices of the Desert, performed live by actors in that ensemble inside the compound of a relative. Bidi, the male actor who earlier resisted the army commander through cross-dressing, in this performance played the role of an older woman in a family where two sons heatedly dispute with their elderly parents over their sons’ plans to go to Libya for labor migration. Their parents were vehemently opposed to their sons’ travel destination, though not to their labor migration per se. Although Libya has long been a popular work destination for Tuareg men, paying much higher wages than work in Mali or Niger until the 2011 overthrow of Ghadaffi, stories of dangerous desert journeys, violence, and unscrupulous employers toward migrants there circulated even prior to those 2011 events.

Both mother and father assert their opposition to this plan. They even refuse to bless their sons before travel—a heavy moral penalty, in effect a curse. The father even brandishes his sword. The mother exclaims, “What will we do with the livestock? There is no one to watch them. Only you (the old father) are left here, for others (in the family) have also left for Libya.”

Later, the sons depart in defiance, and consequently their parents must disperse their animals among different people. The old father falls ill and dies. Mourners and others lament that, since the son has neither returned nor sent money from Libya, they need to sell the family’s livestock to pay other people for their herding assistance and to finance the father’s mortuary ritual. At the ritual’s Qur’anic reading, mourners discuss in hushed, grieving tones how the father’s illness was caused by the sons who went to Libya.

In this play plot, some gendered themes also appear, though less prominently here than in other plots I focus on more intently later. Although a male actor played the old mother, and her lines were fewer than those of other characters, nonetheless, her role was not passive: she assertively voiced the family’s economic concerns, thereby conveying the importance, in rural semi-nomadic Tuareg communities, of women’s as well as men’s property interests since women, also, inherit, own, and manage livestock, date-palms, and the nuptial tent. Also, she, not her husband, survived the stress of the sons’ departure from the maternal tent and its consequences.

In Kidal and other Saharan towns, the raw materials for tents and feed for herds are expensive, or no longer available. One must rely on paid, nonkin labor. Productive and processing labor moves to other spatial and behavioral

realms. As Prussin (1995) points out, once the reconstruction and reassembly that reinforced the meanings of nomadic ritual space no longer exist, some rituals lose their socioeconomic efficacy. For example, symbolic furnishings associated with marriage may persist but are no longer created by the bride and her family. Some of these concerns reverberate symbolically in nomadic symbolism in town weddings: when friends bring the groom to the home of the bride's parents, for example, they circulate around the entire town in cars decorated like camels, rather than camels circling a single nuptial tent—the marriage dowry in the countryside. Tamajaq-speaking residents of Saharan towns such as Agadez and Kidal often travel to distant rural weddings, not solely because they are related by kinship but also in order to see the beautiful ceremonies with camel races, which they miss in the town. In the past, camels were featured in town weddings and their races at national holidays there, as well, but recently camel races have ceased in towns because, adults allege, “town children here are not used to camels and sometimes upset them.”

Unrelated men's carpentry is an important emerging occupation in the demand for European-style bedroom sets as new forms of dowry. In much sociability and economics, sedentarization and urbanization entail a shift in creation, ownership, maintenance, and control over household, domestic building, and hence over property relations. Thus, to borrow Prussin's (1995, 202) term, the “art of memory” in town requires another system of mnemonics.

Verbal and nonverbal, iconic, and kinesthetic uses of space in plots featuring nomadic-sedentarized encounters in town and countryside therefore subtly evoke cultural memory, portraying, but also resisting and subtly critiquing, social changes in settled life that might restrict or marginalize rural and more nomadic persons. Thus the process of cultural memory-making occurring here is complex; for the plays and actors in them are also forward-looking.

Other plays, types of public spectacles, and performances are also didactic and future-oriented, not solely nostalgic reflections on the past. The actors in plays and beyond them in sociality express their dilemmas, contradictions, compromises, and transformations in urban spaces and ponder how to cope with them. Nonetheless many plots in their “official” themes demanded by bureaucrats at times overtly attempt to obliterate nostalgia for nomadism. In their overt, “official” messages, the “modern” plays/sketches organized by civic authorities tend to essentialize nomads by portraying them as ignorant, dirty, and/or old-fashioned. This theme continues in the next play.

“Democracy”

This plot again featured “knowledgeable” urban professionals instructing allegedly “ignorant” rural people. It was first performed live by the Radio Tisdas-based acting ensemble The Visionaries (Those Who See Far) in the

radio station's courtyard on the occasion of the Malian "revolution," the term widely used to refer to the programs of regional semi-autonomy that were launched following the 1990–1996 Tuareg Rebellion between the late 1990s and 2000, when communes were established within the region of Kidal, and structural adjustments of privatization and decentralization from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank were extended to that region. The play was audio-recorded and broadcast.

In this plot, a female actor played a character named Tehene, wife of a character named Boujakalli, played by a famous older actor and comedian; a stranger named Tifenayoukne, who is a veterinarian who has just arrived with this news of the democratization, was portrayed by the founder of the ensemble, also a journalist and director of the radio station at that time.

Upon Tifenayoukne's arrival in Tehene's and Boujakalli's camp, the rural couple remark, "there are many strangers around." Tifenayoukne (whose name denotes "to do clever things or to be self-important") inquires about the condition of the couple's herd animals, a courteous way of greeting them.

Then he assembles the rural residents for a meeting, where he explains what decentralization is. He contrasts the new conditions to those during the Tuareg 1990–1996 rebellion, asserting that democratization and peace "will replace weapons with education, foster the sharing of powers (*tanhaute*), and give voice to locals in aid programs."

But he adds, "if they (rural nomads) come to town, they will see more (i.e., learn everything)." He also states:

for a long time, the people in the South of Mali have been ahead of us (in the North of Mali), because they have meetings. Now everyone will have meetings for change. . . . For example, the former military commander (in Kidal), whom one used to call "the leader," will be replaced by the mayor, ready to devote himself to the people. [Until 1995, there had been no town mayors in the northern Kidal region, only military authorities from the South who dictated all policies there.]

Tifenayoukne also notes that "the people of the town and people of the countryside are apart, but the place of the mayor is one (a unity), unifying everyone." He went on to describe how the army commander position (who in Mali's democratization would be replaced by the position of a prefect, i.e., governor position) would have diminished powers, shared and dispersed more broadly across town and regional civil positions. He elaborated, "Under those policies, small villages became rural communes, and towns became communes, with neighborhoods."

Tifenayoukne also used the analogy that "communes are like neighborhoods, and one neighborhood is like one village. Towns cannot be mixed

together.” Thus this plot seeks to explain nation-state based administrative geopolitical categories to nonspecialist rural audiences through comparison to a rural village or (semi-)nomadic camp. This idea is conveyed through the technique of veterinarians’ inspecting the herders’ animals, with analogies made between village and town communities. An urban neighborhood is compared to a village, with the goal of opening up communication between town and countryside, though livestock herds, not oasis gardens, are referred to in the veterinarian’s central role (i.e., the central role is not that of an agricultural extension agent). In other words, except for the visiting stranger/veterinarian, the cast consists of rural persons presumed to be all isolated and ignorant. Alongside emphasis of differences, however, there are also assertions of similarities between the urban and the rural here in the village analogy.

These appeals to similarities, shared predicaments, and unity in plays about rural-urban encounters and “nomads” are the exception, however; for they do not prevail in other plots that feature these themes. Distinctions and contrasts between urbanites and “nomads” as Other, and identification of the former with professional status and wellness and the latter with ignorance and disease are the themes in most of these types of plots, such as that in the following play.

“Go to the Hospital: Advantages of the Clinic in the Countryside”

This play was performed by the acting ensemble called Voices of the Desert and composed by its founder, Ahoulou. Its cast included a rural man who brings his younger brother to the hospital, the younger brother, and a (biomedical) doctor.

The older brother says worriedly, “the family does not know what is wrong with him.” The sick patient, afraid, wants to leave. The doctor gives him pills, but the patient does not like them. Following a lab exam, the doctor explains, “the illness is from chewing tobacco (popular with some rural persons)” and tells them, “there is no medicine for that affliction here.”

Eventually, the doctor gathers the brothers’ family members and tries to convince them to stop tobacco-chewing. An elder at the play’s conclusion asserts, “We will abandon tobacco!”

This plot portrays an “enlightened” biomedically-trained urban physician giving pills and diagnosis in the countryside to the older brother of a sick person, whose illness is unknown to this rural family. The lab exam reveals that tobacco is the cause, suggesting lung cancer or perhaps emphysema (the precise biomedical illness term was not given). This play certainly did convey a valid and important message intended to improve health. The setting,

however, is “in the countryside.” The clinic physician convinces the family members to give up chewing tobacco—a popular custom among some, though not all, Tuareg groups (clans of Islamic scholars/marabouts tend to eschew this practice). There is also a hint of intergenerational difference and change, explored more fully in chapter 7: here, the elder is instructed, rather than instructing—a transgression, even inversion, of mores, for elders are supposed to instruct youth and should not be instructed by younger persons, even professionals. The elder agrees to follow the physician’s advice.

IMPLICATIONS: SELECTIVE CULTURAL MEMORY

In the foregoing nomad-settled themed play plots, there is nuanced but selective memory-making: mediating the cultural past, present, and future, albeit not in a strictly linear fashioning of time but nearly circular, in coping with the practical and symbolic effects of deterritorialization and new larger-scale places for the exercise of state and global (International Monetary Fund IMF, World Bank, and nongovernmental NGO) powers. Also, these plays are partly nostalgic and commemorative, and partly future-oriented and even at times obliterating some memories of past identity and relationships. The plays with rural and urban characters and references to nomadic and settled differences respond to wider, more powerful forces viewed by some Tuareg as threatening their cultural autonomy.

The foregoing plays also reflect and produce uneven, debated, and contradictory meanings, processes, and responses to the surface stories, and express some disagreements concerning them, thereby reworking them. On the one hand, nomads’ mobility has been curtailed through censuses, schools, and taxes. Pastoral border zones have been farmed, disrupting ecological and political balances. Yet since many Kidal residents—actors and nonactors alike—frequently travel, transhumant-like, between town and countryside, where they have relatives and some property, spaces and times are continually reconstructed socially and culturally and are usefully understood as subjective, relative, and fluid. But clearly, there are also profound contrasts and transformations in temporal, spatial, and social experiences over the full range of these settings. Like some other edutainment plays, for example, plays about AIDS education analyzed by Bourgault in southern Mali and in South Africa (Bourgault 2003), these plays have a didactic intent, but their messages do not determine or capture completely culture and memory.

In northern Mali there are indeed social tensions and divisions, but also close connections and relationships: between some Tamajaq speakers, Mande speakers, and Arabic speakers, between Bella descendants of slaves and some (though not all) Tuareg of other social backgrounds; between

more nomadic and more settled peoples; among factions of dissidents; and between dissidents and state and regional authorities. These are not static categories, neat antagonisms, or binary oppositions. There are intermarriages and business partnerships between some persons of diverse ethnic and class backgrounds.

The rigid official concept of “nomad,” ossified and conflated with “rural,” tends to be prominent in the consciousness of not solely town bureaucratic authorities, organizers, and the Tamajaq-speaking composers they commission to create “modern” plays/sketches but also that of many *ibaraden* actors and nonactors, both urban and rural-dwelling, albeit for different reasons, as noted. In practice, however, divisions are less distinct: one can be both nomadic and settled alternating between town and countryside seasonally, both “modern” and older, both Tuareg and Arab, or Tuareg and Bambara through intermarriage and multilingualism. A vivid example of these processes earlier was the life story of Tekres, founder of the ensemble Joy, who, as shown, despite her earlier trauma, eventually married a Mande (Bamana)-speaking man from the South, and whose children spoke several languages, though the family favored Tamajaq at home and Tekres eventually divorced that husband. Categories are practiced, neither rigid templates people always follow nor fixed, essentialized, or immutable classifications. The subject positions of rural and urban, settled and nomadic persons are in practice fluid, and one can move between them, notwithstanding stereotypes and tensions. Notions of cultural “heritage” “authenticity,” identities, and relationships and their valuing continually change (Appadurai 2013; Arnoldi 1995; Hannerz 2010).

Thus alongside intermittent inter-group conflicts, remembered and current, northern Mali is also a site of connections: interaction, cross-cutting social ties, diverse populations, and free-flowing, creative ideas. In Tuareg society, the intruder is a raider at first, but once he/she wins trust, usually friendship and protection follow (Claudot-Hawad 1993). Indeed, Tuareg wedding symbolism compares the new bridegroom to a raider when his family’s camels encircle the bride’s camp and tent (Casajus 1987; Nicolaisen and Nicolaisen 1997; Rasmussen 1997). This was a practice traditionally done by warrior invaders just before attacking and pillaging a rival camp. The groom, not the bride, is initially the outsider, and the family of the groom brings him to the home of the bride, not vice versa. Thus far, as of this writing, Tuareg weddings retain this custom even in towns, except, notably, in cases of marriage between a Tuareg woman and an Arab man, when the bride is brought to the groom’s home.

The point is that cultural, ethnic, rural, urban, nomad, and settled/sedentarized are remembered categories that continue to orient symbolically and inspire performatively but are not mutually exclusive in all social contexts of

practice. Hence the importance of a thematic “mental logic” in the play plots as myth-like, but this logic does not pervade all cultural ideology or social practice.

The *ibaraden* actors in the “nomadic” and rural-themed play plots therefore mediate temporally between cultural past, present, and future, and also spatially between the interior and exterior of Tuareg cultural life, which in these performances become resituated: the more “traditional” tent (interior) and wild (exterior) symbolic polarity becomes transformed in these plots into the rural as exterior and urban as interior (in official discourse), in which both rural tent and wild are equated with each other in official symbolism as, in effect, the “wild,” rather than opposed as occurs in more long-standing Tuareg symbolism. In the foregoing plays, tent and nomadic camp become opposed to the new social and moral center—the town—which threatens to replace the mother’s (rural) tent as the center of education. Yet some characters “talk back” to this official discourse, as do actors and nonactors offstage behind the scenes and, at times, between the lines subtly during play performances. In other words, the plays addressing nomadic and settled-sedentarized spaces and their wider social contexts reveal temporal and spatial complexities in the multiply mediated voices of memory, reenacted in ostension, extended to negotiating present and future concerns.

Yet composers’, actors’, and audiences’ own subjective reactions to these plots’ portrayals of rural-urban relationships were also ambiguous. In their exegeses of the plays, my friends, assistants, and interlocutors—actors, audience members, and others—never openly stated outright disagreement with these plots’ messages. Only subtly within plots, during informal conversations with actors and audience members, and in other sociability did I find hints of resistance and disagreement with plays’ hegemonic negative stereotyping of characters and plots that came across as condescending. The composers and founders of the ensembles performing the foregoing plays, considered “modern” sketches, were commissioned by agencies such as the hospital and clinic, secular schools, and civic organizations, rather than by individuals or families, to produce them, thereby suggesting these particular plays are more akin to state spectacles (Handelman 1990) than sites of resistance. The fact that several actors and composers frequently left Kidal for the countryside, however, suggests an unspoken yet strong feeling of resistance rather than identification with some of these plots. Also, alongside hegemonic processes reducing rural and semi-nomadic persons to positions of nonstandard, even abject cultural performers of past “outmoded” practices in need of “enlightening,” one also finds sly hints of empathy, critique, and resistance within the plots and dialogues themselves. Recall, for example, how, in the play “Sanitation,” the character of the visitor talked back to town authorities.

In these performances, therefore, the negative counterpart of memory also merits attention: systematic replication of oblivion and “structural nostalgia” (Herzfeld 1997) may occur, but also, I add, even more nuanced forms of memory may occur, with dilemmas and mixed sentiments, with a reworking and destabilizing of categories.

Herzfeld (2001) suggests distinguishing between memory, a psychological process, and remembrance, a social one; and between forgetting, on the one hand, and more systematic formal obliteration (oblivion) on the other. The Tuareg data suggest additional nuances to this: in the play plots and characters located somewhere in between the (individual) psychological and the (collective) social construction of memory, and in the selective memories of actors and nonactors. The remembering and forgetting of culture may be vulnerable to wider sociopolitical processes, but their successful “registering” is never certain or final. For all psychological inner states are opaque, in particular those in actors’ multiple personas, and thus make possible resistance, not solely compliance. There are also complexities of meaning construction in play plots with gendered themes, the focus in the next chapter.

Chapter 6

Disputed Gender, Relations between the Sexes, and Embodied Performance

CONSTRUCTING GENDER

Many plots with gendered themes address contradictions, dilemmas, and debates that emerge from transformations in relations between the sexes: opportunities, but also challenges and dangers, especially for Tuareg women in towns and settled centers, and responses to them. Many of these plots are intended “officially” as warnings and advice with particular focus on women but reveal contested and uncertain gendered constructs. Alternative femininities and masculinities are also central throughout many of these performances, their plot/themes, and to some extent, also in the “performance” (practice) of gender in wider social relations. Although I often use the term “women” here, I also try to situate them contextually and to make clear that Tuareg women do not constitute an undifferentiated category of “essentialized woman.”¹ They interact with men and occupy subject positions according to age, social backgrounds, occupations, kinship roles, and other locations in society.

Also relevant to these play plots, their stylistic features, and wider social significance are concepts of body and sexuality. Both gender and the body—specifically, the female body—are enacted in plots, acting styles, and creative processes surrounding play production. The gendered and embodied themes in acting and plays reveal the body as a nexus of both symbolic and material forces (Lock 2007; Schulz 2011, 2012). Fundamental to understanding the expression of Tuareg female bodily aesthetics in play performance, for example, are local cultural bodily aesthetics idealizing the dignity and reserve of female comportment, in particular for women of aristocratic and tributary social backgrounds—the backgrounds of most of the actors in and around Kidal, still relevant and referred to in actors’ and others’ imaginaries, if not

always determining all practice across all contexts. Also key to understanding these aesthetics is the impact of urban bureaucracies, media, and state and non-governmental agencies' policies upon this bodily aesthetic. In the multiethnic setting of Kidal, for example, there are transformations and disputes over the long-standing and widespread Tuareg preference for a woman who is sedate, dignified, and who appears to do very minimal physical labor, who minimizes her gestures, and maintains a "fat" appearance. This aesthetic and disputes and negotiations over it shape women actors' embodied performance in plays.

Despite Tuareg women's generally high social prestige and independent property ownership, there are some gendered controversies conveyed in both plot contents and aesthetic performing styles of many plays. These include debates over girls' education, until recently widely opposed by many rural and more nomadic groups, and discussions over certain aesthetic stylistic features tending to produce, in their effects, restrictions on (though not outright banning of) acting for women. Dress controversies, also, illustrate these tensions. One female actor complained that at one Kidal radio station, a male staff member wanted only rural girls to act in sketches there because he preferred "traditional" (rural) clothing over "modern" (urban) dress. The former is characterized by enveloping robes conveying dignity, modesty, and less need for physical exertion. These restrictions derive not from seclusion or deprivation but rather from taboos on elite women's bodily postures and gestures in public space that are intended to embody their high prestige and to elicit respect from others, in idealized cultural memory of noble elite status, still salient goals in much social practice, though not without challenges.

In plot content, female characters are often just as prominent as male characters: for example, in plays encouraging parents to send children (including girls) to school; in portraying mothers reacting to their children's labor migration or marriages; and in one plot, a woman participates actively in a court case. In their acting style, however, most female actors of aristocratic and tributary origin usually remain seated and still physically, use few gestures, and speak rather briefer lines than male actors in dialogues. In general, social stratum origins based on descent in the past still restrict female performers of nonservile and nonsmith backgrounds to more subdued styles before audiences. Although Tuareg women of diverse backgrounds have long been prominent in singing and musical performances, until recently these practices involved genres, styles, and instruments specific to each social stratum. Also, some more devout Islamic scholar/marabouts and more conservative men of aristocratic background oppose women moving about in performances "too freely," that is, in these men's view using too expansive gestures or dancing in too unrestrained a manner.

Another gendered difference in performance is that in many plays, despite both women and men acting in an ensemble, predominantly youthful male

actors perform the roles of not solely characters of their own age and gender but also of elderly and female characters. By contrast, seldom does the reverse occur; that is, older and female actors do not perform, even in cross-dressing, the roles of youthful male characters.

An adolescent female actor in the Voices of the Desert ensemble, apprenticed when younger, commented, "Today, youths do not believe there are female actors, but we exist!" She and many others asserted that young men tend to increasingly dominate in the newer, urban plays arranged by official civic organizations. This was one reason why I saw some male actors play female characters in a few plays. Some male actors explained that fewer women than men acted in the new plays/sketches because men actors were "often filling in for women who were absent in herding their animals," which was in fact true in some cases. In principle, actors in plays can be of either sex and of all ages. In other contexts, there is widespread preference for older men and older women as storytellers, poets, and authorities/teachers in traditional work apprenticeships.

Except in the case of the respected and renowned older actors present in the Visionaries ensemble at Radio Tisdas, the modern sketches appear in some ways to be subverting long-standing verbal art performance patterns of gender, in the more subdued (less verbal dialogue and more restrained gestures and mobility) styles of female actors and in the presence of more numerous youthful male actors. Women are not, however, excluded from either acting in plays, characters in the play plots, or from the creative processes surrounding them. Despite some gendered differences which appear to outsiders as unequal "voices," women's voices are heard, though sometimes indirectly and subtly.

I contend that, although female actors appear to be restricted in their rarer, more fleeting, and subdued appearances in plays, and in their more restrained mobility in performing style than the men actors, this embodied gendered performance pattern does not indicate oppression or "deprivation" of women in Tuareg social, economic, or political life or in performance. The questions arising here are what accounts for this discrepancy between women's conduct within the play performances and their conduct in wider society, and what is the cultural significance of their apparently subdued roles in the play performances?

Fundamental to understanding this issue are contradictions in wider social life. In general, most Tuareg women are not secluded and enjoy much social and economic independence and freedom of travel. Separation of the sexes is relatively minimal. Unrelated men and women may visit, meet, and socialize in public. As singers and musicians, women as well as men are organizers of many social events, such as drumming and dancing gatherings, which feature much flirting and courtship. Yet recent studies (Oxby 1990; Keenan

2003, 2004) have found that many Tuareg groups display variations in gender arrangements according to relative degrees of religious devotion, nation-state policies, regional confederation-based and rural/urban differences, as well as age, kinship roles, and class backgrounds. The *ineslemen* clans of maraboutique Islamic scholars, for example, attempt to control their women slightly more by placing greater emphasis upon virginity and patrilineal interpretation of Qur'anic inheritance laws.

Women and men also experience transformations over the life course. Many, though not all, older men devote themselves to intensive Qur'anic study. Some older women enjoy security as mothers-in-law and grandmothers, and young bridegrooms are deeply obligated to provide groom service, bride wealth, and gifts to their parents-in-law, toward whom they should practice a strict reserve/respect relationship. Many older women specialize in herbal medicine, divination, and bone-setting healing specialties. A widow or divorcee may become a household head in advanced age or remarry.

Girls' education, an important local issue, is one frequent plot theme. In one such play, like many others addressing this issue entitled "Girls' Education," and performed by Ahoulou's acting ensemble Voices of the Desert, the goal was to promote education for women and to convince parents, in particular the rural nomads, to send their daughters to school, because many of them fear that modern (secular, i.e., non-Qur'anic) education will cause their daughters to abandon their culture and religion and also expose them to possible harassment from some teachers.

Ironically, however, there was an all-male cast in this play, with three actors, including the play's composer and ensemble founder, Ahoulou, and some played the roles of female characters. One actor played In Hinan, who tries to convince another character, also a rural nomad and a father named Igra who at first opposes girls' schooling, who later is won over. Another actor played another nomad named Mahmoud, who is somewhat ambivalent but less opposed to girls' schooling than is Igra. The name In Hinan is the masculine form of the feminine name Tin Hinan, and this latter, significantly, is the name of a famous pre-Islamic Berber (Amazigh) female leader.

"Girls' Education"

In this play, Mahmoud's and the father Igra's discussion addresses a more generally held concern: that girls in school will abandon their culture and also become "wild."

Igra, for example, states, "If you leave a girl in school, there are no rules, they are going to do what they want . . . (and also) . . . because my daughters are beautiful, (and) I nourish them well, no need for school."

Mahmoud states, "When girls go to school, they must dress in an appropriate (correct) manner and keep to the customs. . . . I do not want them to look

at (be influenced by) other girls because they are nude: nothing (certainly) no breasts should be exposed outside their clothing.” Here, he refers to not literally complete nudity, but to some Malian girls’ western fashion of tight knit tops, camisoles, etc., which from this conservative father’s standpoint, in effect constitutes nudity—a very relative and subjective cultural concept.

But Igra fears, “If you put girls in school, they become Christians (*ikofer*, fem. pl. *tikoferen*, also used to refer to Europeans in general) (Rasmussen 2004). Watch out! Even if you bring school here, they will be spoiled. School is bad!”

Thus there are fears of schools’ secularizing, even polluting the home space, lessened modesty, and Christianity.

In Hinan reassures Igra and Mahmoud that “when my own daughters return from the distant school, they return without problems, they dress correctly, they pray, they wear appropriate clothing, a large dress, robes and scarves, (so) follow (my) advice.” He goes on to describe the advantages of girls’ schooling, for example, working in an office, but he also advocates parents’ supervising and advising enrolled daughters and sons.

Here, the strategy is to address concerns of more devout Muslim families, a significant presence in the northern Malian region. Many nongovernmental organizations hold meetings encouraging parents to send their daughters and sons to school, and distribute flyers encouraging girls’ schooling, in particular. One flyer, for example, widely circulated, proclaimed in French, “I sent my daughter to school, and now she (with her job) is paying for my trip to Mecca!” Other literature reassures parents that educated women will not try to become *imams* who lead the call to prayer, another concern of some more conservative parents.

In another play with this theme, called “Early Marriage and Schooling,” there is greater empathy for preserving women’s independence, expressed in its plot integrating themes of marriage and girls’ education. I did not directly attend the performance of this play but witnessed its composing, a collaborative oral improvised effort with discussion between Tekres, founder of Joy and its youth wing, whose plots often promoted western secular education and biomedical health care, and an adolescent man, president of a youth development organization. During one of my visits to her home, Tekres spontaneously composed and dictated orally the following play/sketch to that young man.

“Early Marriage and Schooling”

This plot addressed what some agencies and parents perceive as a dilemma between education and marriage for women. An employee of one such agency in a conversation with this researcher referred to this perceived problem of “*le mariage precoce*” (early marriage), that is, some women in impoverished local families are being married off at increasingly younger ages in hopes of

raising their families' economic condition through higher bride wealth and other assistance from more prosperous husbands. Many local families who arranged such marriages, like some agencies, viewed simultaneous marriage and education for women as incompatible.

This play was unfinished as yet but was to be performed during the annual National Children's Week in order to raise consciousness/awareness about children who are not in school, at the Women's and Children's House by members of each Malian regional Children's Parliament, and again later by students during Youth Week in Bamako. Each region or *cercle* was represented in a contest there.

I did not tape this play because it was unavailable, but its plot, summarized for me by Tekres, went as follows: the father of a girl wants her to marry a certain man, Ahmed. The girl is upset because she prefers to remain in school. Her mother goes to a local equivalent of the PTA and asks its leader for assistance. Eventually, the latter convinces her father to cancel the marriage arrangements and allow his daughter to remain in school.

This play's wider social effects are difficult to assess, for several reasons. Although not yet at the rehearsal stage, Tekres's children—young women and men, mostly adolescents and in their early twenties, all but one still unmarried and residing at home, were present as a preliminary audience during this improvisation session between their mother and the youth representative. During discussions, they responded positively to the emerging plot. They expressed deference to the fame and age of their mother and respect for the prestige of the adolescent representative of the youth organization. Notably, the overwhelming majority of youths in Tekres's household (both biological and fictive, adopted children, and girls as well as boys) had been enrolled in primary and then secondary school, but some remained marginally employed or unemployed. Thus while youths in her household did not overtly react cynically to this play plot from respect, their true sentiments may have been different, given their uncertain postschooling destinies.

Some friends and interlocutors later explained to me, away from that household, that many people had become disillusioned with secular education as not always leading to gainful jobs, since educated youths remained unemployed in the national infrastructure.

Reactions by other residents in and around Kidal to calls for girls' education were simply silence, or at least reticence. Often, this attitude conveyed some persons' fears that schoolteachers would harass female students (Rasmussen 2015). But this attitude also conveyed caution about taking any public stance on this issue, from fear of provoking retaliation in the recurring regional violence from more militant Islamists, who vehemently opposed girls' education. Menaka, Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktoo later suffered from intense fighting during and following the 2012 Malian civil war, when militant *jihadists* overran

these towns and for a time occupied them. The militants forbade any form of mixed-sex interactions in school, work, and public sociability. The militants also forced all women in those towns they seized, regardless of culture, ethnicity, language, or degree of religious devotion, to cover up completely or risk severe corporeal punishments. Although so-called “Islamic dress” is in fact quite varied, and not in itself a sign of oppression (Renne 2012), these policies were opposed by many local women who did not customarily wear the most enveloping forms of that dress (*burqa* and *niqab*) or veil the face. The establishment of schools called *Ecoles Franco-Arabes* in some Tuareg rural communities suggests compromises between more moderate Qur’anic and secular education.

Other play plots addressed additional gender-related issues, such as the following.

“Marriage in the Past”

This play was first performed by the ensemble Voices of the Desert. Its goal, the actors explained, was “to convince audience members not to fight too much during their children’s marriage and bride-wealth negotiations.” Although there were several female actors in that ensemble, this play’s cast included a male actor playing two female roles: an old woman and her daughter. Why?

When I inquired, two explanations were given. One was that the women were at the time out at pastures with herds, and the other was that some women were shy about that performance. Although the reason for the shyness in playing roles in this particular plot remained ambiguous, some suggested a possible close connection of the plot to the experience of one of the women actors in that ensemble. In effect, this story is hers, but she preferred others to tell it, thereby not disempowering her voice but rather protecting it and saving her face through indirectly expressing the ideas.

This play’s theme was indeed sensitive, involving a young woman’s rebellion against her parents: resisting traditions of parental authority in marriage arrangements through disguise, subterfuge, and intrigue, though the play had a comical effect as well. Its plot featured duplicity by a male go-between in marriage negotiations, since he was actually another suitor who “steals” the girl’s affection from the (parents’ preferred) fiancé. Hence the hints here of a daughter’s boldness in her indirect, but still powerful, rejection of the suitor initially preferred by her parents—a volatile topic, in which audiences were intensely interested, particularly for its portrayal of deviousness and tensions in first (usually arranged) marriages.

The girl character surreptitiously allows the go-between, a sophisticated urban man on an expensive motorcycle (a status symbol), to court her. All

the while, the latter pretends to assist in arrangements of bride wealth, and negotiates between the girl and the man of her parents' choice! The old mother, more cautious than her husband, the old father, asks "who is this man, exactly?" and she takes an active part in negotiating the bride wealth, speaking with other female relatives and influencing the outcome. This rolereffects older Tuareg women's assertive participation in negotiating marriages of children.

The point is that despite the portrayal of both female characters by a male actor here, the plot and theme still represented Tuareg women's voices in terms of the interests of different women: of older, rural, nomadic, and married, tent- and livestock-owning women, who should be very respected and assertive, and whose opinions are still valued, and also, its portrayal of a young girl who asserts influence on her marriage subtly and indirectly behind the scenes.

Here, additional gender-based distinctions among actors were also significant. Although there were several female actors in Ahoulou's ensemble *Voices of the Desert*, and the ensemble's plays included female characters, these women actors did not always appear in all such plays. Women and men gave conflicting reasons for their absences, hinting of some reluctance on the part of the women to appear in some play plots and/or to portray certain characters. Male actors occasionally impersonated female characters, but as with Bidi's fooling of the army commander earlier, this crossing of gendered boundaries did not have, in local viewpoint, the western sense of "drag" performances by female impersonators suggested by "queer theory" as caricaturing or mocking heteronormative sexuality (Butler 1990). Nor was this cross-dressing considered by most Tuareg to be transgressive. Although a valid and important point in studies of some European and American performances featuring "disguises" or other reversals (Cole 2001), the Tuareg case reminds anthropologists of the need for caution in assuming these attitudes or meanings are universal.

The prevalence of male portrayals of women characters in these plays, but rarely vice versa, is difficult to interpret. In general, there is cultural flexibility concerning alternative gender and sexual orientations. A cross-dressing (allegedly) male sex worker in another Saharan town was not negatively sanctioned, though a few others tended to joke about "him," and a few persons believed "he" was an intersex (hermaphrodite), thereby suggesting some local attempts to equate gender with anatomical sex, notwithstanding general tolerance for his/her lifestyle. In the theatrical plays, the reverse (of female actors donning male dress and playing male characters) did not occur. In social life, a few women occasionally don Tuareg men's turban/face-veil while returning from evening festivals to protect from harassment, and are not negatively sanctioned, but this action, in contrast to the rare case above

of the cross-dressing sex worker, is not a long-term or customary practice, for as noted, Tuareg women wear a distinctive head scarf/shawl over their robes, and most, in contrast to men, do not veil the face. Female actors never portrayed male characters in the live plays, never even “filled in” for them when male actors were not available. Rather, in such cases, one male actor usually portrayed two characters, by standing in a different place if in the same scene, and/or by changing his voice pitch, the latter technique especially prevalent in radio broadcast plays. This imbalance between male and female actors’ portraying opposite-sex characters is therefore difficult to interpret, and moreover, the conflicting and often vague reasons given suggest underlying, unspoken additional reasons.

The issue here was not entirely dress-related, for even in their distinctive dress, both sexes are supposed to be modest and cover in order to convey respect, especially toward parents-in-law: men ready to marry should cover the mouth, seen as analogous to sex organs (a Tamajaq aphorism states that the veil and the trousers are brothers), and married women should cover the hair and nape of the neck (Loughran-Bini and Seligman 2006). Also, more generally, the orifices are vulnerable to spirits who enter the body through them.

Evidence suggests additional factors in female actors’ shyness about appearing in some plots’ stories, as well as their frequent reticence and reluctance to perform certain bodily motions required of some characters during play performances. At some other play performances with themes and actions considered less shameful by the women, I saw that these and other female actors did perform actively in plays, albeit with restrained actions and gestures, and always portraying only women characters. One reason, unstated to me but nonetheless possible in hindsight given the subsequent political and religious violence in the region, was women’s fear of the growing presence of more militant Islamist jihadis whose views of gender and sexuality did not allow such cultural flexibility. Another reason, given me for such caution in contexts outside the plays, such as parental hesitation to allow daughters to participate in the Miss Kidal beauty contest, was fear of the malevolent power of evil eye (*togerchet*), jealousy toward someone very beautiful and/or talented.

These observations suggest that there is also something about the embodied style of acting, rather than the acting profession per se (unlike in some other parts of the world, this profession is not among Tuareg “low-status”), that is the primary reason female actors are more subdued. In other performance contexts with less demand for kinesthetic mobility, for example, in composing, discussing, and rehearsing plays, women take very active roles. It is during their live play performance that their style involves more restrained and subdued style, in particular in bodily motions and gestures.

The many kinds of agency that Tuareg women actors assert performatively in plot themes, characters portrayed, and performance styles are therefore complex. Gender is reconstructed and reworked during performances to emphasize some class-based ideologies which reverberate from past into present. Rather than restrictive, the restrained performances by women actors and their occasional replacement by men in character portrayals convey the ideal of protecting and respecting women, particularly those of noble and tributary backgrounds, and conveying their dignity, which many persons perceive as more threatened in play production than in other Tuareg verbal art performance genres. The reason why, several actors explained, is because acting in plays involves more embodied motions and gestures than singing and playing of musical instruments traditionally (i.e., the latter can be performed sitting down). My own observations of these performances corroborated these remarks. Female singers and musicians of nonservile descent (nobles and tributaries) generally remain seated in solo musical instrumental performances or standing still in choral performances. Also, this pattern is in keeping with long-standing ideals of distinctive bodily comportment for each social stratum: women from smith/artisan and servile backgrounds are expected to be freer in their bodily gestures and motions than women from aristocratic and tributary backgrounds, for example, the former dance in ways considered by the latter to be undignified and lacking in restraint (i.e., with expansive motions of arms and legs).

Tekres, founder of the ensemble Joy, put it this way:

Most (of us) women prefer to perform solo in songs and poems over (performing in) plays because sketches/plays involve more bodily motions such as gestures (*sikbar*), which are shameful for us women of aristocratic and tributary origins, since, in contrast to smiths and former slaves, we emphasize the cultural value of reserve/restraint (*takarakit*) in public. Performance per se, however, is not a problem for (us) women, only gestures and body motions are.

This stylistic standard is in keeping with the long-standing ideal that aristocratic women in nomadic camps, though neither secluded by force nor forbidden to travel or receive male visitors, are supposed to avoid excessive motility (in too-expansive gestures and in too-distant wandering), in order to assert symbolically their dignity, reserve, and generally high status, as “mistress” of their tent and herds, able to receive suitors, generously host visitors, and (in the past) support subordinates. Those who visit others tend to be somewhat lower status, whereas those who remain at home tend to be higher status, their homes often full of visitors. High-status women are in effect “anchored” in spaces near their property (their herding near camps is considered “light” activity and expresses their independent management of their own herds and

tents). In the countryside, even a husband can be ejected from a wife's tent upon quarrels or divorce.

In town, local imaginaries reflect this remembered cultural ideal. Tekres herself was almost always seated inside her urban home but was never alone, rather, almost always surrounded by her family and her visiting neighbors and friends. I almost never saw her walking about. She always sent either a daughter or her Dogon female cook to the market on errands.

Tuareg men, by contrast, more often wander and travel over much wider spaces: on dwindling but still existing camel caravans, on truck trading expeditions, and labor migration, considered very dangerous. Gender is also prominent in many plots about labor migration, as a kind of new rite of passage for young men, but unlike older caravans' role as a rite of passage, labor migration is not always under closer parental supervision. Partly for this reason, and partly because of its perceived greater dangers, labor migration is not always approved by parents, as portrayed in the next play.

"Labor Migration to Libya"

This play was first performed by The Visionaries ensemble at the radio station live in its courtyard before a mostly youthful audience (i.e., of adolescent and unmarried persons). Its plot was composed by a journalist and actor who also served as the radio director at that time, following his training in Bamako. When the play was performed another time specifically to be broadcast over the radio, a female actor, Lala, played two female characters, the mother and the sister of a son who wanted to go to Libya. She skillfully altered her voice accordingly. In listening to the broadcast version of this play on the radio with my host family, and on later transcribing and translating it with assistance from the radio staff, my hosts, friends, and assistants confirmed that a woman actor playing two roles, even of female characters, was exceptional, often due to the unexpected absence of a male actor who usually did this. Women actors prefer doing this only during audio broadcasting.

The plot opens with a young man and his sister herding animals and fetching water, and the son complaining that he is tired of doing this work. He wants his sister to do all of this work, but she resists his orders. Later, his mother actively participates in an acrimonious family discussion of the son's Libya migration plan, and takes his father's side, opposing it, believing the son will ultimately regret going to Libya. His mother warns, "many who go to Libya go crazy because of their misfortunes and disappointments there."

The son, in the next scene returned from Libya, is now mentally ill from his traumatic experiences there. He must be cured by an Islamic scholar with Qur'anic verses, and the family must pay this healer five goats, all the animals they have left.

The mother laments, “What (use) is money (cash currency)?” underlining the importance of livestock until recently as a primary source of wealth, and illustrating the ambivalence of many toward monetization and distrust of cash-based labor for strangers in distant spaces.

There are complex intergenerational, kinship, and gender dynamics here. The son is antisocial, someone who does not respect either his elderly parents or his sister (the brother-sister relationship is important in lifelong mutual support), and eventually he pays the price: he is taken advantage of by his Libyan employers since he cannot count in the local (Libyan) monetary system, his already low pay is stolen, and he goes insane.

Importantly, women characters “talk back” in this plot, despite their fewer lines than men characters. As in some other plays, a son’s misfortune is explained as caused by his disobeying his parents and not obtaining their consent or blessing before travel. Thus women’s acting appearances in most “modern” plays/sketches, even if fleeting and rarer than men’s and at times replaced by men, and women’s performance styles, even if subdued, must not be taken at face value as a sign of outright exclusion or oppression. For women can be assertive and influential in the characters, dialogues, and plots of many, though not all plays, as well as in social relationships in life beyond art.

Following these performances, the urgency of the warnings about Libya increased. Indeed, migration has become even more dangerous. After the overthrow of Ghadaffi in 2011, Tuareg male migrants suffered stereotyping as his presumed mercenaries, and some had to flee lynch mobs for their lives. One returning migrant, for example, related to me how, while fleeing, he had to leave his cash earnings and belongings behind. There followed more acute problems in these migrations of exploitative smugglers trafficking Africans seeking to enter Europe across the Mediterranean, many of whom first traveled through Libya, where some were subjected to harsh imprisonment and at least one instance of attempts to enslave migrants.

Other play plots and characters present additional conflicts, transgressions, but also contradictory mores, conveying, again, ambiguity, debates, and transformations pertaining to gender in Tuareg communities. For example, in some performances when female actors play central characters (but still act with subdued speech and restrained motions), their characters are portrayed negatively or as antisocial, as in the next two plays.

“Revolution”

The first play, entitled “Revolution,” performed inside a family compound by Travelers of the Desert, whose actors belonged to maraboutique Kel Essouk families, and composed by its actor/founder, whom I’ll call Sidi, featured a

female actor playing a young rural girl, engaged to marry in an arranged marriage. When she visits her uncle in town, she is tempted by consumer goods in a store. The shop merchant attempts to seduce her by discrediting her fiancé in spreading false rumors about him, that he is a thief who stole some cows.

In the conclusion, her fiancé and his friend disprove the merchant's slandering of the fiancé, and repair the latter's reputation with the girl's (rural) father. The family welcomes their daughter back home in their nomadic camp, suggesting a happy ending but also a didactic warning: young women must be cautious in the town. Actors and audiences in their comments and exegesis of this plot to me emphasized the dangers of town for young rural women who venture there.

In this play, the female actor portraying the young engaged woman (male actors portray her father, her uncle, the merchant, and her wronged fiancé) takes a more central role than usual, though she remains seated throughout the play, never being shown to walk around or otherwise move around. Her lines are few, but important. Yet mostly other characters talk about her, in effect, relating her story for her.

Even her character's actions in town, which involve walking "around" without a definite destination (as noted, disapproved of by some more devout and conservative Tuareg on both religious and class-based grounds), are only related by others; for example, her uncle-host critically comments to her that, "You are walking around town too much," thereby revealing thematically the more general fears for women's endangered safety and dignity in the urban street space and conveying stylistically the continuing class-based taboo against women of nonsmith and nonservile background moving about too freely in public. Smith, griot, and formerly servile Bella women tend to more often circulate in visiting, bringing news, invitations to name days and weddings, and announcing special events, not necessarily denigrated for doing so (they have much informal power), but nonetheless expected to do so more than others.

In this play, despite his disapproval, her uncle does not seclude her forcibly inside his home. Also, she purchases items on her own, suggesting that, on the one hand, some women still enjoy economic independence in monetarization, but on the other, that they are prone, in some persons' stereotypes, to spend money quickly on temptations in town. Multiethnic urban influences may also be at play in this negative stereotype: in some folktales of the Hausa, neighbors of the Tuareg, there is a view of women as materialistic and acquisitive.

Although the female actor plays an important, central role here, her character appears less assertive on the surface than some female characters played by male actors in some other plays. Also, she is presented didactically as a negative example (though also sympathetically, as a victim of unscrupulous,

seductive urban merchants). Perhaps this unflattering portrayal reflects some Tuareg women's somewhat less powerful positions in towns and sedentarized centers with diverse social and religious influences and their difficulty of obtaining resources for maintaining property there, for example, feed for goats and raw materials for tents.

In some other plays, by contrast, there are more peripheral, briefer roles for female actors, but those roles nonetheless portray more assertive women, as for example, shown the Libyan migrant labor-themed plot. These frequent disjunctions between plot, character, and performance style in portrayals of relations between the sexes reflect changes, debates, opportunities, and restrictions in wider society. Consider, for example, the complexities of the female character presented in the next play.

"The Well"

This play, also performed by the Kel Essouk ensemble Travelers of the Desert inside a relative's compound, featured a female actor playing a (female) witness during a property dispute court hearing held by a marabout. Tuareg cultural interpretations of *shar'ia* are interesting here. The woman sits there, still, subdued, and dignified, dressed in her best shimmering indigo robes and shawl/head scarf, though not secluded or off to the side, but seated among the men on the same mat before the adjudicating marabout/Islamic scholar.

The plot concerns a fight between two men: one, the true well-owner who inherited this from his grandfather, and the other man, lying, who claims to have purchased the well himself legitimately. The woman among the witnesses at the Qur'anic judgment is eventually revealed as a false witness supporting the liar. On the other hand, she encourages each to swear on the Qur'an that each is telling the truth; the liar refuses to do this, admits his lie, and the presiding Islamic scholar/judge recognizes the true owner's right to the well.

As a witness, therefore, this female character is complex. She illustrates Tuareg gender equity (women may represent themselves and be witnesses in court cases), but since she is at first discredited, by implication, she also reveals ambiguity in Qur'anic law and perhaps seems to express some reformist Islamist piety groups' interpretation of the Qur'an as stating that a woman is a less reliable witness than a man. Yet ultimately, she does reveal the "truth," albeit in a circuitous manner: through indirect speech (*tangalt*), an important Tuareg cultural value, thereby also empowering her character's role morally. Indirect, metaphorical verbal expression applies to both male and female actors of high social prestige (i.e., of elite noble and tributary descent), but to different degrees. As shown, there is much greater reticence in speaking and less physical mobility by female actors in general. Yet as also

shown, some women compose scripted plays. Thus on one level, women's performance styles of verbal reticence and bodily restraint reflect class-related, not solely gender-related ideals, recalling linguistic patterns in some other stratified African societies, for example, the "cool speech" expected of Wolof of aristocratic background in Senegal, as contrasted with the "hot speech" of Wolof griots (Irvine 1979) and similar ideal contrasts between Mande (Bambara) aristocrats and their attached smiths and griots (McNaughton 1997). Tuareg ideals of dignity and reserve in speech and motion are a mark of prestigious conduct of upper-class persons, even more so on the part of women, who are considered the guardians of culture as educators of children inside the maternal tent. This role has been challenged by Qur'anic and, more recently, colonial and postcolonial secular schools.

Moreover, this gendered spatial and bodily restraint in the actions of female actors also reenacts the long-standing standards of courtship etiquette in rural nomadic camps, in which a woman "receives" a man in her tent. He must respect her, must leave if she rejects his advances, and should not pressure her for sexual relations. Men of aristocratic and tributary social background are therefore also somewhat constrained by reserve and respect, but tend to express these attitudes differently: in their face-veiling and in their ideally gallant and protective conduct toward women and elders, as warriors and long-distance traders in "wild" spaces beyond the tent. Male actors in their more active physicality in character portrayals embody this value, of courageously protecting rather than restricting women.

The themes in the two play plots above have ambiguous and complex meanings. Some influences derive from Tuareg cultural interpretations of Islam, in northern Mali mediated by the Kel Essouk marabouts' interpretation of the Qur'an for the Ifoghas, as well as those of newly intruding reformist/revivalist Islamist piety movements. There are also, as noted, hints that some female actors feel reluctant or unenthusiastic about some roles assigned them in the new urban plays/sketches.

Yet a question remains: given that most women in social life should be respected, then why were women in these two foregoing plays seemingly negatively portrayed?

In the Qur'anic Islamic representation of the woman in the play "The Well" as an unreliable witness (of lesser importance than a man as witness, as interpreted by some Islamist reformists), a dilemma was highlighted; namely, the woman witness, accepted as equal in Tuareg culture, was initially discredited in her supporting the false claimant to the well ownership. Yet on conclusion of the play, there was a "twist": as if in "retort" to this characterization, she also ultimately exposed the false claimant as lying by her encouraging him to swear on the Qur'an, thereby bringing to the surface (indirectly, subtly, through *tangalt*) his false claim and prompting his confession. This turn

of events encapsulated the reworking of some gendered bias against women in stricter interpretations of the Qur'an as less reliable witnesses than men, thus highlighting the role of the acting ensemble as mediating between these interpretations and local cultural mores protecting Tuareg women's high social prestige and legal and economic independence, and the role of the Kel Essouk marabouts in negotiating this process. Here, actors were continuing their ideal as courageous protectors of the community.

Not surprisingly, dissonant struggles and contradictions enacted by some plots and characters in play performance spaces address tensions and negotiations encountered in wider social spaces, but they do not exactly reflect them in a simple or direct manner. There is a myth-like connection in their expression of mental logical preoccupations and acting's mediation of contradictions, but these are reworked in the performative construction of gender.

Urban life has consequences for relations between the sexes. Some urban men feel threatened by the opportunities offered to women in urban public spheres, and others worry about their future safety. In town, woman as cultural tent owner is in effect, wandering into a new space of *essufftenere*, a new wild: of unpredictability. Unlike in the countryside, where women often visit nonkin and go to evening festivals unaccompanied, in towns most women vanish from the streets after sundown, fearing strangers and violence, and leaving streets to young, marginally or unemployed males who gather to smoke and chat. Nation-state policies of sedentarizing nomads have brought many workers, civil servants, soldiers, and tourists who are sometimes ignorant and disrespectful of cultural knowledge and social practices pertaining to women in rural Tuareg communities. Consequently, some visitors have misunderstood local courtship patterns and social etiquette as invitations to seduce so-called "loose" women.

Many parents arrange earlier marriages for daughters in order to alleviate poverty and also from fear of scandals of illegitimate births because most urban girls are no longer busy herding. Yet with technology that can be used in private rooms of new adobe and concrete houses in towns, some youths resist these spatial restrictions in sociability: whereas in the past, a suitor needed to first approach a girl directly in person in her parents' household with her father present, now the girl and her suitor can call each other on cell phones.

Actors feel particular pressures to hold onto cultural mores because they are on public display. The male actors feel compelled to reclaim their masculine pride, threatened by unemployment and lost battles and dislocation from socialization and rites of passage. The female actors, often suffering from diminished livestock, women's main source of wealth until recently, with uncertain property replacement in irregular job-training programs and controversies surrounding their education, also feel pressures to maintain their long-standing economic independence.

Both sexes face challenges in town. There, the emphasis is upon the nuclear household usually headed by a male who should be the primary breadwinner. There is greater division of the sexes in physical interior domestic space, as well as in public sociability outside the home and in labor. Married urban Tuareg men often eat, drink tea, and gossip with male kin and business partners on visits, at markets, and mosques. In many households in a predominantly Tuareg, middle-class urban neighborhood where I resided during a part of my field research, a typical wife's everyday domestic work is demanding: cooking, hauling wood and water, laundry, cleaning, and child-care, unless the family can afford to hire a servant or engage an adolescent relative for heavier tasks. Some married women are described as housewives (French *menageres*, tellingly, with no precise Tamajaq equivalent). The wife usually no longer herds livestock, depends more on her husband, and often is more isolated from her matrifocal kin here than rural women.

In settled centers and towns, women and men experience increasingly separate divisions of social and economic spaces from western, central state, *da'wa* Islamist, and multiple ethnic and class influences. Some plays remind audiences of organizers', actors', and composers' nostalgic visions of remembered versions of "traditional" gendered mores from pastoral nomadic spaces that some Tuareg perceive as crucial to maintaining the high social prestige of women. Other plays reveal and engage challenges to this goal and issues raised and didactically attempt to remember but also suggest the need to modify, through the medium of performance, older Tuareg cultural gender and sexuality constructs.

More broadly, the foregoing plays illustrate the importance of dynamic situational and relational meanings in cultural and aesthetic constructions of gendered spaces—political, socioeconomic, and symbolic—and mobility within and across them. The sketches/plays therefore serve as forum for reflection on and discussion of these processes and the issues they raise.

What impact do the actors and messages have on the social lives of women and men? Although there is still some resistance to sending girls to school, attitudes are changing, particularly in towns following the exit of the militant Islamists around 2013. Marriage ages, on the other hand, are lower than in the past. Many poorer families increasingly attempt to marry off their daughters to economically better-off men, who are often non-Tuareg because many unemployed young Tuareg men are unable to raise bride wealth. Some international and national nongovernmental, state, and United Nations aid agencies are trying to compensate women and men for lost herds, in some cases by replacing them, or in other cases, by encouraging them to practice oasis gardening and newer occupations, such as tailoring. Alternative occupations to herding and gardening are increasingly available: a few women own small shops and restaurants. But only recently in northern Mali have women

of aristocratic and tributary social backgrounds begun selling items in the markets; in the past, this activity was considered shameful, primarily done by Bella women. Smith/artisan men and women derive much income from arts and crafts, though revenue from their sale has become uncertain in the sporadic regional violence that discourages tourism, an important source of their revenue.

Urban Tuareg women's bases of economic independence are increasingly altered. Much urban property is not independently owned by the married woman but merged together with that of her husband in civic records. In semi-sedentarized communities more generally (oases as well as towns), male-owned houses complicate property disputes on divorce.

Yet as suggested in the play "Revolution," women can also benefit in town life. They can use urban and sedentarized settings to escape from an extended household ruled over by a parent or other restrictive kinsperson. It is also possible for them to gain access to new jobs with school and training, thereby benefiting from emerging economic opportunities, which, though irregular, are more available than in remote rural areas. And many women, like men, often alternate between towns and the countryside and combine different subsistence strategies.

Thus situational practices and meanings are important, not solely structural oppositions, in the effects of sedentization on gender. But life in the towns and settled centers does bring consequences that require new strategies, and these strategies impact gender on multiple levels, including the body.

THE URBAN BODY AND BODY POLITICS IN MEDIA AND PERFORMANCE

Also addressed in acting and other verbal art performances are body politics in Kidal. The long-standing Tuareg ideal of female fatness is most strongly adhered to by rural herders of aristocratic backgrounds, as a sign of relative freedom from physical labor (Rasmussen 2010). The related ideal this manifested, of restrained movement, once had a symbolic prestige value that reflected a commensurate economic value, but this symbolic "capital" has now become detached from the functional economic value it once conveyed: of the noble woman seated inside her tent, presiding over subordinates, reaping the benefits of their labor, but also generously redistributing wealth from her herds in hospitality to visitors and caring for subordinates. Many (though not all) women now find this obligation to be generous and hospitable more difficult to fulfill. Since herding no longer guarantees a livelihood, and many must now combine herding with oasis gardening, itinerant trading, artisanry, and labor migration, manual labor for many (though not all) women has increased, and this holds less social stigma than previously (Spittler 1993).

In Kidal, complex processes impinge upon this long-standing, yet challenged, debated, and changing bodily aesthetic of female fatness. Some school and hospital programs instruct on nutrition and diet and encourage women of Kidal to give birth not at home but at the *Maternite* (birth clinic). Education and job-training thus go hand-in-hand with new ideas concerning the female body that discourage the long-standing valorizing of fatness, though this introduces some dilemmas and double binds because female actors' characters and performances, on the other hand, mostly continue to valorize the older cultural ideal, of a dignified, restrained woman who walks slowly, gesticulates sparingly, and avoids or minimizes physical labor. In this, the acting style in effect commemorates the ideal of fatness as symbolic capital, nostalgically reflecting on past prosperity and idealizing the noble woman's role as well-nourished but also generous and hospitable.

In wider social life, however, health education workshops linking the hazards of diabetes and high blood pressure to obesity, and new media (television, especially) promoting different images of women's bodies explicitly promote a more "slender" ideal (admittedly a very relative and subjective term—in local view, approximately neither rotund nor thin). Their impact, although uneven, is felt most clearly among the new urban bourgeoisie, including some women in acting ensembles.

A female actor and musician I shall call Amina illustrated these dynamics in her comments while we were watching television at her home in Ettember, an upper middle-class neighborhood in Kidal.

Amina's Experience

Amina, around twenty years old, and born in Kidal, belonged to the Joy ensemble and often toured internationally with that ensemble presenting musical concerts abroad. Her mother played the *anzad*, a bowed, one-stringed lute, with the ensemble Joy away from their plays, during their separate musical performances, with Tekres singing. Since her adolescence, Amina both acted in this ensemble's plays and also sang and played the *tende* mortar drum in the other performances.

During our visits, I learned that Amina had recently attended several health education workshops at a Kidal clinic which encouraged weight loss. In particular, the sessions discouraged the traditional Tuareg fattening ritual for women, rare nowadays but still practiced in some remote rural areas of Mauritania, Mali, and Niger by those with the economic means.

Amina's Perspective

On a visit and interview, Amina showed me a photo of herself before she lost weight and remarked proudly, "Now I am much thinner . . . this is more

attractive and healthier, also.” Although she was not extremely thin, she appeared much smaller than in the photograph, in which she appeared to me, as she indicated, to conform to the Tamajaq adjective *ta zewera*, or “fat” (i.e., what most Americans would call “hefty”). When I visited her, she often had the television turned on to a popular soap opera featuring well-to-do slender women and their boyfriends who drove cars, wore beautiful clothing, and lived in luxury high-rise apartments.

Amina did not starve herself, she asserted, but ate smaller portions of a variety of foods. When I asked her why she had undertaken this regimen, she replied that the hospital had instructed her and some other women on the dangers of obesity, using the French term (*l'obesite*). But she nevertheless expressed some confusion and doubt on this and requested from me more information on foods and their vitamin content. She also complained of stomach problems and asked me for medicines that helped digestion, thereby hinting that she experienced some illness or discomfort.

Among some women in Kidal, in particular younger elite women such as Amina exposed to media and performance, there is emerging consciousness of a new bodily aesthetic ideal. Yet there is also hesitation and ambivalence toward it; for thus far, not many others embrace this aesthetic. Several other women who were seeking information about job-training programs at the *Maison du Luxembourg* decided not to attend them when they discovered that center's distance (about a mile) from their homes. They laughingly insisted, “No, we cannot walk there . . . it is too far,” even when I offered to accompany them there on foot (I did not have a vehicle). The women actors' embodied performance styles convey these tensions, as experienced in their changing society through the lens of remembered idealized gender relations.

GENDER AND PERFORMANCE IN HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Relevant to women actors' performance is the role of gender in the history of acting in Kel Adagh Tuareg society. As one female actor, Fana, explained, “The first *ibaraden* were all men. But actors respected women. They were not, in principle, at least, supposed to be their lovers; rather, they gave gifts to aristocratic women for God.”

In other words, Tuareg women became actors in the modern urban plays later, as part of the performances and festivals organized by the consciousness-raising programs in the towns. This suggests that some female actors may offer low-key performances in these plays from their reluctance, resistance, or even subversion, in order to indirectly express their disapproval of outside interference with their traditional symbolic capital; at stake are

women's sources of prestige, both material and symbolic, and their embodied expressions of them in performance styles. Not surprisingly, there is a rarity of female *kel seghsegh* comedians of aristocratic elite social backgrounds; most actors who specialize as *kel seghsegh* comics tend to be male, and most (though not all) of them are of tributary, smith, or servile, rather than aristocratic, descent. The women actors excel more in the serious-themed plays.

Also instructive here is a comparison of women actors' performance styles to those of some other verbal art specialists in Tuareg society. As noted, among Tuareg both men and women have always composed and performed poetry and songs and played instruments, and some female actors today also compose plays. But women's performance styles and genres have been historically cross-cut by their social stratum origins in many Tuareg groups. In some rural communities, for example, each social category still dances in a distinctive style at rites of passage. Rural Saharan smith/artisan women and men, known as *inaden*, do not perform plays but rather sing praise songs and dance at wedding and nameday celebrations of their noble patrons. In their performances, smith women, as well as smith men, are much less reserved and restrained nonverbally and verbally than are women actors. For example, a smith/artisan woman's "griot-like" comic repartee performed at her noble patron families' weddings features abundant and vivid gestures: often, she cups her hands in a manner miming begging. Like some Sahelian griots' similar lack of reserve and restraint in their performances (Hale 1999; Hoffman 2000; Irvine 1974), Tuareg smiths' gestures convey smiths' general lack of nobles' social reserve, which they explain as necessary in order to help arrange noble patrons' marriages and bride wealth and to remind their aristocratic patrons of their obligations to give smith/artisans remuneration in food and cash for their services (Rasmussen 2003, 2013a). Smith women and men, like griots of both sexes elsewhere, simultaneously mock as well as praise their patrons. They remind guests of the importance of women, matrilineal descent, and kinship ties through females in their performance images of eating, the mouth, and the stomach throughout their song verses, sexual euphemisms, and ribald gestures and dancing, styles usually shunned by others.

Like smiths, the *ibaraden* actors, both male and female, are also social mediators in Tuareg society, but in a style and role different from smiths'. Rather than mediating between the older social categories, reminding the client-patron families of their traditional mutual obligations, or recalling female kinship ties and fertility symbolism, the *ibaraden* actors in their play performances mediate between newly emergent and fluid socioeconomic processes and subject positions, often surrounded by officials with agendas of their own.

In addition to reflecting aristocratic dignity and evoking respectful court-ing from "troubadour-like" tributary men, women actors' enveloping dress,

frequent low speech, and restrained actions during acting also convey an important current concern: their need to guard against others' evil eye, coveting and envy feared to cast its gaze on someone with a perceived monopoly over resources, conspicuous consumption, or who is especially beautiful and/or talented. Why is this latter precaution so necessary? Some urban plays are staged on a raised "western"-style stage/platform, as already noted, new to Tuareg performance space. This elevated exposure of bodies also makes some female actors uncomfortable and self-conscious about their vulnerability to both evil eye and accusations of undignified and immodest conduct.

Thus the gender-themed plot contents, embodied performance practices, and wider social contexts reveal dueling old and new ideas concerning gender, bodies, and motions in time and space, expressed verbally and nonverbally. Moreover, acting and plays address not solely gendered and embodied but also class-based conundrums and contradictions—between new opportunities and expectations in urban spaces, and dilemmas over maintaining long-standing, remembered sources of prestige.

Similarly, age and intergenerational themes in plots and acting reveal important but unresolved issues, explored in the next chapter.

NOTE

1. Here, I follow some works in recent anthropology of gender which understand gender as a comparative, dynamic, and relational concept (Di Leonardo 1990; Di Leonardo and Lancaster 1997; Butler 1990, 6; Davison 1997; Sargent and Bretell 2009; Wood 1999) and by studies that recognize gender as not fixed either across time or in location (Butler 1992; Di Lauretis 1984; Flax 1993; Kondo 1990).

Chapter 7

Youths and Elders

Resistance and Healing in Intergenerational Ambivalence

THE EXPERIENCE OF YOUTH AND AGE

Composers, actors, and audience members in Kidal assert that many plays relate “the experience of youth (*tichumera*).” Many plots contain themes of age and intergenerational relationships, and above all, the youthful age cohort widely called in Tamajaq *ichumaren* (masc. sing. *achumar*, fem. sing. *tichumar*). What is this experience, exactly, who are youths, and how do actors enact it in their plays and draw on it in wider social contexts?

In many societies, cultural shifts are drastically revising the meaning of youth and age (Bucholtz 2002; Burbank 1988; Cole and Durham 2007). Prevalent Tuareg cultural constructions define as “youthful” those persons who are past childhood and puberty but as yet unmarried and underemployed, and thus lacking in achievement of social and economic rites of passage. As in much of Africa and elsewhere, many ritual, social, and economic activities that once dramatized the “liminality” of youth are undergoing decline and modification from socioeconomic and political changes, thereby delaying fulfilling cultural criteria for achieving the identity of social adulthood.

As with gender, fundamental to understanding youth is an analysis of intergenerational relationships in dynamic practice. Tuareg youths figure centrally in debates between the generations and in transformations of group membership and social subject positions. These processes occur in household and kin groups, emergent communities such as the numerous youth centers and other nongovernmental-sponsored programs with their educational, job-training, and cultural/artistic programs, which attempt to redefine and redirect Tuareg youths’ identities, activities, prospects, and ambitions, as these have been dislocated in social transformations.

Among the Tuareg, age is culturally constructed. Many persons do not link “youth” exclusively to particular biological or chronological stages. For example, girls become cultural women upon marriage, not on menarche, and cultural men must be marriageable themselves, that is, be economic property owners and capable of providing bride wealth, groom service, and gifts to the bride’s household. Unemployed or marginally-employed persons, even biologically mature ones, continue to be considered youth long into their thirties or forties. In other words, Tuareg cultural formulations of age mark not literal biological, chronological, or linear phases of the life course but rather social, economic, and ritual achievements and transformations (Rasmussen 1997). In order to become a mature adult, one must have work, own property, and marry; and to be considered “old,” one must have children who are married or have achieved marriageable age/status. These accomplishments are becoming increasingly difficult for many, in particular the new, younger age cohort of men, to achieve.

A concept I find particularly useful for understanding the plays featuring youthful and older characters and age-themed plots is the related notion of generations, which directs attention to encounters and interactions between generations and intergenerational relationships (Cole and Durham 2007; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Mannheim 1972), deployed to speak to rapid shifts in experience that create age-conscious cohorts.

The intergenerational-themed play plots illuminate how Tamajaq-speaking residents in and around Kidal recognize, experience, and debate youth and age in everyday social life and in more formal contexts, such as performances and rites of passage, which are still important arenas for reflecting on age situationally. In so doing, these play plots draw attention to ways age relations are situated in fields of power, knowledge, rights, notions of agency and personhood. These plots show not a singular or unitary identity but multivalent identities of Tuareg youth and cultural appropriations and notions of ownership. These identities are echoed in youths’ bodily adornment and popular social events “offstage,” such as some young men’s dropping or modification of the men’s turban face-veil in the towns, and their rejection of some additional age, gender, and class ideals, still valued by many parents, such as endogamous marriage, but also, on the other hand, youths’ frequent defense of other cultural mores in opposition to policies perceived as threatening Tuareg cultural survival.

Performances and plots with themes of youth and intergenerational relationships portray not solely victimization or marginalization, however, but also active agency and resistance to challenges. Resistance here is contradictory and multistranded: in some contexts, youths are rebelling against the culture of their parents and elders, but in other contexts, the former protect the latter against external aggressive forces they fear, such as some state armies

remembered for oppression, “bandits,” and other violent forces. Thus acting and plays question but also ultimately support some local mores. Accordingly, elders and parents are portrayed variously in these plays: as alternately wise and demanding obedience, vulnerable and needing protection, or ignorant and in need of education.

Moreover, some plays about and directed at youths also operate as psychotherapy and/or as didactic moral lessons, like the older folk tales and epics (*tenzoghen*) told by elders, women, artisans, and comedians. There are also plots that continue to remind audiences of local history and laud famous heroes and their remembered bravery. Other plots operate more like warnings and social critiques, for example, attempts to inspire youths to work. As one organizer and actor explained, “An important goal of the plays is to raise consciousness or educate (using the French term, *sensibiliser*) youth.” For example, one recurring motif in many youth and intergenerational-themed plots, also featured in some plays with rural/urban and gendered themes, concerns youths’ migration to Libya in search of work. I observed a number of plays with variations on this migration theme, though plots’ details differed. Although a few plays also addressed nomadism and gender topics in addition in the same plot, intergenerational relationships were also prominent as a more central focus in other plays.

Since youth and age-related themes sometimes overlap with gender and rural/urban themes, in this chapter, I first briefly reanalyze three previously presented play plots with greater emphasis here upon their intergenerational themes. I then proceed to analyze other play plots with more central aged-related themes.

“Exile (Migration) to Libya” Revisited

In this play, first presented in the chapter focusing on nomadic-themed plots, parents were portrayed as strongly opposing their son’s plan to depart for Libya. The father cursed him, proclaiming “May God not bless my son, because he left in exile,” and even took up a saber sword, threatening him. But this was in vain; for still, the son disobeyed and left for Libya on labor migration.

The elder also insulted all youths, asserting “the child who does not stay beside his old father who is sick will be worthless.” The rebellious son migrated, however, and left his animals with his younger brother. Subsequently the younger son, also, went to Libya to join his brother there. Then the old father died.

The people who conducted the funeral found there were no children at home to help herd animals. So marabouts ruled that the animals must be dispersed among different people to care for them. This sad news, of the death

of the father and dispersal of the family herds, was conveyed to the brothers in Libya, who were delayed there and were unsuccessful in obtaining money there.

“The moral lesson here,” Ahoulou, the composer of this play solemnly explained, “is that one will regret traveling without the consent of one’s parents.”

Many audience members asserted that this plot also raised youths’ awareness of the dangers of labor migration to Libya and appreciated the role that the *ibaraden* actors play in protecting people from danger, or at least warning families already affected by danger to avoid risky actions and situations in the future. The plot also reminds audiences to respect parents, though as soon shown, in social life these urgings have mixed results. These consciousness-raising goals come into particularly sharp focus in plots integrating age, intergenerational, and gender themes. In the play called “Revolution” performed by Travelers of the Desert, analyzed earlier in terms of its gender-related issues, also striking are its age-related issues, addressed here.

“Revolution” Revisited

In this play, male actors varied their veil/turban headdress styles according to the characters they portrayed in order to convey the characters’ varying degrees of respectful and respected conduct, dignity, and authority, for example, in roles of the elder, the youth, the marabout, and as the young, newly wealthy but devious urban merchant. The merchant character wore no veil at all. This symbolized not solely his urban cosmopolitanism but also, more subtly, his lack of integrity and respect for the woman and her parents in his spreading of false rumors denigrating her fiancé in order to disrupt her arranged marriage, and in his tempting her to spend a lot of money at his store. Nonetheless, the parents and the fiancé eventually won.

Here, the didactic goal of this play was evident: actors and plot warned of the dangers of towns for youths; the girl experienced these dangers directly, and her fiancé experienced them indirectly, though he was eventually exonerated of the false rumors that he was a thief. In effect, gossip and counter-gossip were powerful in this play. The characters here were of different ages, and the intergenerational relationships were less conflictual than in some other play plots, but nonetheless the rural/urban differences highlighted suggest that parents and their traditional authority in children’s first marriages can be challenged by urban merchants whose wealth can be tempting to young daughters who travel to town. Also in town, elders’ authority over youths can be weakened by distant gossip, more difficult to combat there than in a small rural community close by.

One of several plays entitled “Girls’ Education” (another important issue, woven into numerous play plots with overlapping gender and age motifs), composed independently by Ahoulou and performed by his ensemble Voices of the Desert, which I saw performed in Ahoulou’s relatives’ private compound in Kidal, additionally conveys youth-related concerns.

“Girls’ Education” Revisited

To resummarize, in brief: the character named In Hinan, an old name from mythology explained to me by the actors as denoting “he who is always moving around nomadically” but also the masculine form of Tin Hinan, another mythical name of an ancient North African Berber female leader, tried to convince an old man named Igra, a name denoting “to hear or understand,” to send his daughter to school. Recall that Igra was portrayed at first as ignorant and stubborn, resisting school for girls, fearing that it would encourage them to dress immodestly, cause them to become harassed by males on the street, and also cause girls to neglect their duties at home, such as herding, housekeeping, and praying. Yet Igra listened to advice and ultimately became convinced of schooling’s value.

This play was also sometimes performed more publicly, in officially sponsored festivals or spectacles at the end of vacation in the rainy season to encourage nomads to enroll girls in school. Thus this plot in one sense portrays elders, parents, and nomads as conflated into a single “traditional” identity opposed to official “modernist” discourses conflating youths, towns, and modernity.

In another sense, however, the two older male characters were given more subtle and nuanced characteristics. The point is that an elder can be either wise or naïve and can change opinion. These differences, I found, were related to the social making of the story. There was often variation in portrayals of elders according to circumstances of plot creation (who commissioned or organized it). For example, in those plays performed in more public venues and arranged by official organizations, portrayals of elders and parents tended to be less flattering, as rigidly reacting against innovation. This is shown in the following play, whose plot is centrally concerned with age and intergenerational relations.

“Learn to Read”

This play promotes literacy in a plot featuring a father who cannot decipher an important document concerning money. His children comment to their parents that “one needs to learn to read in order to decipher important

papers.” In this play, which was commissioned and organized by school officials and performed around the end of the rainy season before school opened, older parents are represented as more dependent on youths who already know how to read (i.e., have been to school).

Here, educated children characters literate in French and Roman-lettered Tamajaq instruct and speak authoritatively to supposedly “ignorant” parents, the latter defined by civic authorities as nonliterate despite elders’ frequent knowledge of the local alphabetic script, Tifinagh, and Qur’anic Arabic. Tifinagh, the Tamajaq alphabet, is not generally taught in secular schools. Until recently, teaching, contradicting, and/or second-guessing older persons was taboo for youths, even those with specialized skills. An Tuareg agricultural extension agent affiliated with a literacy program during the 1980s, for example, remarked on how difficult it was for him to teach classes to persons older than he was. At that time, his task was only possible with support from elderly local chiefs. Even a generation later, some still hesitate to do this. The point is that the play “Learn to Read” implicitly asked performers and audiences to do what normally youths should not do traditionally, in the context of modern (secular) education goals. Literacy, in other words, as promoted by civic-sponsored plays, had priority over older mores of respecting parents and other elders (expressed by not instructing or telling them what to do).

The plays do not all have a unitary message, however. In other play plots, respecting elders was promoted. Thus “Learn to Read” exemplifies what Handelman has described as a state spectacle (Handelman 1990) staged from the “top down,” since its overt official message critiqued Tuareg elders. On the other hand, there was also some resistance on the part of some youthful characters. Through apparently contradictory mores portrayed in diverse plays’ messages (sometimes respecting elders and parents, but also sometimes breaking taboos of telling them what to do, in effect, disrespecting them), there emerge flexible negotiations of cultural mores and intergenerational relations. “Learn to Read,” with a title implying exhortation, was liberating, allowing composer and actors to indirectly (though role-playing, at least) challenge parents’ authority “in character” by reversing traditional age roles, an action with potential to inspire audiences and other nonactors to do this, particularly in towns and on labor migrations, where children are less dependent on parents’ authority for access to property. Civic organizations active in some play productions therefore offer local youths means to resist elders.

How do these contradictions play out in social life? Despite some persistence of respect for elders by most youths and the still-powerful ideal of actors as protecting and defending elders and their culture, some youths bring back innovative ideas from their experiences outside traditional socialization

and rites of passage, as reported in some other communities farther south in Mali (Arnoldi 1995). These may lead to a “mixed bag” of greater independence from parents and bold innovations, not solely loss from missing those socialization rituals. Arnoldi (1995, 35–37), for example, describes how young Mande-speaking men in Segou who were members of the youth association were an important group of catalysts in the development of puppet theater there, in part from their migration experiences, which provided alternative avenues to established kin and marriage paths for the dissemination of theatrical ideas and forms. Outside intervening forces are not always dangerous or oppressive; experiences gained from encounters with them can sometimes inspire youths to resist elders, and performance can offer them means to do so under cover of character portrayal.

This Tuareg case in some respects resembles the Mande case in southern Mali; for many Tuareg youths, including young *ibarden* actors, also experience migration and other travel. Among Tuareg youth in northern Mali, however, this experience has been double-edged in its consequences. It involves resistance to not solely local elders but also to some state, civic, and NGO policies.

Tuareg acting and plays therefore express preoccupations, conflicts, and dilemmas, rather than definitive resolutions of problems in intergenerational relationships. Recall, for example, how many youths in Kidal embraced the use of innovative props, such as marionette puppets and stilts from southern influences in a few plays, new to Tuareg performances, despite some elders’ opposition to them. Recall also how the Miss Kidal beauty contest ultimately proceeded despite opposition from some more conservative forces in town. Also, in wider social life beyond the performances engaging these themes, many youths resist parents’ attempts to supervise courtship and to arrange first marriages. Hence the popularity of age-related plots addressing these contradictory pulls of tradition and change.

The next play, entitled “Advice From a Dying Elder,” composed by Ahoulou and performed by Voices of the Desert, was interesting as a counterpoint to some of the preceding ones. This was a play of the genre classified as *tenzoghén*, based on long-standing Tuareg folktales, rather than official edutainment sponsorship. From the perspective of older cultural mores, this plot depicts quite different intergenerational relations: rather than resistance or rebellion against paternal authority, there is respect, and elder-youth roles conform to long-standing ideals, rather than subverting them.

“Advice from a Dying Elder”

This plot focuses on a father who lies dying and gives advice to his sons. I saw it performed by Voices of the Desert ensemble inside a room on a night

when a thick sandstorm whirled around outside. Tellingly, this play was first organized not by state, civic, or nongovernmental organizations or bureaucracies but by Tuareg elders themselves, who often also relate folktales with a moral to instruct youths. Here, the old dying father illustrated his advice for his children to always remain united together with a visual symbolic/technique: he conveyed his idea iconically by taking a bunch of small sticks and showing his sons how difficult it is to break them while tied together, whereas, by contrast, when he unties the individual sticks each breaks easily. The moral here, actors explained, “is for children in a family to stick together,” expressing preoccupation with the problem of dispersion of Tuareg communities (beyond nomadism) in labor migration, exile, and refugee flight from droughts and wars.

This play about the dying elder’s advice thus emerged as a voice from “below” since the elders who arranged it were not in official state or town bureaucracies. The issue raised more broadly here is authorship and the situating of resistance: which message, exactly, constitutes resistance, and against what or whom? The play “Learn to Read” about a youth’s advice to an elder to learn to read was a sketch organized under the surveillance of the school system, and situated youth as “enlightened” and positioned against “ignorant” and “backward” elders. On the other hand, this surveillance, as noted, also facilitated youths’ rebellious feelings “under cover” of acting. By contrast, the latter play, “Advice from a Dying Elder,” was initially related as a traditional tale and requested and organized by parents and older relatives of this ensemble’s actors, who passed it down to Ahoulou, founder of the ensemble, who converted it into a play.

Notably, this *tenzohen* play, which was performed in a dark room with only a few persons present as audience, retained the important role of the elder’s storytelling gesture (*sikbar*) with the sticks. This process certainly gave elders more voice in their own representation of themselves: as authoritative and respected, even as the character was portrayed as physically frail and dying. This plot also celebrated the power and prestige of nonliterate, aural, and gestural teaching of traditions, rather than promoting literacy and textual education. This was an act of resistance (though hidden) not against elders but against official efforts to empower youths and even divide the generations. Hence the efforts here to preserve broader Tuareg cultural memory and knowledge, in the dying elder’s advice and his traditional method of transmitting this cultural knowledge through indirect speech by allusion and metaphor (*tangalt*), here with iconicity (namely, the bunch of sticks) enabled this performance to talk back: literacy is not the sole means to cultural knowledge, and actions “speak.”

When this play is analyzed intertextually against “Learn To Read,” the effect, as with some of the gender- and nomad-themed plays, is a dueling

between opposed ideas: these plays “argue” for different Tuareg mores concerning youth-elder relationships and also reflect actors and other youths’ generally mixed sentiments regarding their dilemma between protecting Tuareg culture and “traditions” but also gaining independence from parents.

The following, another age-themed sketch, performed by Voices of the Desert around festival time in order to warn against consumer temptations, was more comical but addressed a serious concern: debt.

“Credit (or Debt)”

The plot is about a young man who borrows 19,000 CFA (West African francs, about \$40) endlessly to repay other loans, until he owes everyone money. Thus here, a young man is weak: he borrows money from everyone, and falls into a trap of debt. He remarks, “I don’t (even) have time to sit down, I must look for money!”

Soon, he owes many people money, and they are all asking him to repay them. One character, the father of the errant son, is named Dabaratan, denoting “a man who gives good ideas.” Another character, a marabout, advises the indebted son to wrap himself in a blanket and bark like a dog when his creditors come looking for him, so that they will believe him to be insane and leave him alone.

In this amusing play, notably, the youth is portrayed as a spendthrift who cannot repay debts and thus is obliged to continue borrowing. The older parent here is portrayed respectfully as wiser and more temperate with expenses.

The marabout, also an older character, gives advice that “saves” the debtor from his creditors at least temporarily in barking like a dog, though he does not counsel him in ways to avoid debt over the long term; he only points out to him, “If you go to see people, you will have problems. There is no solution, you must be pardoned.”

This remark is intended, according to local exegeses by actors and audiences, to give moral advice to creditors, rather than the debtor, to forgive people who have nothing.

By contrast, another play (untitled) with a similar plot about indebtedness, specifically, overspending for babies’ name days, performed and broadcast by the radio-based Visionaries ensemble, portrayed the older generation as going into debt in competition by continually inflating spending and prices for these celebrations. Name days, where elders are especially prominent hosts and guests, are held one week following the birth of a child, and are very important occasions for affines (both sides of the child’s family) to renew ties but also to show status and prestige. Consequently, older parents and grandparents of the child are tempted to spend lavishly for food and entertainment (praise-singers, musicians) to impress the visitors.

BUNDLES OF CONTRADICTIONS: CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE, MEMORY, AND AUTHORSHIP IN CREATIVE DYNAMICS BETWEEN THE GENERATIONS

The point is that some plots selected for performance emphasized one generation as irresponsible, and other plots emphasized another generation as irresponsible, the viewpoint often depending on organizers, context, and venue. Those portraying ideals of “traditional” intergenerational relationships and age-related conduct took on diverse meanings and purposes—sometimes psychotherapeutic “bolstering” of damaged relationships, and sometimes caustic critical social commentary, coming from alternately youth and elders. In many edutainment plays/sketches presented at the radio and at schools, official organizers were one authorial presence behind the scenes in their requesting a plot theme, even in cases where they commissioned unofficial artists to detail the plots.

Some plots with less respectful portrayals of elders appear to resonate with nearly universal resentments of youths wishing for independence, particularly those plots engaging key social conflicts such as intergenerational disagreements over arranged marriages, education, and expenses. However, some local interlocutors (actors, audience members, and research assistants/transcribers) interpreted the less respectful portrayals as, to the contrary, attempts to elicit sympathy for elders’ and youths’ predicaments by showing antisocial behavior and its consequences; for example, in showing the consequences of children disobeying their parents by going to Libya in hopes of earning cash for greater independence from parents, but where migrants encountered a dire fate and/or brought disaster to relatives.

Also, in contrast to some surface meanings of these age-themed plots, closer attention to the collaboration between the generations, attitudes toward “authorship” surrounding plays, and actors’ accounts of their learning acting reveal youths’ generally greater respect for elders and parents and close cooperation, if not always agreement, between the generations. Again, social contexts are as important as the plots and what are locally perceived as “traditional” cultural ideals.

Over continued visits to homes of ensemble founders, composers, and actors I noticed that the creative play composition and, especially, rehearsal processes were usually more collaborative in private home settings (i.e., inside the household compound with extended family members present and participating), especially in a kin-based acting ensemble such as Tekres’s Joy. In these settings, regardless of some age-based status differences, the different age groups had near-equal say in improvising plots and performances, though there was usually respect shown for older persons’ creative authority, thereby contradicting the lesser respect shown older persons in some plots.

With few exceptions (for example, an elder who feared actors' revealing secrets during a rehearsal), attitudes regarding creativity in play composition and rehearsal "behind the scenes" usually involved intergenerational collaboration, give-and-take, and mutual respect.

Respect was also shown in actors' personal life history narratives and interviews concerning how they became interested in acting and how they learned their skill.

An actor and composer belonging to the Voices of the Desert ensemble, for example, related:

I learned acting through an elder who also told tales. I also compose, I have composed about twenty-five plays/sketches. At first, plays/sketches were not done in public; in the past, they were done only in the evening and in small groups, like *tendes* (drumming festivals) and other musical performances. The new plays/sketches often interest older persons, and sketches also help to change ideas. [Here, notably, he does not view elders as rigidly opposed to change or novelty.]

The acting ensemble Joy most clearly illustrates not solely conflict but also connections between acting, performance, collaboration, and intergenerational relationships. In large measure this is because, unlike other ensembles I studied in Kidal, this ensemble is explicitly age-graded, divided into an adult wing and a youth wing, and it is mostly (though not exclusively) kin-based. [Joy's membership also includes a few actors who are friends and neighbors]. Perhaps the creation of a youth wing reflected Tekres's advocacy for youths in Kidal.

A female actor in the youth wing of Joy first observed others in her family acting and became interested that way, so she started acting in children's groups. She explained:

The older *Tilwat* (Joy) members compose plots in advance, though they discuss them with others, including more youthful members of our ensemble, and accept the latter's ideas if they find them good. There can be changes in sketch/plays; if our mother (Tekres), the composer and founder, finds others have good ideas, she accepts them.

Another actor in Joy's youth wing, about eighteen years old, a son of Tekres, began to practice acting by playing roles of children in his mother's plays.

In effect, for this and other kin-based acting ensembles, producing plays and learning acting enable a continuity of something important: the long-standing role of Tuareg mothers in educating children in their tent in cultural memory through teaching them tales and poems. This practice is an adaptation to changing circumstances in Tuareg society in sedentarization and urbanization. This emerges as a kind of compromise, or tactic (De Certeau

1990) counterbalancing the state and other powers (for example, both secular and Qur'anic schools) that can act to silence mothers' transmission of culture to children.

Key here is flexible collaboration in play plot creation behind the scenes, notwithstanding the initial request sometimes coming to composers and actors from civic agencies (i.e., after the request for a given plot, the NGO and other organizations do not usually supervise closely the improvisation/discussion or rehearsal processes). Plots often (though not always) emerge dialogically, as Bakhtin (1986) would term it, even though the initial creative inspiration to compose, as already observed, may also begin with an individual and sometimes involves initial psychological solitude and a monologue, in the metaphorical *essufftenere*.

Tekres's older son, also a nurse, explained that "*kel tisiway* (composers and actors/comedians) accept some ideas from others. They are predominantly older, of my parents' generation, but they accept some ideas from their children and other youths. But in general, we (actors, other performers) follow the ideas of the *kel tisiway*. But we talk it over, round-table style during rehearsal practice."

An elderly female actor in Joy's older, adult wing resided next door to Tekres. She began acting as a young woman, but Tekres, the founder, her age peer, taught her. She asserted that "we can change plots when we rehearse and talk it over, or even when we perform, but only with permission from their composer."

An adolescent actor in another acting ensemble, Travelers of the Desert, felt that "even very elderly marabouts (Islamic scholars) can make people laugh if they are illustrating good vs. bad," further illustrating the flexible rather than rigid one-to-one correlation between different genres and ages and social backgrounds and suggesting that religious specialists may temporarily drop their ideal dignified comportment (which entails avoiding jokes) to illustrate a moral point.

Also, older actors do not necessarily always reenact solely older *tenzoghén* tales but also can address contemporary themes in their performances, as did some older members of The Visionaries at the radio station. Younger actors sometimes perform *tenzoghén*, not solely modern sketches, thereby contradicting some general statements rigidly aligning youth and age with tradition and modernity respectively.

There is generally much respect by most (though not all actors) toward older mentors, as shown when an adolescent in Travelers of the Desert explained how he became an actor: "I began to attend and participate in plays but had to wait until puberty to act in public with the ensemble, because actors especially want to guard our traditions, to guard our places in life." There are similarities in this pattern to other Tuareg apprenticeships, such as

artisanship and herbal healing, in which youths must refrain from independent practice until authorized by their older teachers to do so.

A female actor in *Voices of the Desert*, about sixteen years old, related: “My grandfather and mother were also actors. I became interested in acting at five years old when I attended a theatrical performance of comic *kel seghsegh* specialists, and admired their gestures (*sikbar*) and stories (*tenzoghén*).”

A number of audience members, however, hinted at more assertiveness, even resistance, in insisting that “the role of actors today resembles *ichumar* (the age cohort of the original Tuareg 1990s rebel fighters), youths who defend the town.” One audience member even insisted that “actors can instruct even chiefs,” implying empowerment of some younger actors in social life. Again, this, too, was vividly shown when Tekres influenced parents, leaders, and Islamic scholars in Kidal, most older than she was, to allow the “Miss Kidal” beauty contest to take place.

Nonetheless, the officials who organize the state and other officially-sponsored plays/sketches (for example, directors, journalists, school and clinic staffs) are also powerful agents of influence, and their own concepts of modernity, at least indirectly, also can be considered voices structuring memory, culture, and authority. When I asked a famous play composer and poet if he would prepare sketches for a forthcoming festival near Tessalit, an oasis north of Kidal, to be held the following January, he hesitated and then replied, “it depends on the kind of program organized by the (official) committee.” Notwithstanding some independent creativity on the part of the composers, ensembles, and actors, who may either compose from individual experience or collaboratively in negotiations with each other, outside officials when planning festivals or other public events choose themes beforehand, request play plots to address them, and invite and commission some composers but not others to participate. They tend to approach only those perceived as more cooperative in producing play plot themes that these officials favor.

At other times, as already observed, the individual composer chooses play themes and creates plots for an ensemble independently, working from poetry recitations, tales heard from elders, or his/her personal experiences inspiring creativity. This combination was earlier illustrated in the career and comments of Ahoulou, founder of *Voices of the Desert*. The point is that composers and actors sometimes face constraints from officialdom and sometimes create independently of officialdom. This variation in authorship is relevant to age here: it has important hierarchical implications, introducing a kind of “fictive” age element into some play productions. In the case of officially-organized plays whose plots tend to denigrate elders, nongovernmental, urban, and state civil servants in effect constitute a kind of fictive “elder” status to the acting ensembles in their increasing authority and

intervention between these predominantly youthful actors and their parents and elders. Until recently, only the latter controlled and supervised youths in specialized occupations of healing, herding, artisan work, and caravaning. In artisan work, for example, youths always learned skills and practiced making jewelry and leatherwork under older relatives, who decided when they were ready to take on more complicated designs (Loughran-Bini and Seligman 2006; Rasmussen 2013a). As on labor migration, youths performing officially-commissioned modern play sketches are more independent of parents than they are on trading caravans or in artisan, herbal, and Qur'anic apprenticeships.

But training programs in new jobs, promoted as more remunerative in the neoliberal monetized economy and more reliable than traditional wealth in herds and oases gardens, are offered by youth centers and encouraged by official agencies who have an interest, as voices "from above," in portraying Tuareg elders as reactionary, somewhat like the negative stereotyping of nomadic and rural persons.

On the other hand, other plots suggest efforts to reconcile social distance and tension between the generations within Tuareg society, as in the plays about the dying elder's advice to his sons and about the harm caused by the son disobeying his father in migrating to Libya for work. Although some youths chafe under parents' authority, these latter plots can be welcome, for they encourage healing family rifts caused by the upheavals in household support networks as many Tuareg have dispersed during regional crises. For example, successful labor migrants who are considered respectful still send remittances home to their parents and parents-in-law. This practice, in fact widespread, is not widely portrayed in plays about labor migration; rather, most portray labor migration as transgressive. Thus while some plays with positive images of age and relations between the generations influence the audiences, it is more in the interest of officials to discourage youths from leaving the country for employment elsewhere.

Thus the voices here are more than dialogical in a dyadic sense, for they alternate and, at times, even contradict each other. There is a medley, but also a debate, of memory, forgetting, and forward-looking in acting performance as outside officials sometimes intervene between Tuareg youths and elders, often redefining elders in some (though not all) plots and characters. On the one hand, instead of merely imitating the older warriors, healers, and ancestors, or exclusively reenacting the past, actors in some play sketches are portraying characters that conform more closely to the new job-training programs' needs emphasizing neoliberal economic reforms in several respects: in, for example, comedic social critiques such as Saidi's warning and brief tale presented earlier against some youths' drug use, as well as in plots warning against some youths' indebtedness, as in the play "Debt (or Credit),"

that distract from new regimented jobs and saving of income; and in plots questioning the authority of some conservative elders who oppose institutions training for these new agendas, such as secular schools, as in the plays promoting literacy and daughters' education.

Yet behind the scenes in social life, particularly in the process of creative construction of plays and in learning of acting skills, as well as in a few plots still performed that are derived from elders' *tenzoghen* oral tales and poems, and in some intergenerational cooperation (in artisanry, herding, and gardening), ideals of youth-elder mutual respect and deference toward elders often continue, though not always. Hence the perceived need for plots that remind actors and audiences of local cultural mores but also hint at ways to resist them, as well as alien mores of outside officials.

AGE IN TUAREG PERFORMANCE: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

In Tuareg communities, youths' public verbal art performances have always required permission from elders and religious authorities, who often restrict them to specific places and times (for example, far from the mosque and never on Islamic holidays) and, perhaps indirectly, also have a say in their themes: for example, taboo subjects such as sex were ideally alluded to only through euphemisms, *tangalt* ("shadowy words" or metaphor and euphemism) in poetry and songs.

Yet there is also some emerging resistance to elders as the sole guardians of traditional verbal art, as when the youthful actors convinced an elderly man to allow them to rehearse a play in my presence by reassuring him that I was a professor who was studying acting for research and teaching purposes and reassured him that I would not use actors' real names. The fact that the younger actors even challenged the elder and continued their rehearsal was very significant. This resistance was also shown in the successful performance of the AIDS education play at the lycee, whose dialogues included frank, rather than euphemistic, discussion of sexuality.

Moreover, although composers and actors still come from diverse age cohorts, older actors are tending to retreat from the new officially-sponsored edutainment plays/sketches and to allow youths to dominate these plays more. Recall, for example, how Atakor, the much-admired older actor, disliked the new plays and considered the old ones "prettier." He had in fact recently begun to retire from his previously prominent role in the radio ensemble, partly for this reason and partly from fear of the encroaching regional violence. In this way, young actors' informal and experimental performances are breaking into older performances.

Thus two processes occur here: youths are mediating between official bureaucracies and Tuareg society in some contexts, but official bureaucracies are mediating between Tuareg youths and elders in other contexts.

Older actors are not passive in these processes. Some, for example Atakor and a few others in The Visionaries ensemble at the radio station, hinted to me they refuse to perform unless they retain rights of independent creativity. Recall how Atakor lamented lack of creative independence and lamented oppression (“there can be no creativity in oppression”) coming from not solely civic authorities but also from a few militant Islamist forces entering his region who would soon ban public performances. Intermittently, particularly between political violence and peace accords, there are declines in play performances, and some actors remain afraid to perform in public. Other actors blame the periodic decline in plays not on fear but rather on the breakdown of authority in youth-elder and student-teacher relationships, as did Tekres’s oldest son. Yet audience members and other nonactors I interviewed varied in their preferences, and many still considered the “Visionaries” to be the best acting ensemble because, more than one young person explained, “these actors are old and really know things.” According to a member of the Radio Tisdas staff, one goal and theme in the radio-produced sketches performed by The Visionaries ensemble is “to teach youths that conserving Tuareg traditions is just as important as eating well.”

These mixed sentiments reveal generally enduring respect for older persons and their arts, creative modifications of them, and some subtle challenging of them, as well in response to current predicaments and perhaps, also, pressures from official organizers in town bureaucracies who increasingly control access to emerging media, education, jobs, and services. Yet the past history of Kidal suggests that, despite the emerging prominence of youthful generations in the modern leadership, many urban and state officials have always feared most the influence of elders and more “traditional” leaders and religious authorities. This fear was shown in the 1963 violence in Kidal when some Bamako-based army units massacred elders and Islamic scholars.

Additional social conflicts occasionally emerge around play composition. Notwithstanding the ideal value and usual practice of harmony among youths and between youths and elders, I noticed cases of increasing competition and rivalry. For example, two adolescent actors both claimed to have composed a play (analyzed in the next chapter) about the origins of the Essouk-Tademket archaeological sites near Kidal, from an account that was originally an oral history recited by an elder, and ironically, despite the play’s message of peace, additional conflicts over finances flared up within the acting ensemble performing it.

The “modern” plays are often organized for diverse reasons: partly to re-define and redirect the roles of younger, particularly male, *ibaraden* under

the metaphorical persona of “warrior,” partly in order to restore disenfranchised youths’ damaged self-esteem from unemployment, lost herds, and lost battles, and partly to prevent them from fighting new battles elsewhere (in Libya, in Afghanistan, or Syria). Thus some play plots attempt to remind youths of new opportunities, not solely past grievances or present fears. At the same time many plays foster goals alien to long-standing local cultural mores.

The concept of “courageous and renowned people,” the core trope and etymological meaning offered me by interlocutors/consultants for the term *abarad*, “actor,” in evoking past glory of ideally gallant Tuareg warriors who fought for their aristocratic patrons and who praised their women, is therefore both reinforced and subverted by some agencies’ official play plots. These processes occur in the following manner: through discouraging too much identification by youths with contemporary warriors (in rebellions and/or militant factions), fearing this leads them to become literal fighters in rebellions; and through encouraging youths’ inspiration from their past ancestors in order to protect the wider community (formerly, to protect and serve *imajeghen* nobles, particularly women) in a different way now and in the future: by going to school and training to do new types of work instead of fighting.

Youths who are not yet married or independent property owners are especially targeted for this goal by youth centers and job-training programs, though in fact, actors vary somewhat in their ages. As hinted earlier by Atakor, older actors and comedians have tended to feel marginalized by the more “modern” plays organized by bureaucracies, though as also shown, some of them still continued to act. Nonetheless “culture wars” sometimes occurred between those preferring older plays from traditional tales and poems and those preferring newer “edutainment” plays, the latter becoming more frequently performed.

The gloss “warrior” (recall one woman actor’s allusion to “Rambo”) in its modern performance usage therefore aims psychotherapeutically to bolster the self-esteem of both men and women culturally defined as youths and politically to rechannel their energies as courageous and renowned persons, despite widespread dispossession, unemployment, and other challenges in northern Mali. This goal involves action in two directions: on the one hand, toward critical but usually respectful reflection on social relations with family and older persons (in the more “traditional” play plot themes), and on the other, toward compliance with “modern” state, NGO, and neoliberal economic agendas of “proper” planning in life: get educated, get a job, settle down in towns or oases, and don’t join dissidents or militant groups (in the more “modern” play plot themes).

This rechanneling effort received expression in many actors’ repeated and strong assertions to me that actors should bring harmony to people. Although

they warn and criticize, actors should not only defend and protect but also bring peace, as did Saidi, the comedian, actor, and host at the *Maison du Luxembourg*, at intervals between performances there, when he exhorted his audiences, “Always (be) together, never (be) angry!”

YOUTHS, ELDERS, AND INTERGENERATIONAL SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

In social life beyond performances, however, youths experienced uneven success in achieving these goals. One actor, in Joy, whom I’ll call Ousmane, expressed discouragement about school:

I attended some primary and secondary school, but our teachers did not speak our language, Tamajaq, and forbade us to speak it in class. I think they were also too hard on us (with grades). Many young men quit secular schools here because they do not like the teachers. The teachers are too strict, they dismiss students too quickly. Primary-level teachers are local and Tamajaq-speaking, but most secondary-level teachers are neither. Also, teachers beat students, though this is against Malian law. Eventually, I dropped out of school.

Some young men felt that the consciousness-raising programs for education were aimed primarily at girls—the numerous plays I observed specifically promoting girls’ education confirmed this—and felt that officials now needed to encourage boys’ education, as well.

There is intense worry about children because many disappeared when families dispersed fleeing the recurring regional violence. During the repatriation of refugees between those episodes of turmoil, rumors flew, difficult to verify, that some young Qur’anic students were seized as they left their schools, allegedly abducted for sacrifices by *feticheurs* (non-Quranic ritual specialists) in Togo and Ghana. There were several festivals at the town stadium with speeches and guitar performances to raise awareness and funding for finding lost children.

By contrast, older youths, anomalous as physically mature persons who remain unmarried and marginally employed, receive sharper criticism from adults. A Tuareg journalist and assistant director of youth programs at the *Maison du Luxembourg* lamented, “Youths today want too much money. NGO job contracts are only for three months, but they are good, since they keep youths busy; otherwise, they make trouble.” Other adults were even less sympathetic, surmising that many youths drop out of school “because they want quick money, and believe that school is not worth the wait.”

Yet steady, secure employment remains a distant dream for many. One young man, for example, received training in Kidal and Bamako as a refrigerator repair technician, but his pay was low and demands for his services

were irregular in Kidal, where only a few shop merchants own refrigerators, most households cannot afford them, and electricity is erratic.

Many marginally-employed youths of both sexes tend to spend their meager and sporadic income quickly on cigarettes, cell phones, CDs, and clothing. A prominent marabout commented, “youths now are attracted to material things just because they are new novelties, only to abandon them soon. They are fickle, not serious!”

Other adult residents complained that many young Tuareg men now smoke “because merchants pressure them to do this and do not warn them of their ill health effects.” Young women also smoke, though young men suffer greater blame. I remember being astonished at seeing an adolescent girl riding a motorcycle at high speed to a market with her baby seated in her lap and a cigarette dangling from her mouth. Adults lament that they cannot control youths, especially boys, though girls are a source of worry if they remain unmarried and bear children. Thus there is a widely perceived and sometimes actual breakdown in intergenerational age-based authority in sociality.

Yet most youths still feel protective toward elders; some, for example, complained when outsiders disrespected them, upsetting them to the point of tears. Elders’ modest dress, for example, has been threatened by the rule compelling men to remove their turban/face-veil for ID photos. Some youths became angry over this policy, viewing it as demeaning to elders’ dignity and reserve and threatening to Tuareg culture. This attitude, interestingly, persists even on the part of those youths who themselves drop their own turban/face-veil, except when visiting the countryside, seeing elders and important traditional leaders, or attending important rites of passage.

Many youths who have formed an alternative (sub)culture called *ichumar* critique both Tuareg society and the state. This term has supplemented older Tamajaq terms *amawad* and *ekabkab* for “adolescent” and has become extended beyond the original 1980s *ichumar* generation in political exile who composed the earlier songs protesting against the state and yearning for home, a genre called by the same name, and who fought in the 1990s rebellions. *Ichumar(en)* now can refer to all “modern” rock-influenced Tuareg guitar music and to all youths. In most contemporary *ichumar*/guitar music, there is a mix of critique and nostalgia for the home culture. For example, in their criticism of some elders’ continuing use of derogatory terms for former subordinates in the old ranked social system, modern “rock style” bands prefer the guitar rather than older instruments because the guitar is not associated with any of the older hierarchical social strata but rather is an instrument used by anyone, and thus conveys equality. This issue is more complex for the *ibaraden* actors. They must walk a fine line between critiquing and defending their home community because they are more mediators than exiles.

This double bind emerged in the foregoing plays with their sometimes contradictory portrayals of youths, elders, and intergenerational relationships. These multiple yet conflicting voices were sometimes internally contradictory within even a single narrative. For many youths feel ambivalent concerning this simultaneously critical and protective role, since they are aware of its contradiction: on the one hand, they may disagree with elders on some issues (for example, in some elders' using older, more controversial Tamajaq terms for the ranked social categories based on descent), but on the other, they realize that Tuareg cultural survival and autonomy need to be protected and defended. After, all, the *ibaraden* actors, as "the courageous and renowned, prominent persons" in their legacy of earlier warriors who fought gallantly for nobles and praised women, should above all defend the community.

Another complicating factor is that not all Tuareg support the rebellions. Hence the dilemma: any self-criticism or other social critique can only go so far; play performances should also, ultimately, promote local cultural pride and revitalization. Hence the tensions enacted in performances and in sociality between the promotion of contradictory ideals: of Tuareg integration into, and participating in, nationhood and modernity, and of local cultural and regional autonomy to varying degrees. Indeed, not all Tuareg leaders in the series of rebellions culminating in the 2012 outbreak of war in Mali demanded the complete secession of an independent Azawad state; some dissidents instead demanded more resources in the North and more representation of its residents in Bamako. For these reasons, many intergenerational-themed performances provide important critiques but also psychotherapy to heal wounded intergenerational relationships and symbolism for restructuring these social relations toward regional peace.

The different voices speaking in these plays conveyed at times a debate with some resistance, at other times a give-and-take dialogue, hoping to reconcile older and younger persons who experienced much intergenerational alienation and trauma over the past thirty years at least, beginning with the *ichumar* generation's migrations and returns around the 1980s to Mali and Niger, where they became disillusioned with what they perceived as their states' broken promises of jobs and spearheaded the 1990s armed rebellions.

Despite some common themes, therefore, the play plots about youth and age are not monolithic and present varied and debated perceptions of youth-elder (and child-parent) relationships; in other words, they often reflect on dilemmas in these relationships and disputes over long-standing ideals. Their messages, though often intended as didactic, are not exactly replicated in artists' and audiences members' commentaries or lived practices outside play performances, in everyday sociability and more long-term practices.

In sum, therefore, at least three voices compete performatively to define age: local, state, and global forces, with dissonant meanings and goals.

Official organizations, institutions, and their representatives attempt to draw Tuareg youths into their own political and cultural agendas. Yet many youths have attempted to remain culturally autonomous, in large measure because they have become disillusioned with their search for belonging, respect, and gainful employment in the state sector. These contradictions and dissonant voices in the plays encapsulate disputes over the possible directions of youth and culture. Contrary to portrayals in some play plots, in the creative acting process youths were shown to not always oppose older traditions but to respect them, and elders were not always pro-tradition or against “progress,” though they might be portrayed that way in some plots and, indeed, in sociality sometimes took that position. Incidents and commentaries revealed the internal diversity of viewpoints in the community.

Official organizers were powerful but not entirely hegemonic in all contexts, since composers, actors, and audiences were shown to hold divergent viewpoints and to “play with” general guidelines. Local, state, and global forces thus comprised a trio of competing influences in these plays about youth and age. Second and third parties at times come between Tuareg youths and elders, thematically in their plots, dynamically in their creative production, and beyond in social life. Yet some local voices in fact talk back to authority, just as youthful and older voices also sometimes “talk back” to each other. Both official and unofficial stories were present, but each wielded a different kind of social power.

In sum, in these expressive forms there is both nostalgia and criticism, occasionally even disdain, concerning what some elders represent in widely-held stereotypes: namely, long-standing cultural ideals which are under scrutiny, neither wholly accepted nor wholly rejected. Like the rural-urban and gendered themes, these age-related plot themes resonate with wider social life but do not exactly reflect it. They convey careful reflections on current predicaments and consideration of future paths to take. There is agency (Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995) in the dynamics of competing state and NGO programs, youth centers, and media “edutainment” agendas. There are also emerging concerns with negotiating religious and moral agency and power, another preoccupation in northern Mali, to which I now turn.

Chapter 8

Religious Reflections and Social Dissonance

RELIGIOUS THEMES AND MORAL COMMENTARIES IN PLAY PLOTS, MYTHICO-HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS, AND SOCIOPOLITICAL PRACTICE

Fundamental to understanding play plots with religio-moral themes is the anthropological conception of religion as a broad cultural and moral system of belief and practice, for example, of Islam both in its “orthodox” and “para(popular)” forms, as culturally interpreted. Informed by works of Asad (2003), Lambek (2008), and Zigon and Throop (2014), this approach guides my analysis in the present chapter, in which I examine several play plots’ religious themes, their embeddedness in regional mythico-historical religious legends, and their relation to wider social contexts.¹ I also draw on insights from my own experiences among the Tuareg, which were marked by frequent discussions of religion. Their generosity and hospitality toward me often took the form of concern about my own welfare, often expressed in a mutuality of religious practice. Several Islamic scholar/marabouts made protective amulets for me; non-Qur’anic healers encouraged me to seek out their diagnoses and treatments. The issue of my own religious orientation could not be ignored and often arose. Many encouraged me to pray alongside them on Muslim holidays, a gesture I now recognize as welcoming and protective. Friends warned me to steer clear of a marabout rumored to beat *ikufar* (infidels, general term used to refer to non-Muslims and Europeans). When I unavoidably encountered him on a trip to a town, however, our encounter was uneventful; he simply asked me if I knew the value of prayer, I replied yes, I did, and he was calm, even cordial, for the remainder of the journey. In small villages south of Kidal around the time that different religious factions were entering northern Mali with interpretations of Islam very distinct

from those of most Tuareg, women urged me, on our mutual visits, to repeat after them verses from the Qur'an, in particular the Fatikha. At that time, I attributed their urgings to excessive fervor, even intolerance, and admit I was somewhat annoyed. Later, however, in retrospect given the turn of events since that time, I now realize that those women may have been trying to protect me, envelopping me into their own religiosity in a gesture of support. For soon after my departure from that semi-nomadic community, religious conflicts became violent.

Additional meanings of "religion" among the Tuareg emerged in friends' efforts to guard me against alleged "witchcraft" and "sorcery" (*ark echaghel*) which often involved ritual specialties straddling "official/orthodox" Islam, for example, wearing Islamic scholar/healers' Qur'anic verses inserted inside smith/artisans' protective silver amulets and undergoing non-Qur'anic diviners' diagnoses and cures.

Thus not surprisingly, play plots centering on religion ponder both "orthodox" religious concerns and local cultural mores predating Tuareg conversion to Islam and social issues arising from these strands of religiosity, sometimes interweaving and sometimes conflicting. Islam among the Tuareg, as elsewhere, is not monolithic. The plays and their broader social contexts also address social issues introduced by early conversion of Tuareg to Islam and, more recently, by Salafist/Wahhabi intruders in northern Mali.

Thus far, few Tuareg have been attracted to Salafist- or Wahhabi-influenced variants of the reformist-piety groups. Many ideas of proper moral conduct also derive from local mythico-histories, tales, and epics.

Islam, brought to Tuareg regions by Sufi holy men between the eighth and eleventh centuries CE (Norris 1975), introduced the challenge of how to reconcile certain local social institutions and cultural knowledge with the new religion, for example, how to incorporate local social hierarchies into the Islamic ideal of equality of all believers, how to accommodate pre-Islamic Tuareg matriliney into the Arabic-derived patriliney and Qur'anic law, and how to rework mores such as reserve, respect, and honor, and dignity in changing predicaments. These issues and approaches to them became commemorated in mythico-historical and other verbal art traditions but remain vital today. Thus I also examine verbal arts and social cases and vignettes relevant to the play performances. Their variants serve as alternative reference points for navigating moral systems.

In these religious-themed plots, as in social life, broader cultural moral systems and "official" orthodox Islam sometimes interweave and sometimes collide. More broadly, these themes in the plays and other verbal arts and the widely-held (though sometimes questioned and transgressed) mores they portray reveal a paradox created by not solely religion but also by wider historical and sociopolitical processes, a contradictory need for alternating strategies and stances. Ideally, there should be political and spiritual balance between the Kidal region's mediating position as a literal/geographical and

metaphorical/spiritual crossroads, inspired by the Kel Essouk maraboutique descent group, and on the other, the need to protect this space as a beleaguered, endangered fortress, recognized by traditional and modern leaders. Waves of invasion have created tensions and dilemmas between spiritual obligations of welcoming and mediating, on the one hand, and political pressures for protection and resistance.

Local experience of dilemmas, transgressions, and ways of coping with them, portrayed throughout several play plots and other verbal arts, often address problems of disrupted social relations and of long-standing Tuareg cultural mores of honor, reserve/respect, generosity, and guardedness/caution. In the past, these ideal character traits were considered most prevalent among the aristocratic elite, but in the rhetoric of “modern” Tuareg leaders, these traits are now desirable and attainable by anyone: namely, the ideals of *echechek* (honor or decency); *takarakit* (reserve, modesty, or respect); *imojagh* (dignity, etymologically related to the term for the precolonial noble elites); and *tangalt* (cautious or indirect metaphorical expression). Religion-themed plots pose such questions as what do these cultural ideals mean today, how far are they guided by “orthodox” Islam in practice, how and why are they transgressed, and what the social responses to them should be.

Also pondered in these play plots addressing religion are relationships between the spiritual and the political, which can become strained, but are not separate but close and mutually dependent. This interdependence came to the surface, for example, in requirements to obtain permission from the Ifoghas *amenokal*'s council of elders and marabouts/Islamic scholars in order to initiate a variety of projects in and around Kidal, ranging from beauty contests to bars to proselytizing by members of a reformist/revivalist sect.

Islamic scholars/marabouts are prominent characters in some, though not all, plays and other verbal art addressing these themes. The following play plot, as well as several oral mythico-histories, honor the Kel Essouk marabouts specifically and their ideal peacemaking roles in northern Malian Tuareg society. This play, entitled “The Market of Essouk,” portrays a marabout positively as a devout, respected peacemaker. It dramatizes the origin of the Kel Essouk marabouts and their traditional home area called Essouk-Tadamekka, which today includes archaeological sites declared part of Mali's cultural heritage patrimony. Until the 2012 war over Azawad independence, festivals with performances of music and plays were held there annually, but later, these events were cancelled until 2014. Around that time, they were revived but moved farther south in Mali.

“The Market of Essouk”

This play was originally an aetiological tale related by an elder in the countryside between Kidal and Essouk-Tadamekka to an actor, Moussa, who

belonged to the acting ensemble Joy. He adopted it for performance as a play, which was first presented at an early Essouk-Tadamekka Festival in 2005.

I saw this play performed at the home of a clinic nurse and part-time actor by actors in two ensembles, Joy and Sons of Azawad. Characters included the marabout, an important merchant named Biga, a (traveling) Algerian named Bikany, a Moroccan traveller, a resident of Essouk named Ibrahim, and another merchant.

In this plot, several traveling merchants seek to understand the origins and purposes of Essouk-Tadamekka. Here, a marabout welcomes them warmly and then explains, almost “sermon-like,” the importance of that place. Dominant in this play is the Islamic scholar/marabout’s account of local history and his allegorical moral commentary for the visitors and merchants. Notably, the characters’ interaction in this plot is less dialogical than in many other play plots; rather, the marabout dominates the interaction, in keeping with the inspiration for this play, an origin tale related by an elderly marabout.

As the Kel Essouk marabout explains the origins of that place, in this process he conveys key religious mores but also reveals unresolved issues in Tuareg cultural encounters with Islam:

The Marabout: Essouk was a place that did not exist in the past (i.e., was not populated by humans initially, in other words, was not a civilized place, before religion entered). There were trees, a stream, many things. It was passed by in history until it became a “place of crossroads,” a meeting place, and it also became a market (*essouk*). Then it became among the first towns that existed. Those who left Algeria, they passed through Essouk, those from (present-day) Morocco, those from Algeria, those from Mauritania, those from Mali, they all passed Essouk.

Before the Kel Essouk and Muslims, Essouk was inhabited by a non-Muslim people (*ikoufaren*). In history, it later became a great place. Our parents told us some details of this history. They said that it was their old parents (ancestors = *Kel Ibda* or *Kel Arou*) who told them this history. So its history is ancient. The place of Essouk is a place of encounter, not only for Moroccans, not only for Algerians, not only for Malians, it is a historic world place for everyone.

Note how inclusive, not exclusive, the marabout’s description of that place is. Yet there is nonetheless also a hierarchy and “evolutionary” progression suggested: pre-Islam is portrayed as by this Islamic scholar as presocial and amoral, as an “empty” space, geographically, socially, and spiritually. This is consistent with Tuareg cosmology/philosophy’s concept of empty spaces as not solely literally the wild or desert but also states of solitude and nostalgia, spatially and psychologically creative though outside the moral anchors of society—of the female-owned tents and male-dominated mosques. Once Islam arrived, in this account related in the central lines by this Kel Essouk

marabout who dominates this play, humans as moral and social beings began to “count”; that is, there is a spiritual basis for society that was considered absent prior to this encounter with Islam and its early holy men, merchants, and warrior-proselytizers. Peaceful trade, not solely conquest, played a part in this process.

Kel Essouk, as noted, denotes “People of the Market.” Recall that some actors belong to the Kel Essouk descent group who interpret the Qur’an and other Muslim holy books for the Ifoghas nobles and the *amenokal* who traditionally leads the larger Kel Adagh confederation, with powers modified by the French colonial and Malian state powers. Since becoming caught in the midst of tensions between Bamako and the Malian North, it remains the Kel Essouk and current *amenokal* who have faced challenges in brokering peace. Entala, his late father, traveled to promote peace during the Azawad conflict, and the Kel Essouk have played a historic role in maintaining regional equilibrium and mediating conflicts, for example, advising the *amenokal*, protecting the peace for trading, and adjudicating disputes in *shar’ia* court, such as marital and property conflicts, the latter portrayed earlier in the play “The Well.” Kel Essouk marabouts also participate in negotiations over social controversies concerning the introduction of novelties into the community, such as beauty contests, dancing clubs, secular music festivals, and bars.

SACRED SPACES AND TIMES

The Bar/Dancing Club Controversy

By implication in this play plot—actually a sermon-like mythico-historical account about Essouk-Taddemekka, sacred spaces and times are important. These spaces were hotly disputed in Kidal when an individual affiliated with the army wished to open a bar/dancing club there. Intala, at that time the *amenokal* (now deceased, succeeded by his son) and his council of elders and marabouts at first opposed the idea. Later, however, they relented and gave permission to do so on the condition that the owner agreed to open it on the outskirts of town, near the police station and not far from an army post, far from the chiefly Aliou neighborhood.

Although opposition in Kidal to the bar and club opening was couched in the idiom of their being “not religious,” actually, Tuareg ethnicity and cultural formulations of gender and class were more important considerations. This location was symbolically significant, a sly political move: it was situated, tellingly, between the police station and a small neighborhood of very impoverished refugee women from Niger, who spoke a different dialect of Tamajaq, never mixed socially with others in town, and some of

whom, in their precarious livelihood, became sex workers. That space, also near a dried riverbed where the army camp was located, was distant from the mosques and on the other side of town from the “respectable” and “elite” neighborhoods.

In other words, here was a space diametrically opposite from the holy spaces of Essouk-Tadamekka and the Aliou neighborhood of the *amenokal* and his council of marabouts and elders. There was a moral situating of that controversial bar/dancing club in polluted and anomalous spaces, on the other side of town from the both the town’s and the region’s sacred space: outside the *al baraka*-saturated (blessing or benediction) spaces of the Kel Essouk marabouts and Ifoghas *amenokal*. In effect, this location marked it, in contrast to Kidal’s maraboutique and chiefly neighborhood of Aliou and the holy (religious) and patrimonial (state) site of Essouk-Tadamekka, as a “profane” or at least shameful space (lacking Tuareg cultural ideals of *echchek*, honor, *imojagh*, dignity, and *takarakit*, modesty, reserve, and respect, and violating Muslim sensibilities but, ironically, also approaching the civic and state institutions of police and army). In a larger community where persons were assembled together by marabouts and elders, these specialists continued their roles, but this bar/dancing club gathering was situated in a polluting and “off to the side” rather than sacred or crossroads place but tolerated if kept at a distance from Kidal’s sacred powers and inserted near its secular town and nation-state powers. In effect, pollution was sent toward institutions some viewed as the oppressors and away from the “sacred” spaces. Thus the merging of religious and political concerns was also the background of the mythico-histories inspiring the play “The Market of Essouk” about Essouk-Tadamekka.

The decision to permit the opening of the bar/dancing club was the product of long-standing disputes, negotiations, and change in Kidal and the surrounding Adragh-n-Ifoghas region. Timing as well as spatial considerations were also at play. It was significant that several years before the controversy over the bar/club, the chiefly and religious authorities had granted permission for the *da’wa* Islamist-reformist piety sect from Pakistan to preach in Kidal, but only after a very contentious debate and only provided they would respect local culture and not promote violence. That group opened schools and clinics, filling gaps left by the withdrawal of state support in the wake of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank restructuring and privatization policies. The sect’s proselytizing, however, attracted only a few local followers. Some residents even mocked their long beards. The sect left. Subsequently, as though inspired to courage by their departure, the request to open the bar/club came up. Thus proponents of the bar/club in effect seized the moment, a brief window of time to negotiate the rocky issue of how acceptable the bar/dancing club was in a setting so dependent on religious peacemakers and charity organizations.

This incident, as well as additional mythico-histories about the earlier arrival of Islam in the region and alternative “culture heroes” predating Islam there, reveal Tuareg cultural interpretations of Islam as open to competing ideas but also resilient in encounters with more orthodox movements. Even prior to the recent Islamist-revival/reformist piety movements, many have long grappled with what it means to be Muslim and also be culturally Tuareg, spiritually and morally. As in many Muslim communities (Beeman 2011; Masquelier 2009; Schulz 2011, 2012), there is no consensus on precisely what it means to be “religious,” or how to interpret Islam or the holy books in local cultural, let alone more “orthodox” or “reformist/revivalist” perspectives of sacred places and eras.

ADDITIONAL VERBAL ART REPRESENTATIONS OF THE COMING OF ISLAM, THE KEL ESSOUK, AND ESSOUK-TADDAMEKKA

Pre-Islamic Female Ancestors/Founders/Culture Heroines

The coming of Islam—whether early conversions or recent pan-Islamic movements—is not the focus of all Tuareg mythic-histories or play plots, nor viewed by everyone in the community as the “first” civilizing force. Pre-Islamic female matrilineal founding ancestors are also prominent, though their stories are sometimes interwoven with the coming of Islam (Casajus 1995; Norris 1975). Depending on the context of the telling, there can be portrayals of eras predating conversion to Islam and of eras following it as experiencing variously complementary, hierarchical, or opposed forces.

Both women and men may emphasize alternately, Arabic-derived patrilineal or Tuareg-derived matrilineal founders, but tellers tend to minimize the matrilineal theme when in the presence of important (male) marabouts and chiefs. The emphases do not always strictly correspond to the gender of the teller, though this is sometimes a factor. Equally significant is who is present in the audience and their relationships to the teller. The presence of a male who is a close cousin of the teller, for example, causes less reticence or caution about a matrilineal origin account than the presence of an Islamic scholar/marabout. Among the Ifoghas Tuareg, not solely women but also some men who are not marabouts openly relate matrilineal mythico-histories, in contrast to the case among some other Tuareg groups, such as the Kel Ewey in northern Niger where women tellers tend to dominate tales about pre-Islamic female and matrilineal ancestral culture heroines and hesitate to relate these tales before men and Islamic scholars (Rasmussen 2006).

In Kidal, I collected the following account of a female culture hero/founder from a man. According to this teller, the male nurse and sometime-actor in his mother Tekres’s Joy ensemble, two *timenukalen* (female traditional leaders)

named Sataunata and Bosaydata were prominent in Kel Essouk and Essouk-Tademekka history. He elaborated:

Sataunata was an ancient Berber (Amazigh) “queen” there, very generous, who resided at Essouk and Tademekka, now a site with rock art, about sixty kilometers from Kidal. Both female leaders were renowned for their generosity toward visitors. Sataunata gave visitors rice; Bosaydata gave visitors gold pieces. The Songhay Empire attacked Essouk-Tademekka three times. The site was finally abandoned in drought, reverting to desert. All but Bosaydata left during that seven-year drought. Bosaydata pounded gold pieces, ate the gold powder, and lived.

The Pilgrims

By contrast, according to an elderly Kel Essouk male actor, comedian, poet, and oral historian, the father of Bidi, an actor, this site was founded by two male pilgrims en route to Mecca, thereby connecting this ancient site more directly to the Kel Essouk marabouts. He explained, “The pilgrims liked the place so much that one said, ‘This is Mecca,’ and they decided to settle there.” He explained, “The Kel Essouk were the first men who brought Islam to this region (around Tademekka). They live around Etember, Tasit, Tin Oker, Agelhok, Kidal, Tessalit, Anefif, and Tin Essako (the earlier home of the Ifoghas chiefly family and the *amenokal*) . . . these groups are descendants of those first pilgrims who brought Islam to the Tademekka region.”

Tuareg Islamic scholars/marabouts (*ineslemen*) were not supposed to fight. Fighting battles was the duty of the *imajeghen* (or *imouchar*) aristocratic Ifoghas and the latter’s *imghad* tributaries, who raided and traded for their noble overlords and had rights to a portion of the war booty. Marabouts’ past and present spiritual peacemaking roles and Qur’anic interpretations do not occur in isolation from political roles, however. Some urban marabouts now also bless secular (nonliturgical) music festivals, performances, and political party rallies. Marabouts frequently meet with modern secular civic and state leaders, as well as the *amenokal* and other traditional leaders to discuss policy concerns.

These themes—of tensions but also close contacts between Tuareg and Arabic-influenced mores and institutions—continue in another, slightly different oral mythico-historical variant of the Kel Essouk marabouts’ origins, roles, and relationships, emphasizing more mixed and shifting regional religious and political alliances and oppositions.

Enter Kosseylata and Sataunata

An Ifoghas woman of noble social background from a small rural village near Kidal in the Adragh-n-Ifoghas Mountains related this variant to me in

the presence of her male cousin. This she called “The Story of the Leader of Essouk (the Market),” which went as follows, with some brief annotations that are my own:

One said that the faithful of the Prophet prayed in the morning at Timissaw (a mountain in Algeria between the Adagh and Ahagar massifs)

They prayed the first prayer in the evening at Doreyt (a mountain toward Abeysara)

They prayed the second prayer at Balaghane (a oeu/d/riverbed between Kidal and Menaka)

They prayed at dusk at Essouk (about sixty kilometers northwest of Kidal)

Is that distance possible now?

If it is not the car

In that era they did not have cars

Until their arrival at Essouk,

Until they Islamized the people who were there

Those people were called the people of Kosseylata (Berber pre-Islamic male “king” or *amenokal*)

A non-Islamicized people

Now Kosseylata returned, as their traditional spiritual leader

Then the people were Islamicized

They had refused until one captured their leader

He (Kosseylata) professed to them that he was Muslim, but he was lying

They left him until he deceived the Acheloum (a group of companions of the Prophet)

He surprised him by an arrow, he fell, he was ill, his companions brought him

Sataunata (the female leader) told them, “I am going with you; do not leave me.”

I heard that Sataunata married the Acheloum chief (chief of the companions of the Prophet)

They told her, “No, no, stay here.

All that is for you (i.e., all that remains of the battle).”

They told me that Sataunata had filled up (i.e., with milk or wealth, become enriched and become a powerful chief or leader)

She became so rich, and also a chief, that the slave gave her cow’s milk at Sandimane (mountain)

Another gave her milk at Tanainait mountains (i.e, she received milk from Sandimane Mountain to the Tanainait Mountains. [This shows the extent of her chiefly domain: many slaves in that region between those mountain massifs gave her milk tribute, on a geographic chain.]

Yes. So people told me that she lived life like that, until she became miserable (declined, aged)

Until misery took her

Until she swallowed a nugget of gold and she died

This place there now is where the Acheloun (leader) is buried, there is a kind of stone

Those stones, those big rocks there
 They mark a tumulus (tomb) in the place
 So that place is named Tin-Siloumane (at present-day Abaybara, a village
 near Kidal). Tombstones that resemble the wooden Islamic prayerboard
 People say that the stones (rocks) there are not from that place, you
 understand?
 And well, those stones that serve
 There is one that arrived on horses
 So the companions of the Prophet returned there.

This account, in contrast to the versions portrayed in the aforementioned oral mythico-histories and in the play “The Market of Essouk,” resembles those found in some other Tuareg groups (Norris 1978, 1990) relating initial Tuareg and other Berber resistance to Islam on the arrival of Arabic proselytizers, and hint of persisting conflicts, as well as conciliations and compromises between Tuareg matrilineal and Arab patrilineal descent, succession, and leadership. In this woman’s account, curiously, rather than surviving on gold powder in drought as in the previous account by the actor/nurse, Sataunata dies, somewhat ironically but also self-sacrificing, from ingesting the gold.

There is not a one-to-one correspondence between the gender of the tellers and the emphases in these variants, but the point is these variants address, each in its own manner, Tuareg resistances, tensions, and accommodations on the coming of Islam and Arabic cultural influences. Prehistoric Berber (Amazigh) “queen”-like leaders such as Tin Hinan have been widely mentioned in ethnographies (Keenan 2003; Worley 1988, 1990). Following conversions to Islam, there have occurred both colliding and interweaving of these traditions. As in many other African Muslim communities, some Tuareg claim Arabic ancestry. Some intermarriages have taken place between Tamajaq-speaking and Arabic-speaking peoples (Nicolaisen 1961; Nicolaisen and Nicolaisen 1997).

In other words, with the coming of Islam there was a “push-pull” between Tuareg women’s high social prestige and economic independence and their challenge by Arabic patriliney; this was, again, earlier hinted in the play “The Well”’s plot about the dispute over well ownership and its resolution with some ambivalent attitudes expressed toward the woman witness in a *shar’ia* court. There are contradictions, struggles, dilemmas, and compromises over entitlements to spiritual and political leadership as well as property, including sacred land spaces, in peacekeeping, trading, and warrior rights.

In the mythico-historical-based theatrical play and also the narrative variants concerning the Kel Essouk, their relationships with other Tuareg and outsiders, and their region’s settlement, several themes emerge: both acknowledgment of and ambivalence toward pre-Islamic leadership, with hints of matriliney preceding and sometimes alternating with the Arabic and

Qur'anic and, later, state-introduced patriliney and male spiritual and political leadership. Tuareg influences predating Islam and Arabic/Islamic/Qur'anic influences co-persist to varying degrees and in different contexts: in ritual, healing, inheritance, and succession in different Tuareg regional confederations and descent groups (Fischer and Kohl 2010; Oxby 1990). In some regions, both Qur'anic *shar'ia* and secular courts are available for cases and disputants.

The Ifoghas Tuareg highlight both traditions, male and patrilineally traced maraboutique and female and matrilineally traced founders and descent systems. Ifoghas accounts also commemorate male and female battle heroes and merchants who resisted invaders, but who also welcomed long-distance trade. Increasingly, however, some political leaders have felt pressures to become more “devout” according to Islamist-reformist piety groups’ interpretations of the Qur’an in order to retain their political influence. Thus there are alternative themes revealed in variants of the history of Essouk.

A Marabout’s History of Essouk

The following, another history of Essouk (untitled), was offered me informally over tea by an elderly Kel Essouk marabout I visited who resided in Kidal’s Aliou neighborhood nextdoor to the *amenokal*:

Essouk, it is our heritage (*alassal*)

It is for that that we became the Kel Essouk

It was at that time that the French arrived (between 80 and 100 years ago, before the *amenokal* named Attahir; the French arrived at the time of Illi, father of Attaher and grandfather of Intala; that was the epoch of Firhun and Kaousan, heroic leaders of Tuareg revolts against the French (i.e., around the early twentieth century)

They made war, people became separated, but we kept our culture of the Essouk

We were called the Kel Essouk (People of the Market, also denoting Crossroads or Meeting-place)

There was this woman who was named Essouk. She had brought her products there (to Essouk-Tademekka, there was a large river over there at that time)

Across the river, she sold them (her goods)

At that time, there was no money (European-introduced currency), people bartered. They took (acquired, learned) our cultural heritage, for always

Our culture, our heritage was the Qur’an

We became the marabouts

The Kel Essouk was the name of our old ancestors

It was with them that we became marabouts

They called us the Kel Essouk

This account, like the play “The Market of Essouk,” about Essouk-Tadamakka and the other mythico-historical accounts related to it, emphasizes separation/dispersion and differences, but also assembling of peoples. Pre-Islamic and Islamic influences are not inevitably incompatible, notwithstanding some struggles over interpretation. Interestingly, even this Kel Essouk marabout serving the Ifoghas *amenokal* mentions a female trader “named Essouk” who resembles another, named Buktoo, in popular accounts of the origin of Timbuktoo, which denotes “the place of Buktoo.”

Notably, “market” (*essouk*) here, and also Buktoo, as in the play “The Market at Essouk,” refer to both a literal place for trading and meeting and a more abstract ideal of mediating, assembling diverse peoples, and keeping peace. Yet there are also references to factionalism and invaders.

The point is that markets in the Kidal region were historically not always marginalized peripheries, battlegrounds, or spaces of alterity. They have also been welcoming centers, crossroads, and meeting places, blessed by *al baraka* Islamic benediction power of the maraboutique group named for the historic market and current archaeological sites at Essouk-Tadamekka.

DE-SACRALIZED SPACES AND TIMES

Like some other ritual specialists in African religions (Fratkin 2012; Masquelier 2009; Wood 1999), Islamic scholars traditionally bless and protect important gathering places such as markets. Yet violence has at times swirled around them. The Kel Essouk’s powers to bless and keep the peace in northern Mali have been challenged by factions holding different concepts of moral space and time, religious devotion, and sociopolitical practice. Even during my field research residences just prior to the 2012 war, there were already a few incidents occurring in and around Kidal’s markets which local residents lamented as caused by “a draining of *al baraka* from the region,” a moral deficiency, in their view, a breakdown of community and sociality. Some of these incidents were perpetrated by advocates of a more strict interpretation of the Qur’an, for example, in the aforementioned stoning of actors in Caravan Without Borders at the market by some adherents of *da’wa* in the audience who opposed the ensemble’s edutainment play for its explicit addressing of HIV/AIDS, its portrayal of flirting and courtship, and use of marionette puppets.

Other incidents in or near Kidal’s market were perpetrated by unknown persons. Once, two strangers impersonating police approached me near the Kidal’s larger new market and, screaming, demanded my official papers, a copy of which I fortunately was carrying inside my billfold, and which I showed them. This placated them, and, raucously laughing, they sped away in

their Toyota, brakes screeching and sand flying. Later, based on my description of the men and their vehicle, friends and hosts asserted that those men were not “real” police, but suspected bandits.

Other market scenes ended less happily. On November 2, 2013, suspected militant jihadist forces from Algeria abducted two French journalists from the Kidal market and killed them while pursued by army forces trying to rescue them. Markets, crossroads, and meeting places can morph from places of peace, integrity, and trade into places of deception and violence.

The play “The Market of Essouk” is now a nostalgic mnemonic of the past within a narrative of nation expressing hope for possible future cultural revival, reminding others of idyllic relationships at a crossroads of opportunity, as well as danger, and looking forward: in its inspiring audiences to revive and continue the ideally peaceful purpose of religion and its practitioners.

The *ibaraden* actors, already aware of approaching crisis during my research, tended to evade direct conversational expression of politics, understandably. But they pondered these dangers indirectly in their plays, other verbal arts, and sociality, especially the ambiguities of religious devotion and the wider moral issues these raised in additional religion-themed plays.

For example, one plot, which portrays an imposter feigning to be a marabout, contrasts a “true” versus a “false” marabout and evokes more general attitudes concerning local concepts of deception. Other plots depict contrasts between generosity versus greed, jealousy, coveting, and, especially, theft.

Local concepts of deception, “lying,” and other transgressions—whether in impersonating a marabout or in stealing—have different connotations and elicit different responses, depending on agent, intention, and predicament, suggesting a moral hierarchy of needs. In the marabout-themed portrayals, I argue, what is really at stake in truth versus “lying” is a moral dilemma: between the spiritual obligation to be welcoming, hospitable, and open in mediation and generosity versus the regional predicament of successive invasions pressuring residents toward a protective, closed, and “fortress-like” society that “refuses” to be dominated. In this predicament, Islamic scholars/marabouts attempt to promote peace, but events around them challenge this ideal.

This preoccupation is striking in the following play, entitled “The False Marabout,” whose plot concerns an imposter impersonating a marabout, a veiled critique of some Islamic scholars who do not behave as “true” marabouts ideally should.

“The False Marabout”

The cast in this play, entitled “The False Marabout,” included actors each playing two characters: Hamid played the false marabout and the genuine



Figure 8.1 Male actor portraying a female character in the play “The False Marabout.”
 Source: Photo taken by Author.

marabout; Adamou played the go-between who arranges clients for the false marabout and a client; Boubacar, a male actor, played Maimouna, a woman abandoned by her husband, brought to the false marabout by Adamou’s character, and also a sick patient with dental cavities who is diagnosed by the false marabout inaccurately as possessed by spirits. Eventually, he is exposed, with a warning (Figure 8.1).

This play’s plot, true to its title, concerned a “false” marabout on the surface but has several levels of significance. First, literally, there is someone who misleads, who falsely impersonates a marabout, who gives false diagnoses and collects illegitimate fees for his ineffective healing. But more subtly (in keeping with the cultural ideal of cautious, indirect speech and symbolism, *tangalt*), this plot also portrayed the contrast between integrity, honor, and deception, and between “true” versus “false” Qur’anic healing by someone who impersonated a marabout, thereby offering an oblique critique of some Qur’anic students who aspire to become prominent Islamic scholars/marabout but who are not ready and/or do not conduct themselves as “true” religious scholars should. This critique is rarely expressed openly in social life, but rather indirectly away from marabouts’ presence.

A social case echoing this more general concern did, in fact, occur during my research/residence, as shown in the following incident:

The Case of the Mysterious “False” Aspiring Marabout

Just before the Ramadan fasting month began, a mysterious traveler from a place he did not specify, who self-identified as a Qur’anic student of a prominent marabout and who held ambitions to become a great marabout himself, stopped at a compound where I lodged with a research assistant and his relatives. The traveler was en route to a pilgrimage center. At first, he was welcomed by my hosts and assistant without question. Gradually, however, as his stay lengthened and he began (in their view) to take advantage of the situation—staying too long, without contributing anything to the household—others there became disaffected and even began doubting his claims of spirituality, *al Baraka* blessing power, religious scholarship, and connections.

Household members, including the homeowner, were initially generous, hospitable, and courteous to him (for example, sharing bowls of food and glasses of tea with him), as one should be toward marabouts and their Qur’anic students. This is ideally supposed to be reciprocated, however. Truly “great” holy men should also be generous, hospitable, and courteous toward others. Others present came to regard him as a “false” holy man, greedy, profit-minded, a “freeloader,” and not as knowledgeable of the Qur’an as he claimed to be, an unlikely candidate for either being mentored by prominent marabouts or practicing maraboutage himself. They also found him inconsiderate, as for example, when he played a radio too loudly and kept chattering on his cell phone late into the night, causing noise. Away from his presence, some men and women even criticized him for his refusal to eat with me because I was a woman (most Tuareg women and men eat together, except in public and at formal rites of passage). This “guest” (*amagar*, a Tamajaq term also denoting—significantly—“foreigner” and “stranger”) soon overstayed his welcome and failed to attract other companions or potential followers. Eventually, the visitor moved on and was never heard from again.

Although Qur’anic students and Islamic scholar/marabouts often travel, sometimes beg, and are expected to circulate widely in disseminating their knowledge, healing, and settling disputes, and others should welcome them and provide support, nonetheless there are limits to hosting them. For these specialists are also supposed to be polite while guests and hospitable themselves while not traveling. An esteemed, highly respected marabout asserted to me that “A marabout should not seek glory but should rather be a reflection of God.” Several others also insisted that “a truly great marabout has never harmed any person.”

Given these ideal mores and widespread respect for the vast majority of Islamic scholars who do follow them, contradictory portrayals of marabouts in play plots as benign or as transgressors and ambivalent attitudes toward

them in social life raise interesting interpretive issues. In some respects, one could argue, these contradictions reveal didactic Malinowskian (Malinowski 1926) mythical social charters: the foregoing play, “The False Marabout,” like a myth as social charter, encourages proper conduct through portrayals of its opposite, antisocial transgressive conduct. In other respects, guided by Drummond (1995), I find more complex semiotic processes occurring, signifying antinomy, indecision, and ambiguity. As in some other plot themes, these patterns relate debated ideas in Tuareg culture and memory: here, regarding interpretations of Islam, as well as dilemmas, contradictions, and discussions concerning past, recent, and ongoing political conflicts in the Adragh-n-Ifoghas and Kidal region, as also illuminated in the foregoing mythico-histories.

In other words, the foregoing play “The False Marabout,” the “offstage” social vignette/case, and local oral traditions ponder, comment on, and debate the historical and contemporary contexts of multiple, alternating, and contested spiritual, social, and political powers, circulating, shifting and ambiguous, challenging traditional leaders’ spiritual power to bless, protect, and heal.

In relationships between Islamic scholars, their Qur’anic students, and others, there is supposed to be mutual trust (*amana*), respect (*takarakit*), and honor or decency (*eschek*)—in short, honorable conduct. In the incident with the self-professed Qur’anic scholar aspiring to be a “great” marabout, no one asked him to leave or expressed hostility toward him directly. There was only resentful, low-toned gossip away from his presence.

Most audiences do not usually comment openly on the social or political criticism of marabouts portrayed in play plots. Only plays with extremely controversial plots, such as those portraying sex- and gender-related topics such as AIDS prevention and girls’ schooling, provoke obvious ire from more devout or “conservative” audiences. Attitudes toward marabouts must be at least outwardly respectful in public. Most audiences, actors, play composers, and transcribers expressed their continuing respect for marabouts in “real” life, most of whom are in fact honest, kind, and competent. My interlocutors and assistants most often blamed transgressions on others: favorite targets were disrespectful and/or unemployed youths and invading, vaguely known “outside elements” such as bandits. Unknown travelers in the region abound, and their affiliations are uncertain. “Who do you know?” was a recurrent question I heard, posed on social introductions. Patrons and intermediaries are important. In the foregoing play, accordingly, the question hinted was, just who was that marabout?

Notably, the shameful and corrupt conduct portrayed in “The False Marabout” play is not by a “real” marabout but by a “false” one: an imposter. Yet as shown in the incident about the traveling Qur’anic student aspiring to be a

“true” marabout, there are also resentments toward some religious specialists viewed as corrupted, as well as others who take advantage (in local viewpoint) of their connections to spiritual figures and powers to exploit others.

Indeed, marabouts themselves should prevent others’ corruption, as they did in some Tuareg regions when they set maximum limits on bridewealth prices viewed as too inflated, when they discouraged excessive spending for name days, and when they ruled that Tuareg husbands can no longer be reimbursed for the bridewealth on divorce once they have “touched” the wife.

In direct comments to me, local residents’ serious critiques of corruption tended to target imperfect practices of Islamic scholarship by either students not yet ready for this profession, or by outright imposters or ordinary persons seen as “not real Muslims,” instead of specific marabouts.

These broad themes of transgression in social, religious, and economic life continue in another theme, theft, in the plots of the following plays. The first play is entitled,

“The Thieves”

This play was performed by the Radio Tisdas-based urban acting ensemble The Visionaries. In its plot, thieves (*ibedegen*) rob a shopkeeper named Bahmid. Yet in response, Bahmid gives them items and helps them because he knows that they will ultimately be judged and punished. Eventually, they confess.

A question here is why, following a theft, is generosity on part of the victim toward the known thief ideally the response, and so widely admired?

On the one hand, generosity is emphasized as the ideal both in particular and in general: that is, on the part of the victim (person robbed) and also toward the thief (in forgiveness, but also literal generosity as well) following a theft; and more generally, other persons (intermediaries between the thief and the victim stolen from) should give presents as alms to the victim following his/her misfortune or harm by others.

The plot of this play on one level conveyed a religious moral, based on the widespread local belief that a thief who swears falsely on the Qur’an will suffer consequences of illness and/or insanity, for example, leprosy; and only Allah punishes. If the perpetrator confesses and the victim forgives the thief, he/she will be spared. However, to be forgiven, the thief must not lie but instead admit the transgression.

The play was first performed in order to raise consciousness about the problem of theft, composed by an actor, comedian, and also a journalist and director at that time of Radio Tisdas and founder of the Visionaries acting ensemble. This play, according to the radio staff, was based on a traditional *tenzaghen* tale.

Both the play performance and the oral legend about Bahmid on which it is based ended in the following moral comment by one of the thieves:

You must know (that) if you lie one day, the truth is going to stop you. Someday, that is going to catch up with you. You must know what one did to Bahmid (the victim of the theft). He did good to us, yet we had done harm to him. We arrived in Tamanghasset, Algeria (to trade items), and then we fell ill (i.e., we were ultimately punished by Allah, not by Bahmid). You must know that we did harm (bad actions).

The moral idea here, in the exegesis by the actors to me, is that deception, theft, or betrayal of trust needs to be redressed not solely by the thief but by both parties on “even ground,” not solely by the wrongdoer but also by the wronged person. Both must participate in a mutual moral rapprochement.

Deception and theft are real concerns in wider society, as anywhere, even among the small, generally close-knit ensembles of *ibaraden*. Actors, too, like other people, could be tempted to retaliate against a thief or, worse, to steal themselves.

The meanings of this plot in fact were “played out” in social practice, in an incident of alleged deception and embezzlement by a fellow *abarad* in an ensemble experiencing social and economic tensions, and the moral message of this play informed other actors’ responses to the accused transgressor. This play’s theme was vividly, even ironically, mirrored in life behind the scenes during the organizing and performance of the play about the origins of Essouk-Tadamekket discussed earlier in this chapter.

The Case of Deception and Theft of Funds

The actors had intended to perform the play about Essouk-Tadamekket for free, from affection and respect for the organizer’s friendship with them (contrary to the usual practice of actors being paid by the organizer requesting their performance). One actor in that ensemble, whom I shall call Moussa, led that organizer to believe there was the usual fee (50,000 CFA or about \$100). Later, it was discovered that he had secretly pocketed the money given him by the organizer instead of sharing this sum with his fellow actors.

In the aftermath, a concerned group gathered. “Usually,” members of the ensemble explained to me, “we actors in ensembles need these payments in order to purchase costumes and props.” But this performance had been intended as a special favor, a gift to the organizer who had sponsored a large number of their performances. For this reason, prior to discovering the embezzled sum, the actors had performed the play entitled, “The Market of Essouk” without any costumes or props—very unusual, which had puzzled me as I watched it.

When Moussa's alleged transgression became known, the other actors did not punish him or report him to authorities but gossiped disparagingly about him—especially after he spent all the money on party clothes and thus could not pay it back. He did, at one point, confess, and then, shamed, hid in seclusion for about a week. Other actors in his ensemble gave a small kid goat as a compensation gift to the organizer who had been deceived into paying unnecessarily for the performance.

Later, the accused “errant” actor visited the organizer and made a request: he asked the organizer to give him money for several blank CDs he needed for recording some songs he had composed and hoped to sell.

On first scrutiny, this case, in particular its conclusion (of the wronged person being asked by the transgressor to give money to him), like the plot about Bahmid, is puzzling. How can this be understood?

Illuminating here are the wider social, economic, and religious contexts. Moussa was an actor in the youth wing of Tekres's ensemble, Joy, as well as another neighborhood acting ensemble but was a bit peripheral to each and often floated between them. Like many youths, he greatly admired the Kidal-based international touring band Tinariwen. He hoped to found his own independent musical guitar band. Moussa boarded in one of two houses that Tekres owned in the center of Kidal, where her oldest son, a nurse and a part-time actor, and the latter's wife and infant son also resided. The oldest son's wife was of mixed ethnic/cultural background, and the household, very cosmopolitan, was multilingual: members spoke Tamajaq, Songhay, Bamana, Dogon, and French.

Moussa's father was from southern Mali originally and of Mande/Bambara background, a group with whom Tuareg in the Kidal region have had political tensions. A retired civil servant then living in Gao, he was divorced from Moussa's mother, a Tuareg woman who had moved to Tamarasset who had been his second wife, and also was divorced from Tekres, the founder of Joy ensemble, who had been his other wife in one of her marriages, and therefore once Moussa's mother's co-wife and rival.

In this tension-laden kinship network, Moussa was a kind of “third wheel” in his household and acting ensemble. Still, Moussa hung out at Tekres's home and often acted in the youth wing of Joy. He socialized with the other youths in that extended household, playing cards and listening to music on the family's CD-player.

But importantly, he was not a “child of the stomach” of Tekres, nor a maternal nephew who, Ifoghas say, emerges from the knee of the (maternal) uncle and inherits his character. Nor was he a full brother of Tekres's other children who also acted in Joy. Ifoghas Tuareg in their Tadart dialect of Tamajaq, unlike some other Tuareg, terminologically distinguish between female and male children of sisters. *Tanyaten* refers to female children of

sisters, and *anyaten* refers to male children of sisters. Two of the latter were also members of Tekres's extended family, though they, unlike Moussa, resided in her household and also attended school. Tekres had raised both of these maternal nephews since their mother, one of Tekres's sisters, had moved with her husband to Saudi Arabia. As the son of Tekres's ex-co-wife and rival, as well, Moussa was doubly marginal in her household. Although Tekres was not unkind to Moussa as an ex-stepmother, she devoted greater attention to her own children and maternal nephews. Also, in Ifoghas Tuareg kinship, still influenced by pre-Islamic matrilineal institutions, one's sister's children are the focus of important affective ties.

More than structural kinship factors alone contributed to Moussa's predicament, however. Several in his acting ensemble resentfully alleged that his well-to-do father spoiled him, pointing out, "Moussa's father gave him two houses in Menaka and Gao, but then he sold them, and spent all the proceeds!"

In Tekres's household and acting ensemble, therefore, Moussa was not entirely excluded but felt like an outsider, though I did not, until the alleged embezzlement incident, notice anyone there mistreat or gossip about him. I did, however, hear him complain about feeling "abandoned" by persons at a distance, significant in light of his difficult personal history of an absent mother and usually absent father. About twenty-five years old, with his mother and father far away, and an outsider among his fictive and extended kin, this intelligent and creative but marginalized young man had not completed school, was unemployed, and often appeared lonely, alienated, and angry.

As noted, Moussa wished to start a new "rock"-style guitar band with the aid of the director of a local youth center. Some youths enthusiastically participated in theatrical and other performing programs also offered by that center with this hope in mind, but very few attain the goal of becoming international touring elite bands.

Of course, it is difficult to know precisely the cause-effect connections between Moussa's personality, his actions, and his social predicament. But clearly, his familial situation was difficult. In the two households most familiar to him resided children of different mothers and the same father, and children of sisters, in Tuareg society fertile ground for both close cooperation and rivalry from competing property interests and affective ties (Nicolaisen and Nicolaisen 1997). Moussa's father, as noted, came from an ethnic group and region with whom Tuareg in the North have historically had violent political conflicts. Finally, there was economic inequality, with jealousy toward Moussa because of his father's relative prosperity. Thus despite his relative economic wealth, Moussa had little emotional or social capital.

Yet others also felt long-term sympathy that lonely young man, which tempered their response to his theft. Also influential were wider moral

systems conveyed in the messages of both the earlier play “Credit,” counseling creditors to pardon or show mercy on debtors “who have nothing,” and in the message conveyed in the play “The Thieves” about Bahmid. Although reprimanded, Moussa was not ejected from any of the acting ensembles.

And yet, in effect, even more was at “play” here than forgiveness. There remains the puzzle of the gift request from Moussa. Attached to the widely-held ideal that the victim of theft should be compensated is another ideal: that this thief/embezzler, who did not deny his action but grudgingly confessed, would merit some gift himself: a kind of offering, an embodiment of the spiritual forgiveness by the victim/organizer, from whom he requested CDs following the theft. In this Bahmid-like case, religious mores fused with Moussa’s social predicament and psychological state.

Broader factors also explain these ideal mores and responses. This incident has a Sufi logic, didactically illustrated in the play/tale “The Thieves.” Many Tuareg groups were converted by Sufi holy men from North Africa, and the Kel Essouk representing this broad tradition around Kidal remain prominent and influential despite the intermittent religious rivals who can be less forgiving of thieves.

Key in the Sufi framework for coping with good and evil is the way in which Sufis attempt to place their experience of the Unity of Being within the Islamic framework. As Bousfield (1985, 194) points out, an important theme in Sufi Islam is that everything, including misfortune and evil, as well as luck and good, comes from Allah (God), and no other source, neither human nor Satanic (Bousfield 1985, 196). Only Allah rewards and punishes; humans should not do this.

Instructive here is a related 2014 event in Iran. There, the mother of a murdered man pardoned his convicted murderer at the last moment, just before his execution, removing the noose from his neck just before he was to be hanged (Associated Press 2014, A2). In Iran and some other Muslim countries, the Islamic law *shar’ia* concept of *qisas* (Arabic term), denoting “an eye for an eye,” allows families of victims to oversee punishment—in that Iranian case, execution of a convicted murderer, but the families may also opt for mercy, often in return for monetary compensation. Forgoing *qisas* in justice is viewed as an act of charity (in Tamajaq, *takote*), one of the pillars of faith in Islam, and a chance to atone for one’s own sins.

Significantly, the Iranian mother of the murder victim refused the monetary compensation for herself, preferring to donate to a cause. She proposed that it go instead toward improving local soccer schools.

Although the case in Shiite Muslim Iran is not identical to this Tuareg case in (predominantly Sunni Muslim) northern Mali—the former concerning murder and the latter concerning theft, and the former followed by a charity donation to the community and the latter by a charity donation request from

the transgressor—they nonetheless inform each other and the play about Bahmid and are broadly similar, I argue, in their overarching logic: of not solely mercy and forgiveness, but also generosity, toward transgressors.

In northern Mali, as shown, moral challenges arise with danger, pollution of sacred places, shifting and overlapping alliances, and rivalries. These conditions make it difficult to discern friend from foe. Hence the need for reassurance that one can trust human agents, and the reliance, ultimately, on Allah (God). Sufism can be seen as trying to give space to a realm of experience threatened by the emphasis on personal responsibility and salvation (e.g., by fleeing violence, on the one hand, and by Divine Omnipotence, on the other). The spiritual path then looks like an “escape route from the double-bind of the injunction to follow the Law and the impossibility of human agency” (Bousfield 1985, 197). In Tuareg moral systems, there are blurred lines between the agents of different responsibilities and obligations.

Therefore, following transgressive conduct, responsibility for rectifying moral balance is not strictly limited to another individual’s compartmentalized deception/lying, theft, greed, or avarice; rather, the focus is on a mutual negotiation of moral responsibility between all parties, in reaching a common ground to reinforce good and combat evil. No one person, perpetrator or victim, is held solely responsible for redress, and redress does not flow only in the direction of compensating the victim, though this latter, too, should be done. Moral and spiritual personhood collapses the Maussian dichotomy of *le moi* and *la personne sociale* (moral, internal versus social personhoods). There is unity in Allah (God) here, but also collective (not individual) human agency. We are, in other words, all responsible for each other, as metaphorically expressed by some Tuareg leaders’ cultural imagery, “all under one tent (*ehan iyan*)” in their calls for unity and forgetting of old hierarchies and rivalries, and also, as earlier expressed by Saidi the comic actor and host at the *Maison du Luxembourg* in his exhorting audiences, to be “always together, never angry.”

These ideas were conveyed in the play “The Thieves” and paralleled socially in the case study about Moussa, where despite this accused thief’s (or embezzler’s) marginal status, there was a counter-pull toward a unity of believers which connected perpetrator and victim into one moral community. Even though Moussa was the object of some jealousy over his presumed economic advantage, the quest here is not merely for a levelling of material wealth but for social and moral validation—specifically, local cultural ideals of dignity and honor—in negotiations and compromises. Many wish to clarify friend from foe in the increasing ambiguity and unpredictability of transgressions, protections, and vulnerabilities. That said, many also wish to keep the moral ground level between humans dependent on each other. Distinction and unity are both important.

Contrary to the case in some other African societies (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Ferme 2004; Parkin 1985), many transgressions portrayed in the

Kidal play plots and defined as such in social life there do not invariably involve excess. Rather, some transgressions, even apparently greedy ones, are derived from both material and psychological deprivation, dispossession, and dispersion. Even material wealth does not always offset psychosocial loneliness or protect from political violence.

Actors in their ensembles, as *ibaraden*, courageous prominent persons who, warrior-like but ideally honorable and protecting the community, should remain loyal to each other. Indeed, the library at Radio Tisdas contained a French translation of John Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat*, a novel depicting in-group loyalty despite tensions—perhaps intentionally placed there to inspire local youths. But like others anywhere in all professions, some *ibaraden* do not always display solidarity, are not always respectful toward women, elders, marabouts, leaders, or other actors. As many Tuareg disperse, they find fewer rituals to deal with problems of the heart, soul, and spirit. “Traditional” rites of passage such as the caravan trade, important for gender socialization of young boys, have declined (though not ceased) because of thefts and murders along the routes, diminished camels from droughts, and competition from faster trucks.

Much imagery in the religious-themed play plots conveyed worries over these matters and reminded audiences to listen to religious leaders and to learn about their history. The plot theme of impersonating a marabout didactically promoted the caution needed to discern truth from deception and avoid “false” religious leadership. The plot theme of forgiving and being generous to a thief reminded audiences that only Allah (God) can judge. These messages are grounded in both local cultural and wider Qur’anic injunctions; the boundaries between their influences are not rigid.

Yet as shown in the next play plot about theft that I observed, even gatherings and mediations can become subverted and corrupted. Protecting against violence and transgressions also leads some to hold onto distinctions and to guard markets and other meeting places. Consider the next plot depicting theft dangers in large gatherings, in effect, a myth-like structural transformation (Levi-Strauss 1962), even a counterpoint to the “History of Essouk” play.

“The Herders and the Thieves”

This play, performed by three actors in the Voices of the Desert ensemble, included the following characters who warn a man about danger of theft at gatherings: Amadan, a herder of animals; Ikras Ag Tikras, a deceived man; and Mokhayat Ag Madogaz, an old name denoting “he came into the world to find something, his destiny.” I saw this performed inside the family compound of an actor’s relatives. Ahoulou, founder of this ensemble, explained, “This play’s purpose is a warning, a social/moral lesson and commentary. It is often

performed around festival time to alert people to the dangers of large groups assembled and is also presented to encourage the education of youths.”

In this plot, thieves steal from a careless and trusting man, and the other characters give a didactic warning to beware of antisocial behavior, especially theft, at large festivals when nomads gather their herds at a salt source and during musical festivals. In these events and locations, one must be cautious around strangers and/or travelers, for they may be thieves. Note the contrast here to the inclusiveness and peace of the crossroads and meeting place as portrayed in “The Market of Essouk,” and the mythico-histories, which emphasized the ideal mediating powers of the Kel Essouk marabouts and Islam as an overarching, constraining spiritual influence on gatherings. Actors and audiences explained that, without these powers (i.e., at more “secular” gatherings such as touristic musical festivals), assembled strangers may not bring harmony but instead danger. This plot also expresses the dilemma between Tuareg cultural valuing of inclusiveness at festivals and performances and more conservative or devout persons’ opposition to mixed-sex sociability and women’s performances at them.

In other words, without protecting patrons’ and mediators’ protective blessing *al baraka*, potentially sacred crossroads can be desacralized, and people can become harmed or corrupted. This plot also expresses the broader historical and sociopolitical tension between the contradictory positioning of Kidal and its region as meeting place but also as a protected, endangered fortress refusing entry except to trusted guests. Even the blessing powers of *al baraka* become uncertain in the region’s religious rivalries.

NOTE

1. In my uses of religious-related terminology, in particular, pertaining to Islam, I am well aware of their complexities and many nuanced variants, which challenge translation across religions and languages. For example, designations such as “popular or folk religion,” “para-Islamic,” and even Sufi, Salafist, and Wahhabi, can obscure more than illuminate, in their conflating of diverse beliefs and practices across regions and eras. For heuristic purposes, however, and in order to bound this topic, some terms and phrases used here, as for example, “Islamist reformist/ piety or revival movements,” while only approximate, hopefully approach local residents’ own categories. Even local adherents disagree and change opinions concerning these terms. In other words, there must be some kind of idiom to convey finer nuances but also retain a sharp focus. Thus I favor broad, open anthropological definitions and approaches to religion in general (e.g., Lambek 2008), though I am also sensitive to some problems of terminology pointed out in critiques of the anthropology of Islam (Asad 2003; Masquelier 2009).

Conclusions

Tuareg Acting as Nostalgia, Critique, and Hope

This book has hopefully contributed to anthropological understandings of culture, memory, and performance, as well as African Studies and to ethnographies of the Tuareg, in particular the Malian Tuareg. Acting, actors, and plays open up new perspectives on more general connections between theater, play, spectacle, other verbal art, popular and expressive culture, and the power of both politics and aesthetics in the construction of cultural memory and forgetting.

Concerning Tuareg ethnography and more general concerns with culture, as shown, the town of Kidal, the primary though not sole location of my research for this book, is a culturally diverse place, though with a prominent Tuareg presence. Moreover, this researcher's focus has been upon Tamajaq speakers and Tuareg culture, acting, actors, and plays. Thus there is no denial here of diverse influences, but nonetheless I firmly contend that there is a value, in ethnography and cultural theory, to maintaining an intense focus on a cultural setting, albeit in dynamic interaction with wider influences. It was never argued here that the Tuareg are an isolated or static group. It was also acknowledged that there is a slippery slope between some cultural survival/autonomy movements and extreme nationalist movements, though in this, too, the Tuareg defy neat categories. For as also observed, not all agreed on the proposed Azawad independence, and many proponents of cultural survival and regional semi-autonomy also intermarry with other groups and condemn racism. These complexities were also shown in the historical background of the region and town: recall that many of Kidal's mountain neighborhood names end in *bougou*, a Mande (Bamana) term for "town." That said, local residents in Kidal and the larger region themselves recognized distinctively Tuareg or distinctively Mande community influences, and the acting ensembles, play performances, and most audience members

whom this researcher studied featured overwhelmingly persons whose first language was Tamajaq, and who self-identified as Tuareg. The focus on both the historical and current practices of acting, actors, and plays therefore offers insight into Tuareg variations on Malian and other performance traditions but also reveals finer nuances of debated, unfinished, and emergent qualities of much cultural knowledge and practice.

On one level of their significance, acting practices' and plays plots' wider aesthetic, social, and political themes referred to contexts of popular culture. I agree with Lewinson (2010) and Weiss (2009) that neither polar emphasis, of global imperialism nor complete local recasting of intruding elements into neatly-bounded molds, helps to interpret how socially positioned individuals and groups within constraining contexts draw on cultural themes to address their situation vis-à-vis other groups, their histories, and their contemporary world.

In my analysis of the wider contexts surrounding actors, acting, and play performances, I have attempted to navigate between these poles of analysis by emphasizing that the actors I studied, participating in a distinctive popular culture of their own, are simultaneously conscious of their marginalization (exclusion of most from wealth and prestige), constrained by their social-historical positioning (as both a vital center of rich creative influences and a site of tensions), and inspired by opportunities, not solely dangers, of multiply-mediated symbols and practices to engage locally reinterpreted issues. The *ibaraden* are not simply passive imitators of other genres or reproducers of nostalgic local cultural memory—though this, too, is important as both inspiration and caution for future action. Nor are the *ibaraden* always rebels, their critique and resistance notwithstanding.

In his study of popular culture in urban Tanzania, Weiss (2009) delineates barriers that liberalization there created for youths' movement into stable economic lives and families and highlights how young men employ hip-hop sensibilities, celebrities, and symbols to generate a sense of empowerment to keep on struggling. Similarly, this book about Tuareg women and men actors and their performances has revealed the potentials, opportunities, dangers, and constraints of the situation in northern Mali without succumbing to solely a critique of political economy that sees only dependency and frustrated reaction to a single source of domination, or to the assumption of creativity generated independently of harsh realities daily confronted (Weiss 2009, 238). Relevant here is the importance of Tuareg actors, acting, and their art as simultaneously cultural performances of memory, forgetting, narratives of nation, and forward-looking rituals of modernity offering hope.

On another level, Tuareg acting performances and their wider historical and contemporary social/cultural contexts revealed nuanced kinds of memory, forgetfulness, culpability, and forgiveness, as well as forward-looking

processes in and around Kidal. How far do acting and play performances challenge, and how far do they reproduce, cultural ideologies of power—for example, long-standing and changing local distinctions in social relationships and emerging state, nonstate, and global hierarchies? To what ends are actors' powerful and respected roles being directed, and by whom? Is there empowerment or appropriation of their remembered performance ideals and cultural mores in aesthetic creativity, style, play plot themes, and social practices?

The foregoing chapters suggested that many transformations in Tuareg acting and plays in the town and region of Kidal and the Adragh-n-Ifoghas Mountains are impacted by the increasing bureaucratization and militarization of state, nonstate, and other powerful official infrastructures impinging on some Tuareg communities. Not solely the state is the “villain” here, but also nonstate forces. This is undeniable, but counterbalancing these hegemonic forces are hints of resistance in the plays and in social contexts beyond them presenting issues and predicaments broadly similar to those in the plots. I have not argued that these wider social and political contexts have a one-to-one correspondence to the acting aesthetics, actors' roles, or play plots; rather, I have argued for their overarching interconnections, “myth-like,” in local imaginaries. The alternate yearning for, protection of, and critical social commentary concerning selected cultural memories in acting do not constitute an always conscious reenactment, in contrast to American folkloric reenactments. Nonetheless, there is a mutual evocation between cultural memories and acting practices, actors' roles, and plays' plots, and in these processes there is contestation of what directions culture takes in the future.

Some aspects of “modern” plays/sketches organized by official authorities represent, to a large degree, an attempt to crystallize or “freeze-frame” them as spectacle, superimposed onto the fluidity of long-standing Tamajaq verbal art performance. However, this attempt from the “top down,” as shown, is not always successful. The actors, plays, and attitudes and commentaries by and about them often present alternative forms of culture and nationhood and encode accommodations, negotiations, and resistance to bureaucracies and other encroaching powers perceived as endangering Tuareg culture, arts, and the Tamajaq language. Acting roles in and beyond plays seek to protect against symbolic and literal violence.

To Handelman (1998), “modern spectacles” are public masks of the bureaucratic ethos. Bureaucracy is the paradigmatic form of organization in the modern state: no state can exist without it, and its logic affects even logics of oppositional discourses if only by inversion or distortion. Yet the performances in northern Mali and their performers' wider predicaments have also faced nonstate forms of power. Not solely the colonial and post-colonial nation-state but also Islamist-reformists/revivalists of varying

degrees of militancy, nongovernmental and other aid agencies have formed complex neoliberal bureaucracies and at different times have filled the gaps opened up by intermittent withdrawals of aid and support and limited national budgets. Thus hegemonic logics at play in agency (whether of individuals or of groups) are related to powerful agendas of regimentation and the role of “displays of order” (Herzfeld 2001, 257). The analytics of these relationships, as the important social backdrops to acting, plays, and actors’ roles during and beyond play performances reveal local reworkings of culture, memory, and performance that challenge rigid dichotomies between state and nonstate, between ritual and spectacle, and between popular and “official” memory.

The foregoing chapters on Tuareg acting, actors, and plays also reveal culture and place/space as having shared common themes, internal diversity, and connectedness to other places and influences, expressed through selective mnemonics and forward-looking theatrical arts. The Tuareg data offer a means of transcending sometimes polarized and circular arguments about the so-called “culture concept,” globalization, and relocalization (Appadurai 2000, 2013; Hannerz 1992, 1997, 2010, 2013; Redfield 2007). In Tuareg acting, some European and southern Malian Mande aesthetic concepts, acting styles, and props influencing local genres constitute to some local residents displays of power but to others welcome rich contributions to art, as long as they are optional (i.e., neither forbidden nor imposed). These aesthetic contributions both reflect and shape social transformations experienced by many local residents. The *ibaraden*, widely regarded as courageous, as well as renowned persons who protect their community, are also liminal and ambiguous figures who alternately incorporate, critique, and refashion these multiple influences in their creativity. As social critics as well as advocates, they are important in reminding us that cultural autonomy/revival movements need not always descend into xenophobia; indeed, in much acting practice during and beyond performance, actors negotiate between contending forces to guard against extremism. Sadly, their efforts face challenges from recurring political violence.

This book has also revealed memory as addressing and informing not solely the past and present but also the future, but not in a linear or neatly sequential sense. Social or “collective” memory, moreover, in northern Mali among Tamajaq speakers is far from unitary or consensual, though there are also widely-shared cultural themes and efforts to reconcile opposed variants of memory in emerging narratives of nation (Anderson 2006). This was shown in the plays and also some other verbal arts relevant to their plot themes, particularly concerning religion, an important issue in the region and the world today. How does the past orient but not dictate possible futures, often in nonlinear (Werbner 1998) and nontextual (Stoller 1997) ways? And

how do personal memories articulate with public memories in theatrical and social performance? And most importantly, what is forgotten?

Many performances and discussions of them highlighted the conflict between elite political and religious interests and popular cultural memory practices. They revealed memory which some authorities work to suppress, conceal, or deliberately avoid in “official” public practice. It is now almost a truism that memory is selective and, like history, is “written” differently by diverse participants. That said, what is important, in my view, is to explore what factors encourage or discourage particular versions of memory that are selected, in order to avoid the pitfall of excessive relativism with its problematic consequences of possibly denying horrific documented events, such as slavery and genocide. The Tuareg actors, plays, and audiences and other residents and interlocutors in and around Kidal often searched for heroes (past inspirations, such as Tuareg warriors resisting French colonialism, and present models, such as famous musicians representing Mali to the outside world) to recover cultural dignity and pride, but they did not uncritically defend all local practices but instead critiqued some of them constructively.

The tensions between popular and more official memory-work and conflicts between different interest groups in northern Mali (most prominently, rural and urban, gendered, intergenerational, and religion-based) over remembering, forgetting, and advice for the future were expressed in many plays as commemorative and laudatory, though not uncritically. These mnemonic representations at times fostered a nostalgic, even fetishized, remembrance of and romanticized aspects of the past. On the other hand, in many contexts beyond the play performances relating to actors’ and other residents’ lived social experiences, local choices in memory emerged as based on not primordial or naturalized definitions of kinship, descent group, or ethnicity, but on more contingent, politically-inspired decisions—often based on regional events and sense of place—but also flexible concepts of these affiliations. This book has shown that these divisions are not always clear-cut, and it is in the social sense that a representation of personal motives, desires, and experience becomes dominant.

Concerning performance, the foregoing materials on acting and plays suggest that performance analysis benefits from an analytical focus on aesthetics, style, plot, and socially practiced agency, as well as structural constraints (in both immediate creativity and wider relevant events and processes). Performance is social, not solely aesthetic, but should not be used too broadly as a gloss or cover term. I owe a great debt to guiding works by Ahearn (1998), Arnoldi (1995), Bauman (1992, 2004), Beeman (1993, 2011), Hoffman (1995, 2000), Reed (2007, 2016), Snodgrass (2006), and Weiss (2009). My endeavor here has been to include as much direct “speech” of performers and performances as possible without intruding on local artists’ own creative independence or

intellectual property (direct quotes here are oral), and without betraying or endangering identities (all individual names directly quoted and/or appearing in case studies, vignettes, and interviews and conversations are pseudonyms except those of plot characters and of individuals and groups already widely known internationally). To these ends, like Reed (2003), I have retained some degree of ethnographic “authority”; this book has not been an experiment in relinquishing all of the ethnographer’s authority since to do so would not solve the problem of choosing which local “voice” to replace this. But I have contextualized as widely as possible in order to avoid, or at least minimize, a static content or formal analysis. Both personal poetics/aesthetic agency and socio-political constraints emerge here as powerful. In other words, stories are important but do not stand alone. There are multiple storytellers and representations here, but there are also power relations which cannot be ignored.

In sum, given that the plays are products of both individual inspiration and group collaboration, their production was very complex in terms of the issue of “voices.” My intent here has been to convey their fluidity and flexibility, not to reveal strict “authorship” borders. As Hoffman (2000) has shown, there are actually plural voices involved in any field research project over the long term, and, in my view, one has to recognize the additional importance here of wide social contextual as well as immediate textual analysis. In the space of this book, I have attempted insofar as possible, within the parameters of protecting local residents’ safety and their creative control over their arts, to offer nuanced analyses of these voices. Moreover, as shown, much “voice” is conveyed in the northern Malian Tuareg setting through nonverbal, multi-sensorial, multimedia actions, such as signifying practices of body, dress, and spatial features of land and built-form, not solely text.

This stylistic play on form is complex, as Ahearn (1998) and Bauman (2004) point out, with individual innovative improvisations, but as Barber and Waterman (1995) point out, there are also wider structural constraints on artists. In delving into acting creativity and its inspiration and stylistics (the emphasis in Part I) and in paraphrasing plays in their form as performed publicly and then analyzing them in terms of both text and wider context (the emphasis in Part II), this book has also revealed acting and performances situated between several contending powers, as on one level a “crisis management” theater, but much more as well: as more long-term aesthetic creativity emerging in an environment of multiply-mediated and circulating powers. The plays, not previously explored extensively in Tuareg ethnography, are the focus here, but this art is also supplemented and enriched by more long-standing local verbal art performances such as mythico-histories, comedic routines, monologues, and folktales. All these arts and their specialists continue to coexist. Although the plays have become more specialized as a genre recently, they have not replaced other genres.

All the plays, in different contexts, addressed both small-scale, micro-community and large-scale nation-state issues. They expressed personal sentiments of loneliness, problems of pressures to be generous and hospitable in the face of economic limitations, family rivalries, and moral dilemmas. The plays, acting styles, actors' social roles beyond them, and wider historical and sociopolitical contexts informed each other. In sum, the northern Malian Tuareg performances are important as locally innovative expressions of long-standing cultural and regional verbal art traditions but also as products of historic and recent encounters with neighboring societies and performance genres. Thus they are an emergent form of sociopolitical critique, aesthetic form, and cultural mnemonic, a narrative of nation at once critical and laudatory. The past remains unfinished business, haunting the cultural present and future.

In northern Mali, actors, composers, and audiences no longer regularly enjoy the sheltering mountains or the beautiful sunsets of their surrounding desert, dotted with vibrant towns like ports in a sea. In the regional upheavals, performances have long "intermissions," though also many "curtain-calls" and "encores" and never absolute "finales." Actors and other local residents have intermittently become refugees and exiles from sporadic but horrific armed conflicts between several groups, military, paramilitary, and unknown, not always united in origins or goals in their region as the early twenty-first century moves on.

Around 2012, residents of regions around Kidal, Timbuktoo, and Gao became caught between numerous forces, which initially included the following: the fractured (and frequently renamed) *movement national pour la liberation de Azawad* (popularly called the MNLA), comprised of Tuareg dissident/nationalist/separatists who initially led the northern Kidal region's full secession and declared that region an independent Azawad; the Bamako-based Malian army; French forces fighting some militant Islamist-reformist jihadists whose ambiguous relationships with the Tuareg separatist/nationalists have been often contentious but sometimes overlapping; and shadowy *Al Qaida* in the Maghreb (popularly glossed as AQIM, but often also renamed and splintered), as well as other violent forces difficult to reliably label, with murky identities and changing affiliations.

I do not intend to take a specific political stance on the Azawad issue, though, like many other anthropologists, I do take very seriously the need to be an advocate for those we study and condemn atrocities and human rights violations, whoever commits them, and wherever they occur. This I have already done and continue to do so (Rasmussen 2017). Nor do I attempt "up to the minute" news bulletins; for ethnography is not a genre identical to journalism, neither desirable nor possible since anthropologists (rightly in my view) are more concerned with larger contexts at the time we study a topic

and with longer time frames, and work within a theoretical framework. Yet it would be impossible to discuss Tuareg culture, memory, performance, and acting in northern Mali without some reference to relevant political events there following my field research.

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC POSTSCRIPT

In social turmoil, ethnographers face particular challenges in cultural representation. Not all Tuareg support the various splintering dissident factions, and not all dissident fighters in the North are Tamajaq speakers. Allegiances are fluid, overlapping, and ambiguous. Not all Islamist reformist revival groups are violent militants or jihadists; rather, many deplore violence and offer peaceful, tolerant routes to religious devotion. Many (though not all) Tuareg continue to be cool to the reformist piety movements, objecting to these movements' more orthodox interpretations of *shar'ia* law because they are at variance with local cultural mores and social practices. In particular, many are wary of the militants' opposition to local flexibility in gender constructs, mixed-sex sociability, and public performances featuring male and female artists.

Most residents of Mali, weary from the northern region's descent into a battleground, hope for peace. The Kel Essouk refugees, in peace negotiations between several rebellions of the 1990s and the outbreak of civil war in 2012, wished to repatriate to northern Mali in the Commune of In Chaouch. *Action Contre la Faim* (Action Against Hunger), an international aid organization, built a cistern well for them. Finally, after guarantees of peace and security, many Kel Essouk returned, repatriated gradually to a village between Gao and Kidal. But they and other northern residents of diverse social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds have since repatriations lost much property and have been subject to repeated massacres by some Malian army units, paramilitary groups, bandits, and other assailants in the Sahara and Sahel. Residents flee and return home, again and again. In conversations with this researcher, a Tamajaq-speaking urban intellectual lamented, "I pray for an end to the evil spirits (*djinn*) possessing my country!"

For a time since these events, mostly world-famous elite musical ensembles such as Tinariwen and Temekrist but not acting ensembles (though as noted, some individuals perform in both genres on separate occasions) have performed internationally and in refugee camps, the latter the destinations of some of the actors in the plays included in this book. Musicians from Tinariwen performed songs (not plays) twice in my home town in the United States just before waves of political violence resurged again. There, in between their performances on a raised platform in a record shop promoting their new CD,

we greeted each other warmly, and I inquired about Kidal. At that time, just prior to the escalation of armed conflict on declaration of Azawad independence, the news was generally upbeat. Yet other factors may have explained their replies: Tuareg etiquette, largely formulaic, demands that most greetings be responded to by polite, positive responses such as “*Alkher ghas*” (in health), except in situations of unusual duress.

It is difficult to access news from individuals at the distance, as many have since 2012 dispersed from the town of Kidal. In the rare correspondence that I have received (mail is unreliable, and Internet sources not available to all local residents), there is evidence that some remain in the Kidal region. Others languish in refugee camps in Mauritania and Burkina Faso for varying time periods. Those who can manage it have fled to Bamako, Tamanrasset, and a few who can afford it to France and Belgium.

Since 2012, the Adragh-n-Ifoghas and Kidal region have had scant relief from strife. In a statement released on April 1, 2012, by the MNLA just before they declared the Kidal region to be an independent state of Azawad, the MNLA invited “all Azawadis” (note the inclusive regional rather than narrower ethnic term used, i.e., not simply “all Tuareg”) abroad to return home and join in constructing institutions in the new state, declaring independence on April 6, 2012. The MNLA also pledged to draft a constitution establishing a democracy, acknowledged the United Nations charter, and said the new state would uphold its principles. Also promised was respect for all colonially-established state frontiers that separate Azawad from its neighbors.

In its declaration of Azawad independence, the MNLA announced the first political institutions of the state of Azawad. These included an executive committee, directed by Mahmoud Ag Aghaly; a revolutionary council, directed by Abdelkrim Ag Tahar; a consultative council, directed by Mahamed Ag Tahadou; and a general staff of the Liberation Army, directed by Mohamed Ag Najem. There was no clear central government, though the MNLA claimed responsibility for managing their country until appointment of a national authority. The MNLA was estimated to have up to 3,000 soldiers. They initially established their headquarters at the former Gao governors’ office, naming it the palace of Azawad. Subsequently, the leaders acknowledged the presence of armed rival groups in Azawad. At a conference, several Azawadis voiced their disapproval of “radical” militant Islamist jihadist groups and asked all foreign fighters to disarm and leave the country.

But no official entity recognized or supported Azawad, at least openly. Not all Tamajaq speakers have supported Azawad. As anywhere, there is diversity of political opinion. In Bamako, about 200 Malian northerners staged a rally against the Azawad partition. Two thousand more protested the next day against it. The African Union declared Azawad null and of no value

whatsoever. ECOWAS also declared Azawad void and insisted that Mali is an indivisible entity.

Meanwhile, the military wing of the Islamist-reformist piety (Wahhabist and Salafist-influenced *da'wa*) faction, called Ansar (E)Dine in the North, rejected the MNLA's declaration of independence hours after it was announced. On May 26, 2012, from lack of other external support, the MNLA merged with the Ansar (E)Dine Islamist reformists but later decided to withdraw.

Given this splintering of alliances and lack of international recognition and support for Azawad, the Islamist piety reformist/revivalist group Ansar (E)Dine, wishing to declare an Islamic republic, subsequently was able to seize control of Gao, driving out the predominantly secular MNLA forces. By July 12, 2012, with the fall of Ansogo, Ansar (E)Dine overran all remaining MNLA-held towns. Ansar E(D)ine Islamist piety adherents follow the *da'wa* (Salafist or Wahhabi-influenced) branch of Sunni Islam, which rejects the existence of Islamic holy men other than the Prophet (for example, the reformists/revivalists consider some Islamic scholars or "marabouts" whose popular or para-Islamic Sufi-influenced cultural practices, widespread among most Tuareg and throughout the Maghreb, to be un-Islamic). Ansar E(D)ine also objects to praying around the graves and tombs of Malikite holy men, also customary in widespread local cultural interpretations of Islam in North Africa, where many holy men came from who earlier converted many Tuareg groups to Islam.

Around 2013, additional shadowy, more violent forces such as the *Mouvement pour la jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (popularly called MJAOU) and a few elements of *Al Qaida* in the Maghreb (AQIM) and others entered the North as well, where they destroyed many valuable manuscripts in Timbuktoo and harshly imposed their own interpretation of the Qur'an and *shari'a* law with punishments such as flogging women who did not follow their dress codes and cutting off hands of accused thieves. Their policies also departed from the participation of women in legal proceedings with men and marabouts, and from peaceful means of reabsorbing transgressors into the moral community as exhorted in the tale and play about Bahmid. The MJAOU committed atrocities, particularly in Gao, until driven out of major towns by French and Bamako-based forces in 2013 and 2014, but still lingered in some desert and mountain areas. Bamako, the capital of Mali, itself maintains a precarious peace, with sporadic attacks on hotels and restaurants. One acquaintance described it as "like an armed camp." The country's border areas between Mali, Niger, Libya, and Algeria became plagued by abductions.

On June 20, 2015, following protracted negotiations, dissident leaders (Tuareg and Arab) from the North gathered in Bamako and signed an agreement brokered by Algeria with some political reconciliatory measures, with

hoped assistance from United Nations peacekeepers (*Le Monde* June 23, 2015: 2). Several prominent leaders from the North stayed away, however, and attacks in northern and central Mali on peacekeepers and occasionally in Bamako continue to sporadically erupt.

In all these events, what has happened to Tuareg acting, actors, and performance? Despite the ambiguity in the Qur'an and other holy books and the varying positions taken in different Muslim communities concerning performance and performers (Beeman 2011), some militant jihadists worldwide have insisted that Allah spits on actors. In regions of Mali where they seized power, militants destroyed some performance venues and persecuted actors, musicians, and singers. A few performers, exiled, on tour, and/or in refugee camps, have spoken out in Internet and other media interviews. Some performers, for example, members of the Tinariwen and Tartit bands, have attempted to promote peace negotiations (Rasmussen 2013b, 2017). Actors have remained more low-profile in these public interviews.

Another crisis impacting performance and acting has been the massive return of labor migrants to Mali and Niger from Libya following the fall of Ghadaffi in 2011, many of whom brought back military weapons and became unemployed. Some returning migrants to Niger indicated to me that they had to flee lynch mobs in Libya who erroneously stereotyped all Tuareg migrant workers there as Ghadaffi's mercenaries. In northern Niger by the time of my visit there around 2017, programs in job-training had largely integrated many of these returnees back into their communities, but in northern Mali, they have faced irregular support.

In peaceful interludes, some youth-oriented job-training programs and plays in Kidal and other Saharan towns have persisted and continue their goals of repatriating these returnees and discouraging them from going back to Libya. Indeed, even prior to the overthrow of Ghadaffi, numerous plays warned youths against traveling to Libya, but economic forces drew many there, some attempting to cross from Libya on perilous journeys across the Mediterranean to Europe, nonetheless.

The details of Kidal's and actors' fates there have been difficult to assess. The struggling theatrical performances and festivals in Mali have often had to be postponed, cancelled, or relocated to other venues and regions in the sporadic continuing violence. The *Maison du Luxembourg* as I knew it no longer exists. As the regional turmoil increased, the director and a staff member were held up and robbed of their vehicle in the surrounding desert, though fortunately they were later rescued. The director and organizer of youth programs returned to Kidal and remained there for a time, but the director was compelled to flee again to Bamako, and then to Europe (*Le Republicain Lorrain* Oct. 28, 2012: 1–2). Subsequently, the Wahhabist/Salafist-influenced jihadists and other lesser-known fighters dismantled the

Maison du Luxembourg building and courtyard complex. This center became a memory, its carefully constructed theatrical auditorium, offices, rooms for job-training sessions around an open courtyard, and its intricately carved wooden doors with beautiful bas-relief and etched designs modeled on those of Tuareg jewelry, crafted by local smith/artisans, were smashed in.

Fighters in several episodes of political violence also looted the Radio Tisdas buildings, library books, and rooftop courtyard, which, between attacks during my research/residence, resiliently remained a popular venue for broadcasting recorded plays. The most recent fate of the radio's lending of audio-recordings to local residents remains unknown to me, however. Physically and culturally, the radio station became a shadow of its former self, stripped of books, videos, CDs and DVDs, and missing solar panels on its roof. The invading fighters also burned or stole much media broadcasting equipment. The fate of a DVD recorder I donated remains unknown to me. Fighters threatened musicians and actors by smashing and scorching musical instruments and by threatening to cut off the tongue of a singer and the fingers of a guitarist if they returned to perform anywhere in the region (Hammar 2015).

Perhaps this challenge for Tuareg performing arts and media more broadly is what the Kidal-based "Conversations around the Tea" Internet website (alternately taken down and reposted from time to time), alluded to when, around 2014, they ceased the site's activities with the following message: "The tea is bitter. There is no more conversation" (Kidal Info 2014).

Yet the "curtain" has not completely descended over the *ibaraden* or other performing artists. There are glimmers of hope. Performers make efforts at empowerment through alternative local and global media, in new creativities on tours, in newspaper and television, and in interviews. Some plays and other performances have moved farther south in Mali.

Festivals of the Desert and Festivals of the River

Many Tuareg performances at festivals including plays and music now occur with other Malian artists around Segou on the Niger River. In 2014, for example, a festival featuring some Tamajaq-speaking performers was called the "Festival of the River." This enabled these arts to continue and even flourish, but this new title was a significant change from its previous title, "Festival of the Desert" previously held around Timbuktoo, with implications. Although a reflection of practical cultural survival and welcome peaceful reconciliation, and a valuable opportunity for performers to continue their arts in rich interregional dialogues, this festival title change nonetheless implies more than a literal or functional geographic shifting of location. This name of the festival also implies a symbolic pressure to resituate the cultural and regional aesthetic for some actors and musicians, obscuring the harsh

fact of forced relocation of populations fleeing from violence, uprooted from their own homes. For example, the names of several acting ensembles such as *Travelers of the Desert* and *Voices of the Desert*, and the name of the musical band *Tinariwen* (as noted, denoting “The Deserts”), are names of Kidal and Adragh-n-Ifoghas-area performing ensembles which remind their audiences of important connections between Tuareg cultural aesthetics, sense of place and memory, and performing arts. These names remain known, and many actors and other performers still strongly identify with these desert places, which are also implicated in other aesthetic creative inspirations, for example, much Tuareg poetry. Thus their cultural symbolic power was transformed by these changes in location and new festival name. Their names’ meanings no longer have the same symbolic spatial referents in a “festival of the river” as they did in a “festival of the desert.” It is not known whether any Tuareg actors’ ensembles, long-standing or newly formed, have changed their names to reflect these changes in performance venues, spatial cultural symbols, and population dispersals. That is a question for future research.

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