

## AMULETS AND TALISMANS OF THE CENTRAL SAHARA – TUAREG ART IN CONTEXT OF MAGICAL AND MYSTICAL BELIEFS

**T**he Tuareg people, whose language and culture are based on those of the Berbers, live traditionally as nomadic stock-breeders in the West and Central Sahara. Today they live on the territories of Algeria, Libya, Republic Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. The primary places for the production and selling of Tuareg crafts are the markets in Ghadamis, Timbuktu, Agadez and Zinder. Although the blacksmiths stand out in the hierarchy of Tuareg social order they play an important role in the rituals, magical and mystical beliefs and the community.<sup>1)</sup>

The term “Tuareg” (Arab “tariq” – “Abandoned by God”) was given to the nomadic tribe by the Arabs<sup>2)</sup> who came to the Sahara in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century. The name “Targa” is a known term for the part of the Sahara which was called by the Arabs “Fezzan”. It is a geographical territory which is located in modern-day Libya. The Tuareg call themselves “Imuhar” which means “Free People”. The nomads are composed of the tribes *Kel Ahaggar*, *Kel Ajjer*, *Kel Iforas*, *Kel Air*, *Kel Geres*, *Ullimidden Kel Dinnik*, *Kel Ataram* and *Kel Tademaket*. They speak their own language called “Tamashek” with its own alphabet called “Tifinak”. Today about 500,000 people speak Tamashek and about the same number of

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<sup>1)</sup> Rybiński (1999: 11).

<sup>2)</sup> Göttler (1989: 12).

people share the same ethnic background.<sup>3)</sup> Most of the Tuareg have now given up their lives as nomadic stock-breeders and moved to oasis villages and towns. The main reasons for the change were the political situation in post-colonial times and the drought periods of the years 1970–1973 and 1983–1985. In the course of time, the nomads lost large pasture areas for their livestock and the traditional life became nearly impossible. Only a marginal group of the tribe continues to live as migrant stock-breeders in the desert.<sup>4)</sup>

Despite these changes, the Tuareg have preserved as much as possible of their ancient traditions, rituals, beliefs, religious views of pre-Islamic times and the old magical and mystical views of their forefathers. Those beliefs and traditions diffuse from generation to generation in legends, poetry and songs of women (Targia, female Tuareg) and blacksmiths. Elements of these creeds are especially present in the local crafts: mystical and magical symbols and forms are the main motives used in the production of basic commodities and amulets, talismans or jewellery for special occasions. These objects made of silver, metal, leather, wood or stone, nearly always possess designs which not only have a religious or magical function but also a decorative one.

#### CURRENT STAGE ON RESEARCH OF TUAREG ART AND CRAFTS IN EUROPE

Unfortunately the extent of existent research on Tuareg art in Central and Eastern Europe is quite disappointing. It seems that just a small group of present scholars investigate in Tuareg art and crafts, and most of them deal with the meaning and design of traditional goods without taking much care to note new types and styles and sometimes exclude the magical and mystical interpretation. The projects and publications which analyse those objects more in context of traditional religious beliefs and Islamic symbols and patterns are also of note. General anthropological publications about the Tuareg in the context of the changes and consequences of their lifestyle are prevalent: Johannes Nicolaisen (*Ecology and Culture of the Pastoral Tuareg*, Copenhagen 1963), Thomas Seligman, Kristyne Loughran (ed.) (*Art of Being Tuareg: Sahara Nomads in the Modern World*, Los Angeles 2006), Hans Sterlocke (*Algerien. Kunst, Kultur und Landschaft. Von den Stätten der Römer zu den Tuaregs der zentralen Sahara*,

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<sup>3)</sup> Nicolaisen (1963: 8).

<sup>4)</sup> Hureiki (2000: 15).

Cologne 1974), Gerhard Göttler (*Die Tuareg. Kulturelle Einheit und regionale Vielfalt eines Hirtenvolkes*, Cologne 1989), Karl Prasse (*The Tuaregs. The Blue People*, Copenhagen 1995), Ines Kohl (*Tuareg in Libyen. Identitäten zwischen Grenzen*, Berlin 2007), Guindi El-Fadwa (*Veil. Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*, Oxford 1999), Adam Rybiński (*Tuaregowie z Sahary. Tradycyjna kultura Tuaregów Kel Ahhagar na przełomie XIX I XX wieku*, Warsaw 1999) etc.

Publications about Tuareg art and crafts exist in the field of art history; however, books and articles focus on general art or simply mention nomadic art in overviews of African Art traditions. Rare are the scientists who discuss a special piece of art or craft in detail: Jean Gabus (*Sahara, Bijoux et Techniques*, Neuchâtel 1982), Wolfgang Creyaufmüller (*Das Agadezkreuz. Strukturelle Bestandteile der Form des Schmuckanhängers vom Typus "Agadezkreuz" und seiner Modifikation*, Stuttgart 1998), Helene Hagen, Lucile Meyers (*Tuareg Jewellery. Traditional Patterns and Symbols*, Rabat 2006), Dieterlen Germaine (*Contibution à l'étude de bijoux tuareg*, *Journal Société Africanistes* 42, Paris 1972) etc.

To analyse Tuareg jewellery in the context of its magical and mystical function is to develop a deeper understanding of the role of those objects in daily life. The relation between the blacksmiths who create them and the customer who orders the pieces is important. Of course, interpretation of the art and a profound understanding is not easy for someone who is not a part of the culture, because many secrets remain well kept among the artisans, who do not reveal everything to strangers. Nonetheless conclusions can be drawn from the study of the method of production; for example, which materials are used and which kind of symbols and forms are used on each object. Amulets, for example, have the function of protecting the wearer from the influence, effect and bad energy of ghosts and also to warn off ruin or stave off disease. A madness-detecting amulet would be placed at the entrance of a tent or a central place of the camp to keep desert spirits away, called "Kel Essuf" by the nomads. These ghosts can detect madness. Other talismans can help to calm a camel, or, when placed on the saddle, can prevent the rider from falling off. Pregnant women wear talismans to prevent miscarriages and premature deliveries. Adrian Corso gives a rèsume to the general functions of an amulet: "Each small object hung or placed somewhere and able to express a supernatural power and energy, is an amulet."<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Tuareg jewellery and art is also understood in the Tuareg society as a representation of a special tribe or, can be seen as a sign of wealth of a person or clan.

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<sup>5</sup> Corso (1929: 206).

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SYMBOLISM AND THE MEANING OF AMULETS AND TALISMANS  
IN THE MYSTICAL WORLD OF THE TUAREG

The Tuareg's belief in talismans and amulets is based on the view that there exists a general balance between the material sphere (which means all things surrounding all creatures, such as nature and universe), and the immaterial sphere (which means the world of spirits in the magical and mystical sense). Thus the balance between the world of human beings and the ghosts and Jinns of the desert is formed. As Jacques Hureiki expresses: "*Das immer währende Gleichgewicht zwischen Mensch und Natur und den übernatürlichen Kräften*".<sup>6)</sup> This belief also has origins in the creeds of forefathers and as well as from Islam. Spirits, especially those which are connected with nature, are a part of ancient faiths in North Africa and the Arab world. On the other hand there are Jinns-ghosts, which are described in the 72<sup>nd</sup> Sura of the Koran and are present in Islam.<sup>7)</sup> These spirits are considered to be bad ghosts who, often like to play games with people or animals and doing so, just for fun, they put their victims in a state of mental disarray. Tuareg rituals and talismans as well as lifestyle habits exist to protect individuals from the powers of these ghosts. One example of this defence strategy is to place two small sticks, one over the other to build a cross. A Targia does this to protect some milk in a bowl from becoming sour, which is also one of the games of the ghosts. The cross as symbol is the most powerful and most well-known method among the Tuareg to avert bad influences and to assure security. That's why an amulet in the shape of a cross is one of the main pieces of mystical jewellery.<sup>8)</sup> (Fig. 1)

An effective talisman against bad energies and spirits should have a special design and colour and needs to be made out of a specific material with a magical or mystical significance. However, the key to turning an object into a real amulet is the performance of a marabout, or a spiritual magician who can overlay the piece with required attributes. Spiritual magicians or so-called "seers" are specialists of theurgic powers and provide their knowledge to help other creatures. Marabout is also the Arabic word for an Islamic spiritual and intellectual preacher originating from the Sufi tradition, which is also seen in a kind of Folk-Islam. Those preachers are often also known in the Tuareg culture as mystical medicine men and the nomads believe in their supernatural

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<sup>6)</sup> Hureiki (2004: 40–48).

<sup>7)</sup> Paret (2004: 409–411).

<sup>8)</sup> Miller (2009: 25).

powers.<sup>9)</sup> The rituals of the marabouts are always based on a definite process. To find out the best method for a mighty amulet or magical blessing to keep away bad spirits and the influence of Jinns, a mystic goes out into the desert after sundown, without any food and all alone. This is the territory of the ghosts who, according to Tuareg beliefs, live in the wide solitude, darkness, in deep holes and caves. When close to these spirits, the mystic can descend into a kind of transcendental meditative state. The experience shows him the right way to deal with a disease or to create the right kind of talisman.<sup>10)</sup>

In the old Tuareg faith, legends and fairy tales in the oral tradition are hidden evidence of the parallels to Sufi believes who appeared in North Africa in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. It seems that the nomads and the Sufi share a similar point of view on mystical, magical and spirit powers. One of the most iconic members of the Sufi is the mystic Shaykh Sidi Mekhmud Albaghdadi. He is known and respected in North Africa, and especially in the desert of Niger, as H.T. Norris mentions: "He drew my attention to conflicting legends and reports about Shaykh Sidi Mekhmud Albaghdadi amongst the Tuareg who had come ... in the sixteen or seventeen centuries."<sup>11)</sup>

## COMPOSITION AND USE OF AMULETS

Two kinds of amulets exist among the Tuareg – visible ones and hidden ones. Those which can be seen can be worn as necklaces, finger rings, fastened on a man's turban (Tagelmust) or as decoration in the cornrows in the headdress of girls and women. These pieces may be silver crosses, colliers with or without semiprecious stones, rings with numbers or letters or a particular pendant called a Khomeissa, made of silver, bones, leather or shells.<sup>12)</sup> The main function of all of these is protection and defence from the influences of desert ghosts and Jinns. The other important function is protection against the "evil eye", which is one of the most popular beliefs in many cultures worldwide. According to these beliefs, the "evil eye" is demonstrated by jealousy or an envious gaze that can cause mischief and disappointments.<sup>13)</sup>

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<sup>9)</sup> The Encyclopedia of Islam (2000: 170).

<sup>10)</sup> Al-Kauni (1997: 78–79).

<sup>11)</sup> Norris (1990: XV).

<sup>12)</sup> Boukli (2003: 88–89).

<sup>13)</sup> Lykiardopoulos (1981: 221 ff).

In the second category are hidden amulets. Hidden talismans require a special ritual and the treatment of a seer or a marabout. They are placed in a small box made of silver or animal skin and can contain notes with magical sayings, symbols, bones, pieces of plant roots or citations and prayers from the Koran. Hidden amulets are not usually worn on exposed parts of the body. Even if they can be hung around the neck, they should be covered by clothing. An analysis of the determining factors is necessary to understand how these talismans work and how they are made.

As previously mentioned, talismans play a vital role in the protection against supernatural powers and have preventive functions against diseases, as Jacques Hureiki accentuates: "Amulette und Talismane sind die beliebtesten und meistgebrauchten Vorbeugemittel der Tuareg."<sup>14</sup> According to Tuareg beliefs, Jinns and desert ghosts are sometimes responsible for the imbalance between the immaterial and the material sphere. When these spirits play games with people or cause madness or diseases, they come from the invisible into the material world. That is why amulets are very useful: they help maintain the balance of both spheres. Visual talismans are decorated with magical and mystical symbols which are composed of geometrical figures, lines and points. Tuareg blacksmiths produce special small boxes for hidden amulets. These boxes are all decorated in the same way and often have a protective and mystical function. To remove a talisman from the box can mean that the saying, magic, note or character loses its power. The material used to make the box, silver or animal skin, has positive powers. According to Tuareg beliefs, silver rather than gold should be used in the making of jewellery – because silver is a positive material and gold is a negative one. Gold is a metal witch exercises a bad influence on human beings. Ibrahim Al-Kauni, a Tuareg writer, characterises gold as "banned": "Das Gold macht blind ... das gelbe Metall tatsächlich fluchbefallen ist."<sup>15</sup> Gold is a symbol of the greed and avarice of people, who are willing even to kill each other – just to own the precious metal. In the Sahara, however, life-giving drinking water and natural springs are of more worth than gold.

Sometimes an amulet does not help or a supernatural spirit is too strong for the protecting magic. If a marabout reaches the limit of his art of healing, a ray of hope can be found in a traditional folk-medicine expert, known as a wise woman. With the expansion of the Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.

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<sup>14</sup> "Amulets and talismans are the most popular and most frequented defensive instruments among the Tuareg." : Hureiki (2004: 114).

<sup>15</sup> "Gold makes blind... the yellow metal is indeed banned.": Al-Kauni (1990: 128).

in North Africa, those methods were relegated to the background. But the tradition of wise women never died; today folk-medicine experts act in secret. They use natural ingredients for healing tinctures such as herbs, plant roots or tree bark. Knowledge of this craft is passed down from one generation to the next: mothers teach their daughters in the art of using sources of nature and show them the functions and effects of rituals and substances.<sup>16)</sup> Healing rituals are the secrets of female Tuareg which they never reveal to men. Only rarely does a medicine woman need the help of a marabout or mystic when the natural health treatments seem to be ineffective. Then all powers and all knowledge are necessary as well as God's aid, Islamic blessings, prayers and Koran notes.<sup>17)</sup>

### JEWELLERY AND AMULET ARTISTS

Craftsmen and artisan women traditionally produce most of the goods they need for daily use: bowls and spoons, wooden plates, water and incense jars, leather bags, drums, mortars, saddles, and boxes. They also produce spinning and weaving work and pieces out of horn and stone, or basket work.<sup>18)</sup> (Fig. 2) For work with metal, they must request special powers and supernatural strengths, which only blacksmiths ("Eneden") have. These blacksmiths are not just professionals in dealing with the material, but they also know how to protect their workshop and themselves against the powers of Jinns and spirits. According to Tuareg faith, a fire-place can be infested with ghosts. That is why the nomads fear the Eneden. However, the Tuareg need the blacksmiths for rituals and traditions – during a marriage ceremony, for example.<sup>19)</sup> The artisans make blades, daggers, swords, lads, tweezers and of course jewellery and amulets in the traditional way. Many of them are decorated and often have magical and mystical ornaments. (Fig. 3–8)

The first step of the production for a blacksmith to make a jewel, amulet or a talisman box is to find the right kind of silver, usually in the markets of an oasis or in town's commercial area. In the past the artisans used old silver coins which were melted in the fire, as Ludwig Zöhrer mentions: "Aus Silber,

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<sup>16)</sup> Rasmussen (1998: 147–171).

<sup>17)</sup> Rasmussen (2006: 96).

<sup>18)</sup> Nicolaisen (1963: 255–285).

<sup>19)</sup> Friedl (2005: 259).

das aus alten Silbermünzen gewonnen wurde.”<sup>20)</sup> In modern times there is no longer a need to use coins – silver is available in varied qualities. The greater the amount of pure silver in an object, the better the quality and the higher the price. The traditional methods of working with the material have been preserved as far as possible: the material is heated in a pan over the blaze until it melts and is then poured into clay forms. After the silver cools down and the form is removed, the smith continues to design and shape the piece by using rods and basic engraving instruments until it reaches the desired profile. Final ornaments and decorations are created by the use of puncheons. The artist does not need any stencils. All decorations are individual, hand made and all objects are unique.<sup>21)</sup>

The most popular place for the production of Tuareg jewellery is Agadez (Republic Niger, West Sahara). There live and work the best smith clans of the desert. Their style combines traditional types with modern patterns and designs. The work is an example of traditional ornament art mixed with influences from the techniques of African, Arab, Jewish or Mediterranean artisans and ancient Phoenician symbolism.<sup>22)</sup> Tuareg women especially use all kinds of jewellery in their daily lives: collies, pendants, earrings, fingerings and bracelets. The jewellery is often made of shells, glass, leather, wood or metal that has a decorative and magical character and protects against the “evil eye” and desert spirits.<sup>23)</sup> As already mentioned, one of the most popular designs of a Tuareg craft object is a cross, a triangle and a semicircle. In general, all pieces are made and decorated in geometrical patterns. The origin of the cross shape in Tuareg crafts was discussed between the Europeans who came to the Sahara in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. Some of them tried to interpret it as a Christian symbol. But this was an incorrect assumption – the Tuareg were never Christians and never used Christian religious shapes. The Tuareg cross shape has different origins, which will be analysed in the following passage.

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<sup>20)</sup> “Silver which has been made out of old silver coins.”: Zöhler (1938: 118).

<sup>21)</sup> Gabus (1982: 326–328).

<sup>22)</sup> Corb (1954: 116–117).

<sup>23)</sup> Ougouag-Kezzal (1969: 352).



## MEANING AND SYMBOLISM IN THE DESIGN OF CROSS TALISMANS

There exist 21 variants of Tuareg crosses. The most well-known, among the Tuareg and Europeans alike is the so-called Agadez Cross, the ultimate symbol for protection. Tuareg women often wear diverse versions of those pendants at the same time. It is typically placed around the neck, as decoration for hair dress, as earrings or fixed to the clothing. The basic design of the cross consists of the lower part, created out of three components of which the external ends extend in different directions, and the upper part, in the form of a circle. The whole construction evokes the shape of two triangles, which are then aligned at their longest sides, resulting in a route – a form which often appears in the design of Tuareg amulets and jewellery.<sup>24)</sup> In the decorations of leather and wood-work those ornaments are known to have several magical, mystical and decorative functions. (Fig. 9)

There have been several attempts at the interpretation of the meaning of the cross in the research of European scientists and writers: Jean Gabus states, that the cross might be a symbol of masculinity. Gerhard Göttler interprets it as a kind of shape rooted in the beliefs of the old forefather's. Wolfgang Creyaufmüller sees the cross as an ancient Egyptian symbol of both genders, with four cardinal points and the signs of the planets Venus and Mercury. Ibrahim Al-Kauni mentions the role of the symbol of the ancient Phoenician female Goddess Tanit, who is also known among the Tuareg as the Goddess of Mother Earth and nature. Helene Hagan mentions the cross in the context of the word for love "Ta-Rah" in Tamashek, the syllables of which in Tifinak build a "+" and "o" together. Christian travellers such as Heinrich Barth, tried to find a religious meaning of the Agadez Cross, but although the nomads had contact with other religions, it is not imaginable, according to their history, that they were ever Christians or used signs of Christian faith.

The most probable analysis of the meaning of the Agadez Cross is an interpretation which comes close to traditional Tuareg beliefs. On one hand, the letter "t" (Tifinak "+") is a cross itself, and is also a suffix for the feminine grammatical form,<sup>25)</sup> so it can symbolise the female. According to the nomad's idea of the universe, nothing can exist all alone – opposites and the balance between them is one of the main themes of Tuareg beliefs. Therefore, to bring together

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<sup>24)</sup> Gabus (1982: 447).

<sup>25)</sup> Göttler (1984: 92).

the aspect of man and woman in that case seems to be reasonable. On the other hand, the tribes study cosmology and navigate by observing the constellations of the planets in the night. It is also acceptable to think that they use planet symbols as destination signs on the jewellery. The meaning of the triangle is also important as Ibrahim Al-Kauni accentuates: "Seine Dreieckgestalt. ... Hinweis der Göttin Tannit. Es war ihr Zeichen."<sup>26</sup> Among the Tuareg this is the symbol of the Goddess Tanit, who protects them and shows them the right way in difficult situations. In the case of the circle, the main interpretation is that it is the ultimate protecting symbol against the "evil eye" – a phenomenon which is known not only among the nomads.<sup>27</sup> To provide a summary of the possible meanings of the cross, it can be said that according to the mystical and magical faith and the knowledge of the powers of nature, these kinds of amulets and ornaments can symbolise the four cardinal points of the world, the four phases of the moon, the universe, nature, God and the genders. But besides all that, the composition of triangles and geometrical shapes, has the main purpose of protection against the influences of the "Kef Esuf", ruin and the "evil eye".

#### SYMBOLIC FUNCTION AND MEANING OF THE ORNAMENTS

Geometrical symbols on the boxes for hidden amulets and those on the visual talismans have a similar significance as magical notes, plant roots, shells, and blessings and sayings from the Koran etc. The decorations are always created with lines, figures, and points by keeping a significant symmetry. The combination of several symbols can reveal special characters. Single dots as well as circles can help against the "evil eye" and can symbolise the Tuareg drums called Tenéré, the sound of which keeps foul spirits away, and which can also present the sun.<sup>28</sup> Other combinations of dots and lines can symbolise animal tracks in the desert or foot prints in the sand.<sup>29</sup> Roots of those possible interpretations of the marks can be seen in the Tuareg people's traditional nomadic way of living,

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<sup>26</sup> "It's a triangle sign...The symbol of Goddess Tanit. It was her symbol.": Al-Kauni (1997: 78).

<sup>27</sup> Gabus (1982: 451).

<sup>28</sup> Loughran (1984: 167–193).

<sup>29</sup> Völnagel 2007.

in which caravan trade or hunting expeditions required a good orientation in the terrain.

Parallel, straight and waved lines can be seen as water, the magical function of which is to wash away disease from humans and animals during healing rituals.<sup>30)</sup> Three lines put together to form a triangle have the meanings previously mentioned. The alphabet can symbolise magical sayings and can be used in so-called Islamic magical squares.<sup>31)</sup> The blacksmith's initials in Tamashek letters are also sometimes present on the back of a piece of jewellery. A popular ornamental motive is a combination of lines and triangles called "sandals of the Prophet" and have on the one hand a protective function against bad influences and on the other hand can show the social rank, wealth and prestige of a person in society, as Jean Gabus observed: "Les sandales paraissent représenter bénédiction d'abord, protection, puis richesse, prestige, rang social."<sup>32)</sup> Desert animals are also important for the decorations of the objects.<sup>33)</sup> Ornaments made of lines and points can show animal footprints, or symbolise a special animal such as a gecko or a chameleon.<sup>34)</sup>

Each symbol in the Tuareg culture has its own fixed mystical and magical meaning according to the Tuareg way of life, traditions, and beliefs. Hartmunt Fähndrich writes, that everything has a meaning in the desert – each grain of sand, each plant, each hill: "Jedes Sandkorn, jede Pflanze, jedes Tier, jeder Hügel ... hat eine bestimmte Bedeutung."<sup>35)</sup> This idea also implies that some animal marks on the objects are provided just for the Tuareg hunters, the figures of planets just for caravan traders or other symbols just for women. In the Tuareg faith, the character of an animal is transmitted from an amulet to its owner. For example, the footprints of a desert fennec etched onto an amulet, can give the hunter the speed and cleverness of a fox. The symbols of an antelope can bring foresightedness, and those of a chameleon a silent motion. The symbolic footsteps of a camel or a jackal can give the owner of such a talisman good orientation skills in the terrain, one of the most important elements for survival in the Sahara. Without those skills, it can become dangerous if one fails to find

<sup>30)</sup> Cesco (1971: 146).

<sup>31)</sup> Mommersteeg (1990: 63–76).

<sup>32)</sup> "Sandals seem to represent blessings, protection and wealth, prestige and social status.": Gabus (1982: 454).

<sup>33)</sup> Rybiński (1999: 127).

<sup>34)</sup> Creyaufmüller (1998: 120).

<sup>35)</sup> "Each corn of sand, each plant, each animal, each hill has its own specific meaning...": Fähndrich (2003: 17).

the right pass or misses a water hole – death can result. Furthermore, other ornaments which are used primarily by girls and women protect them from female disorders and can also help find a good partner or fall in love. Another kind of amulet is given to children to protect them from affliction and desert Jinns.

Summing up the function and meanings of the ornaments, one might say, that all symbols have a specific significance. The way in which they are composed and the arrays of lines and points have a unique symmetry. Although not every style is used in all parts of Tuareg territory and not all functions are based on the same point of view – they are all made for special purposes. It is noticeable, that the origins of each symbol are always close to the traditions and beliefs of each tribe. In Tuareg society the most well-known and effective talismans are those with protective powers against the “evil eye” and supernatural spirits. They appear in every phase of life and in all social standings of the nomads. Another significant point about the meaning of symbols in Tuareg art is the ever-changing nature of life and the conditions of the tribe. The blacksmith’s work adapts new modern designs especially for the jewellery and younger artisans sometimes do not know all the meanings of the ornaments even if they use them to decorate their pieces. Old smiths convey their knowledge to the younger generations, producing a modern style of Tuareg crafts which combines traditional design with modern influences. In the case of mystical and magical beliefs immune to rapid change, the original talismans designs will exist as long as the Tuareg faith and knowledge of forefathers exists.

## TUAREG ART IN THE MODERN WORLD

Today only a small group of the Tuareg still live as nomads in the desert and the Sahel. Most of the others have settled in villages and towns. This latter group also uses modern goods such as cars, cell phones, TV or internet etc. and is able to participate as much as possible in the modern world and go to school and take a variety of jobs. The settled people’s level of participation in modern society depends on the politics of the country in which they live and also on their own disposition. A general problematic situation is difficult to illustrate. After colonisation, the political systems changed in North Africa and the Tuareg became strangers among the citizens. The nomads, who have their own political system and hierarchy structures, now have to subordinate their society to the new system. A few writers see the root of the problem in

the lack of material or economic agreements, some in the traditional way of life which the Tuareg want to keep as far as possible, in racism or in the Tuareg and regional history.<sup>36)</sup> Despite these difficulties, the nomads find new ways to earn money and feed their families. One of the new areas for the Tuareg is to work with tourists of the Sahara. Blacksmiths have also recognised that their profession and especially their jewellery have become popular among the tourists and also in the Western world.

The interest in Tuareg culture has increased with the development of tourist activities in the desert. Besides regular tours with Jeeps or camels, Tuareg music festivals and shows are organised for the benefit of visitors. Since these presentations are made especially for tourists, they emblematised not only Tuareg culture, but also those contents which foreigners expect. In literature some writers have mentioned the positive aspect of these festivals. According to these writers, the Tuareg actors can choose which presentations they perform for the guests and which ones they keep for their own celebrations. These shows can inspire the revitalisation of Tuareg's ethnic self-confidence. Other writers see the negative aspects of such touristic shows, believing that the nomads have given up their own culture and now seek ways to sell it.<sup>37)</sup> Both options are imaginable, but an analysis of the current situation shows, that even if they do sell their culture, the Tuareg people can survive. And Tuareg actors can still decide what they may show tourists in detail and what not. It is possible that the Tuareg have found a compromise for how to live their traditional lifestyle in the modern world and improve their economic situation at the same time.

Today, the Tuareg produce their traditional crafts for tourists and foreign markets as well as for their own use. Especially since 1990, Tuareg jewellery has become more widely distributed to the Western world. The blacksmiths have recognised that their new Western clients buy pieces which suit their taste and aesthetics. These buyers do not of course expect magical or mystical symbols and do not need protection against desert spirits and Jinns, but they do want something special, exotic and unique. Europeans like to have the impression that by buying something from the Third World, that they are helping the artists somehow and that they are purchasing something "authentic", "traditional" and "ethnic".<sup>38)</sup> These products are still produced in the traditional

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<sup>36)</sup> Claudot-Hawad (2007: 11).

<sup>37)</sup> Scholze (2009: 416).

<sup>38)</sup> Mahoney (2012: 186 ff).

Tuareg way and the decorations, material and the design is as far as possible the same. Just a few things were changed for the foreign and tourist market: pendants now often have an extra loop on the upper side or a chain of small glass pearls to make them easier to wear for the Western buyers. Usually the Tuareg use leather straps to wear the jewellery around the neck. Today more semi-precious stones or coloured glass pieces are used to decorate the crafts because the Tuareg artisans discovered that such pendants, earrings and rings sell better in other countries. Crafts made of other materials like leather, wood, stone etc. are not as successful in the Western market. This is on the one hand because the smiths discovered that modern clients prefer jewellery and on the other hand that traditional crafts are not just less popular, but also frequently too large and heavy to be transported by plane to Europe. In regional tourist markets however, these crafts can be bought. A few other elements have been changed in the design of the handicrafts: the leather bags are smaller than the traditional ones, the base of the boxes (which are in the Sahara usually curved so they can be placed in the sand), are now flat and other new kinds of products have been developed. The blacksmith now make objects which they do not use themselves, such as ashtrays, lighter cases, key chains or barrettes. These so-called “hybrid” products fuse traditional patterns, decoration forms and original methods of manufacture with modern styles and are made just for tourists and the foreign market.<sup>39)</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Although the life of the Tuareg people has changed a great deal, they have preserved as much as possible of their ancient traditions, rituals, beliefs, religious views from pre-Islamic times and the magical and mystical views of their forefathers. Those beliefs and traditions are diffused from generation to generation in the legends, poetry and songs of the women and the blacksmiths. These beliefs are particularly prevalent in the crafts: mystical and magical symbols and forms are the main motifs used in the production of basic commodities and amulets, talismans or jewellery for special occasions. All symbols have a specific significance. It is noticeable, that they are made for specific purposes and functions and that the origins are always close to the traditions and beliefs of each tribe. In the whole Tuareg society the most well-known and effective talismans

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<sup>39)</sup> Davis (1999: 485–501).

are those with protective powers against the “evil eye” and supernatural spirits. They appear in every phase of life and in all social standings of the nomads. Another significant point about the meaning of symbols in art is the changing life and the different circumstances.

Today, the Tuareg produce traditional crafts for tourists and foreign markets as well as for their own use. The blacksmiths have found a way to exist in modernity without losing their own origins. They function between two worlds and even if they are sometimes criticised for choosing to “sell” their own culture, they play an important role in its survival. In making jewellery for other cultural and ethnic groups in the traditional way, the artisans become, in my opinion, ambassadors of their own culture. Of course the specific meanings of detailed designs and mystical and magical symbols and the ancient beliefs may change or disappear. However it is conceivable that the traditional crafts and the skills of the artisans, who make them will survive as long as there exists a balance between the supply and demand of these objects in regional markets, in the Tuareg society and in global markets. The changes seen in modern Tuareg society do not necessarily mean the complete destruction of the nomad’s culture. However, there is a need to maintain the balance between the conformation to a new frame of conditions and the Tuareg traditions – not necessarily an unbending conservation of old beliefs but a cooperation – or at least coexistence with modernity.

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Fig. 1. Cross shaped jewelry, white metal, Bilma and Zinder, 21<sup>st</sup> century, private collection



Fig. 2. Bag made of goat skin, Algeria, 21<sup>st</sup> century, private collection



Fig. 3. Kabohon – silver, carnelian stone, Niger, 21<sup>st</sup> century, private collection



Fig. 4. Khomeissa – goat skin, animal bones, Algeria, 21<sup>st</sup> century, private collection



Fig. 5. Shashat – silver, Niger, 21<sup>st</sup> century, private collection



Fig. 6. Tenfuk – silver, red glass, Niger, 21<sup>st</sup> century, private collection



Fig. 7. Timia – silver, Mali, 21<sup>st</sup> century, private collection



Fig. 8. Finger rings – silver, Niger, 21<sup>st</sup> century, private collection



Fig. 9. Agadez Crosses – silver, Mali and Algeria, 21<sup>st</sup> century, private collection



Fig. 10. Tuareg and Berber necklaces on an African market in Berlin in 2012