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## Tuareg Jewelry benefits African tribe

Lorraine Sanders, Special to The Chronicle  
Sunday, March 7, 2010

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Russell Yip / The Chronicle

The online store Tuareg Jewelry sells engraved silver jewelry like these bracelets.

It's not every day that a vacation souvenir changes a life, much less the lives of a community half a world away. But that's exactly what happened when [San Francisco](#) attorney Ann Elston's husband, Larry Lossing, returned from a 1997 trip to Niger with a silver pendant in hand.

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Lossing purchased the pendant for his wife from silversmith Elhadji Koumama. Lossing and Koumama kept in touch, and in 2001, the couple invited Koumama to the Bay Area for a visit they hoped would help him find the new buyers he badly needed to sustain his family's generations-old jewelry business, crippled as tourism in Niger dwindled in the [1990s](#).

### IMAGES



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"Some years later, we learned that he had arrived without a single cent in his pocket," recalls Elston, 62, of the day Koumama landed at San Francisco International Airport with two changes of clothes, a supply of jewelry samples and little else.

Though Elston did not know it at the time, that three-week visit would turn into a lasting friendship and the launch of Tuareg Jewelry, an online store she runs to sell fine silver adornments made by approximately 40 artisans related to Koumama by birth or marriage.

Later that year, Elston traveled to Niger and was immediately taken with the Tuareg, a Saharan ethnic group often identified by the indigo-dyed veils men wear to cover their heads and much of their faces.

"They have such a sense of family, community and culture. That's what's important to them, and they are among the poorest people in the world. ... That was a thing that really struck me," Elston says.

Elston is far from the only one interested in African and African-inspired apparel and accessories these days. From bright geometric prints to bold stacks of bangles, spring fashion is awash in the influence of [Africa](#). But what may be a spring trend for the

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fashion-minded is, for Elston and the Koumama family, a life-changing collaboration.

During her initial visit to Niger, Elston purchased a plot of land in the town of Agadez, built a house and was soon spending several months there each year, with Lossing joining whenever the law firm they own and operate together could part with them at the same time.

## Mount Kilimanjaro

Long an avid traveler - she'd reached the summit of [Mount Kilimanjaro](#) in 1983 and lived in Japan - Elston was no stranger to adventure or foreign lands. But her experience in Niger was different.

"I had been practicing law for 20-some years, and I was literally working seven days a week. It wasn't unusual for me to go home at midnight on Sunday, and I was burned out," she says.

Scaling back work at the law firm and sinking hours into Tuareg Jewelry on a volunteer basis, Elston launched a Web site in 2002.

"All the jewelry is made by hand according to the old traditions, and the design is very unique," Koumama said via e-mail.

Each one-of-a-kind piece is handcrafted of fine silver - purer, softer and less prone to tarnishing than sterling - by creating a clay mold from a wax prototype fired using a goatskin bellows. Artisans hand-engrave intricate motifs on pieces featuring ebony, onyx, carnelian, glass and, occasionally, copper and brass accents.

Koumama's family designs and makes the pieces, which are often based on jewelry worn by the Tuareg.

"The tradition of the Tuareg jewelry is ancient. It is not only for the looks, but each piece of jewelry and the engravings have some meaning. It carries a signification. For example, a piece or a certain stone can protect the carrier from evil," Koumama explains.

## Quran verses

There are hollow silver amulets traditionally made to encase gris gris, or Quran verses thought to offer protection from evil spirits. Versions of houmaissa pendants, also known as the Hand of Fatima and given by Tuareg mothers to daughters when they reach womanhood, feature a series of hand-engraved triangles and diamond shapes.

"The craftsmanship is just beyond. (The jewelry) has its own sense of history and design that's just beautiful," says Linda Bonnett, who purchased her first piece from Elston a decade ago and has remained a customer ever since.

Bonnett enjoys the versatility of her necklaces and reports being just as likely to pair them with sweatshirts as she is with more formal attire. There's also the allure of wearing accessories with a meaningful backstory.

"I'm not a jewelry person, and I wear these pieces all the time. And when I wear them, I have to tell the story," Bonnett says.

Elston handles the Web site, photography, gift fairs, trunk shows and events. All of the proceeds from the company go to supporting the Koumama family artisans.



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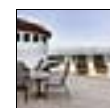
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"The company allows me to create jobs for the people. With the money we earn, we also support, help and feed our community and the poor," Koumama says.

In 2009, gross sales reached \$160,000. That's a welcome sum in a country whose per capita income in the [CIA World Factbook](#) ranked 187th in 2009. Compare that to North Korea, ranked 154, and Haiti, No. 169 in the rankings.

But Koumama and his family are hardly the only ones benefiting from the arrangement.

Says Elston:

"I've gone from being singularly focused on the practice of law, always overworked, always stressed out, to a much richer life. ... I don't have children; now I have lots of children."

### Where to buy

**Cantor Arts Center Bookshop:** [Stanford University](#), 328 Lomita at Museum Way, Stanford; (650) 725-2775.

**De Young Museum Store:** [Golden Gate Park](#), 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, S.F.; (415) 750-3503.

**San Francisco Opera Shop:** 301 Van Ness Ave., S.F.; (415) 565-3229. Open during performances only.

**Online:** [www.tuaregjewelry.com](http://www.tuaregjewelry.com).

*E-mail comments to [style@sfchronicle.com](mailto:style@sfchronicle.com).*

*This article appeared on page **N - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle*

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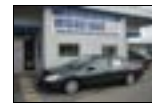


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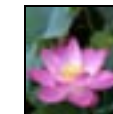


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