

HADIJA'S VISIT TO THE CANTOR ARTS CENTER AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY

Elhadji Koumama's stepmother, Hadija, the widow of the famous silversmith Mohamed Koumama, stepped off an Air France plane in San Francisco on May 26 for her first glimpse of the world outside of Niger's Sahara and Sahel. She made the trip alone and managed to change planes in the huge Paris airport even though she speaks only Tomashek and doesn't read any language.



Hadija is about 45 years old. (Birthdays are not important to the Tuaregs and few of them know their exact age.) She was about 18 when she married

Mohamed, 50 years her senior. They were married for 20 years and have 2 daughters, Fatima and Garfa. He died in 2004.

Hadija was here to demonstrate the art of leatherworking at the Cantor Arts Center exhibition "The Art of Being Tuareg." She is a skilled leatherworker who makes elaborate and colorful bags. Some are tiny tobacco pouches. Others are very large bags used to decorate camels for festivals. Visitors were fascinated to watch her do the intricate cutting and stitching by hand. She created the designs using natural dyes she brought with her that she applied with the back of a knife blade.

Hadija thought that almost everything here was fun. One of her favorite outings was a ride in Larry's old red sports car along the Pacific Coast Highway where she could see the waves



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crashing against the rocks. She found shells on the beach to take to her little grandson. Food was a slight challenge as she doesn't like chicken or fish and being a devout Muslim does not eat pork. Fresh fruits and vegetables were a treat. She found sitting in a chair, especially at the dining table, strange and a bit uncomfortable as she always sits on the ground back home. The foggy Sausalito mornings were the coldest she had ever experienced.

Hadija sold some of her leatherwork. Her dream is to start a woman's cooperative to make leather bags. The next step is to work with a designer on styles that will sell in the western market. One part of that task is to locate a source of leather that is not cured the traditional way as it has an odor that many people find objectionable. Hadija took home scraps and small hides of very fine suede that were donated by a woman who makes clothing for an exclusive San Francisco store. We will report on that project as it progresses. Eventually we hope to carry a line of her work on the website and sell it in stores.

INQUIRING MINDS

[Where do the Tuaregs get the stones and ebony for the jewelry?](#)

In past centuries pilgrims to the Hajj brought stones back from Mecca and traded them to the Tuareg silversmiths. Some of the stones, especially the red agates and carnelians, still come from the Middle East and are sold in the Grande Marche in Niamey. Now many of the stones used in Koumama jewelry are purchased at the Tucson Gem Show and other gemstone fairs and taken to Niger. The quality and variety of stones is greater here and the prices are more reasonable. For example, lapis from Afghanistan is almost impossible to find in Niamey. We have found a good supplier for it here.

The use of ebony in the jewelry is decades rather than centuries old. The Koumamas get most of their ebony from Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta). They buy broken masks and also chunks of wood. Sometimes Elhadji has difficulty getting it in the sizes and quantities that he needs.

The Koumamas use ebony in

three ways. The lovely silver and ebony bracelets are carved from solid pieces of wood that are roughly cut into a bracelet shape and then filed to get the smooth finish. The artisans carefully save the wood filings and mix them with an epoxy to fill in the grooves on some bracelets and pendants to create the patterns. They also cut very thin squares of ebony and layer them with silver in some pieces such as the dome ring with ebony stripes, the trim on the letter openers and ebony and silver stick earrings.

If you have an "Inquiring Minds" question that you would like for us to answer in a future newsletter, please send us an email at the address below:

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