

INADAN MEN CREATE THE JEWELRY

Only Inadan men, a special class of Tuaregs, make jewelry. Inadan is loosely translated as "smith," people who work with fire, metals and other materials. Traditionally an Inadan family was associated with a particular noble and supplied all of the things that the nobles needed: jewelry, camel saddles, spears, swords, leather bags. Today most of the Inadan live in Agadez and other towns and villages in Niger and Mali.



Jewelry is made as it has been for centuries with simple hand tools. Men sit on the ground before small fires. Bellows made of a whole goat skin superheat the charcoal to melt silver. Many pieces, including the traditional "crosses," are made by the lost wax method. The design is carved in softened bees' wax and covered with clay mixed with donkey dung to make a mold. After drying in the sun the mold goes on the fire. At



just the right instant the wax is poured out and red hot silver is poured into the mold. The mold is then dropped into a bowl of cool water to break it. A very rough piece of silver jewelry emerges. After much filing it is smooth enough to be engraved with a tool that looks like a finely sharpened screwdriver using the trembling hand technique. The work bench is a square two inch square anvil pounded into the ground.

Finally it is rubbed with a mixture of charcoal, acid and water to highlight the designs and polished to a soft bright sheen.



Pieces such as the cuff bracelets are made from a flat sheet of silver. Molten silver is poured into a trough to create a bar

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which is then pounded flat and shaped. Most motifs are geometric. Some have meanings, such as a circle with a dot which is a chameleon and a triangular shape that stands for a jackal.



INQUIRING MINDS

No silver is mined in Niger. Most of the silver used in the Koumama family jewelry comes from a Hausa trader in Kano, northern Nigeria. Elhadji has been buying from the same family for many years. Because silver is valuable and shipping is problematic someone usually makes the two day truck trip to deliver the package. Sterling silver is .925% silver. The silver used in the Koumama jewelry is refined to .99% which makes it softer so that the artisans can do very fine detailed engraving which is not possible with a harder metal.

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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