

The Knowable and the Unknowable in Ethnographic Encounters: A Case of Sorcery, Rumor, and Gossip among Tuareg in Northern Niger

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2022.31> © Ústav etnológie a sociálnej antropológie SAV, v. v. i.
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This article explores issues of knowledge production, its limits, and uncertainty and suspicion in ethnographic field research through the lens of what anthropologists conventionally call “sorcery” beliefs and practices involving a love target, its treatment, and its aftermath of “shapeshifting”, occurring in the social context of gossip, rumor, and suspicion among the Tuareg, sometimes called Kel Tamajaq after their language, in Niger, West Africa. Sorcery, I show, provides a useful lens for exploring how gossip and rumor can reveal social critiques and ways in which a crisis is handled. In these processes, matters of “truth” and “ignorance” are complex, thereby allowing scope for broader discussion of ontology. The focus is on an unexpected, serendipitous field encounter with sorcery similar, though not identical to the re-directing of power of Islamic objects, words, and writing in some other African Muslim communities, with emotions awakened and then cast away in a puzzling outcome. The setting of the sorcery incident and rumors surrounding it is a town in northern Niger, in a household compound where this anthropologist stumbled by chance during longterm field research, and was also drawn into treatment for this alleged sorcery. Many Tuareg, who are Muslim, semi-nomadic, and traditionally ranked, have experienced crises and social upheavals: these include droughts, locust-invasions, colonial and post-colonial political violence, religious debates, coerced settling of nomads in oases and towns, labor migration, refugee flight, and health-care inequities. I ask, in the context of sorcery, how do Tuareg make sense of these crises in their society through gossip and rumor? The analysis explores how far and in what ways sorcery and responses to it, like conspiracy theories, allow the creation of multiple narratives about political tensions. More broadly, how does the ethnographer make sense of ontological uncertainty? This analysis is inspired by, but also hopefully builds on approaches to ontological ambiguity and uncertainty and approaches to the role of gossip and rumor in reviewing “reality” from different sense modalities and philosophical assumptions. The challenge here is to interpret events and avoid, or at least minimize imposing the

observer's own concepts of "truth" onto endogenous knowledge and its local expressions.

Key words: sorcery, rumor, gossip, ontology, Africa, Tuareg

How to cite: Rasmussen, S. (2022). The Knowable and the Unknowable in Ethnographic Encounters: A Case of Sorcery, Rumor, and Gossip among Tuareg in Northern Niger. *Slovenský národopis*, 70(3), 392–410. <https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2022.31>

Introduction: Theoretical Framework and Cultural Setting

Rumor, Gossip, and Sorcery

The topic called "sorcery" in the discipline of anthropology, conventionally defined as the destructive use of esoteric knowledge and power – invites, indeed demands reflection on unexpected "routes" to discovery. Specifically, the focus here is on a chance encounter in northern Niger with a sorcery incident, a ritual aimed to make someone fall in love with the instigator, its cure by an Islamic scholar, and subsequent events, as informed by Tuareg interlocutors' rumors and gossip. I make several arguments in this article. This incident of Tuareg love-magic sorcery on one level reveals many rural-based residents' fears of outside spaces' (of desert, and more recently, town) dangers for women especially, who travel away from their tent, in nomadic cultural mores, the center of civilization, and hence need protection. This attitude stands in tension with most Tuareg women's generally high social prestige, independence, and non-seclusion encouraged in local cultural interpretations of Islam.¹ Thus, relevant here is ambiguity in male-female social relationships; for since these are characterized by much free, informal interaction, flirting, and courtship prior to and sometimes outside marriage, these relations may be perceived as involving merely friendship, or as more "romantic" attachments, hidden because of disapproval from Islamist piety movements and threats of violence from Islamist militants. Also relevant here are relations between individuals of different social backgrounds in this traditionally-ranked, but changing society, with rural and urban differences increasingly important in creating emergent new hierarchical class distinctions in modernity.²

1 Notwithstanding regional variations and changes, most Tuareg women still enjoy alternatives to secular state and Qur'anic-influenced legal arrangements, can inherit property independently, initiate divorce, travel, and visit and receive visits from unrelated males. See Ag Erless (2010) and Rasmussen (2015, 2019).

2 Until mid-twentieth century, most Tuareg, predominantly rural and nomadic, combined herding with camel caravanning, oasis gardening, gathering, and artisanry, with formerly-inherited occupations in ranked, endogamous social categories based on descent. Aristocratic descent groups (Tamajaq *imajeghen*) herded large livestock, monopolized weapons, and controlled the caravan trade. Tributaries (*imghad*) raided and traded for them. Subjugated groups of varying subordinate statuses (*ighawalen*) owed crops to militarily dominant nobles. War captives (*iklan*) were owned, and until liberation in the twentieth century, performed most manual labor. Formerly, servile descent was

The Tuareg case, I argue, reveals gossip as speech act and also social action during which intersubjective meanings are constructed, and can be used as a political strategy to advance interests and to persuade others in certain contexts. Many believe that words have power to cause what they evoke, recalling J. L. Austin's (1962) concept of the performative utterance in felicity conditions, and also recalling Rabo's (2021) observations about conspiracy theories as addressing fundamental questions about the presence of good and evil, regardless of their "truth value" or not, and are not only about what is not known but also what one cannot forget. Like conspiracy theories, gossip and rumors for many Tuareg, I show, articulate alternative and contradictory interpretations of cultural experience and social ties in crises surrounding changing and ambiguous gender constructs and social relationships. Hopefully, these findings build on studies of contemporary cosmologies showing "magical", "mystical" forces in local and global modernities (Comaroff, Comaroff, 1993; West, Sanders, *Eds.*, 2003). More broadly, the alternative knowledge and viewpoints expressed in gossip and rumors also provide insights into the tension between individual strategy and collective rules, an important concern in anthropology.

Gossip offers the anthropologist a means of calibrating norms more dynamically within a social group: on the one hand, subordinate groups may use gossip to undercut the power of dominant ones, but nonetheless, dominant groups on the other hand may use gossip to stigmatize and oppress subordinates. In the Tuareg case, I show, this process moves in both directions, since there are class differences in allegations of gossip's truth value. Formerly subordinate groups in Tuareg society, especially descendants of enslaved peoples, are stereotyped as gossiping more than persons of elite aristocratic social background; these latter should ideally avoid speaking too directly or openly. Yet elites are also often accused of instigating powerful sorcery in more subtle, hidden ways, and take rumors about pre-colonial subordinate groups' perceived special skills as sorcery practitioners very seriously and may go to them to instigate sorcery. Gossip and rumor surrounding sorcery therefore reveal complex multiple processes of re-entrenching, reorganizing, and challenging power relationships.

Yenkovich (1977) observed that gossip is a form of sociable interaction, which depends on the strategic management of information through the creation of others as moral characters in talk. As a speech act, (Austin, 1962), gossip enables people to express their community's cultural mores and beliefs concerning ideal, proper, and moral behavior and also, to influence behavior without risking direct confrontation. Yet gossip, I argue, is also more than an act of an individual speaking; it is also a social

considered shameful, but recently, there have been assertions of pride among some descendants of slaves, with supportive civic organizations. Rural smith/artisans (*imaden*) continue to manufacture tools, jewelry, serve as go-betweens, and preside over nobles' rites of passage, in some regions, also singing praise-songs with critical social commentaries (Rasmussen, 2013). Islamic scholars/marabouts (*ineslemen* or "marabouts") interpret the Qur'an. Ecological disasters and colonial and post-colonial state policies have propelled many Tuareg into Saharan and Sahelian towns.

action constructed intersubjectively, involving widely-perceived, culturally-defined intentions and effects. Gossip is also more than a verbal text; actions (in the Tuareg case, manipulation of objects infused with powers) also come into play. Some scholars (Peek, Yankah, *Eds.*, 1997; Gluckman, 1963) argue that gossip enforces collective norms, and strengthens the group. I contend, however, that this is not always so; the Tuareg data suggest that gossip may reveal, cause, or perpetuate “cracks” and tensions in their traditionally rural and nomadic social system that was once, in the not-too-distant past, stratified on the basis of descent, endogamous marriage, and inherited specialized occupations.

Other studies (Comaroff, Comaroff, 1993; Drażkiewicz, 2020) have observed that whenever there is lack of formal or “official” information, knowledge gaps will always be filled with unofficial and covert information and practices. The issue becomes, who is trusted for knowledge, and who is not, and why? Drażkiewicz (2020: 23) in a study of gossip among international aid workers observes that gossip “worked like a compass, enabling aid workers to navigate the maze of actors and bureaucracies with confidence” (Drażkiewicz, 2020: 24). Gossip was an essential tool of the trade, a means of grasping at the ever-elusive organizational totality, a “technology of the imagination”, a way of bringing to mind what is not entirely visible to the senses. Drażkiewicz (2020) defines rumor is an expression of belief that arises in ambiguous situations where there is little or no reliable information on events that are important to a community or organization. Shibutani (1966) argues that rumors are the cooperative construction of meaning through recurrent communication during uncertainty. The fewer the reliable or trustworthy facts available, the greater the role of the group’s unconscious fears and anxieties in their interpretation of events.

There are some parallels between the predicaments of aid workers studied by Drażkiewicz (2020), and of ethnographers studying sorcery (Bond, 2002; Bubandt, 2014; Favret-Saada, 1981; Stoller, 1989). Both must comb a variety of sources, stitching together gossip, rumor, and more empirically-observed knowledge sources. The Tuareg social context of sorcery, like an aid organization, is a world where information is crucial yet always insufficient, and gossip and rumors are tools linking what is known and official with what is hidden and unofficial, thereby heightening its effectiveness in its target, but also creating the conditions of success in its treatment and cure. In effect, sorcery, rumor, and gossip, in both verbal and non-verbal forms, “sow the seeds” of their counterforces, for example, sorcery provokes unbewitching, but also the possibilities of its endless reiteration in gossip and rumor.

The approach in this article is serendipitous ethnography, a qualitative method exploring unexpected, less-structured intersubjective processes and experiences, moving beyond textual analysis to interactions and reflections in the field encounter, with anthropologist’s situation included in the construction of ethnographic knowledge (Borneman, Hammoudi, *Eds.*, 2009; Hazan, Herzog, *Eds.*, 2012). Insights in the present article derive from both structured and unstructured methods in this anthropologist’s recent and longer-term immersive field research and residences over

many years in rural and urban Tuareg communities.³ Hopefully, this approach illuminates rumor and gossip (not the same practice, but closely related ones, often interwoven), and rumor and gossip, in turn, illuminate sorcery's knowledge ambiguity in several ways: first, by offering nuanced alternatives to either extreme of "metaphorical" versus "real" explanations of "otherworldly", "occult" ritual powers, and secondly, by showing how culturally-distinct local modernities remind anthropologists to caution against assuming a single global "modernity". Local modernities, like modernities everywhere, respond to both local and global social, economic, and religious forces (Jackson, 1990; McIntosh, 2009; Soares, 2005; West, 2007). The Tuareg data suggest how sorcery and rumors and gossip surrounding it become moral commentaries informed by widely shared, though not always consensual or unanimously-held cultural assumptions and historical experiences which respond to wider global forces in times of crisis: social upheavals, political conflict, and religious debate. Yet the ambiguity in sorcery, with perpetrator, victim, and healer not always distinct, also reflects some indeterminacy and alternative forms of power and knowledge, in facing hegemonic, dominant forces with unequal power, as noted in rumor, gossip, and conspiracy theories (Drażkiewicz, 2020; Rabo, 2021; Shibutani, 1966; Stewart, Strathern, 2004).

Valuable anthropological works have analyzed the close connections between rumor, gossip, and sorcery (Favret-Saada, 1981; Stewart, Strathern, 2004; Weiss, 1996; West, Sanders, *Eds.*, 2003; West, 2007). As Stewart and Strathern (2004) point out, gossip and rumors, while distinct, both play an important part in the processes leading to accusations of "wrongdoing" which include sorcery and other transgressions. Also, even when sorcery ideas are not overtly at play, rumor and gossip may work as a covert form of stigmatizing against persons who are vulnerable to this – among the Tuareg, traditional and modern elites, as well as subordinates, are vulnerable in different ways to either becoming victims of sorcery, or to accusations of instigating sorcery, depending on social context. Both rumor and gossip, each in its own manner, allow people of diverse social backgrounds to speak to power indirectly and anonymously in times of crisis when there are upheavals in longstanding stratified relationships, but also enduring memories of the traditional forms these take that remain powerful in their potential to be invoked when advantageous.

Rumors of witchcraft or sorcery often signal political and economic turmoil and attempts by people to gain control over disruption that such upheavals bring. When people's insecurities and apprehensions over local and national politics grow, for

3 My methods included participant-observation, guided conversations, structured and unstructured interviews, collection and transcription of verbal art, including life history narratives, tales, plays, songs, and poetry. By serendipitous ethnography, the goal is not a solipsistic overemphasis on the ethnographer as an end in itself, but rather, to include, where relevant, the role of less structured methods in order to reflect on reciprocal knowledge construction by incorporating the situation of the ethnographer (for example, their gender, nationality, age, etc.) and their interaction with interlocutors and consultants into the ethnographic analysis.

example, so do rumors claiming that politicians or other persons use sorcery and witchcraft to accumulate power and wealth. Weiss in his ethnography of the Haya of Tanzania (Weiss, 1996) shows that Haya use rumors of blood-stealing and selling to explain rapid accumulation of wealth; for example, when a member of the community builds a new house, it is rumored that he acquired the money by selling stolen blood. These rumors suggest that the pursuit of wealth and power is always socially problematic, expressing the connections between bodies and commodities, semantic value and economic transactions, rural livelihoods and urban travels, as well as local subjectivities, experiences, and global events (Weiss, 1996: 219).

Moreover, the more information is controlled, the more it becomes an asset. Neoliberal regimes of “free market” competition, despite their discourses of ideal “freedom”, may hide more than they reveal, and often lead to feelings of suspicion and paranoia among those who compete for the limited resources. In Tuareg communities of Niger, an environment of privatization of the previously state-supported economy gives rise to suspicions among those in their changing society who compete for access to education, health, and business opportunities (Rasmussen, 2001). Also divisive are religious debates within the Muslim community concerning gender. There are more consumer products, but unequal access to them in neoliberal reforms since the mid-1980’s imposed by the World Bank and IMF (Bouman, 2003; Keough, Youngstedt, 2019), sometimes bringing new opportunities, but more often, inequalities, reversals of fortune, and for many, unemployment and poverty. Together, these forces constitute a crisis, with historical and contemporary dimensions.

Historical and Ethnographic Context

In Agadez, Niger, a multi-ethnic Saharan town with a large Tuareg (Tamajaq-speaking) population especially numerous in several neighborhoods, persons of diverse backgrounds widely recognize several varieties of what is called *ark eghaghel* or “sorcery” – literally “bad work”: for example, *togerchet*, also called *tehot* or evil eye, *awal* or words (often negative gossip), and *tezma* or the “flying” power of anger (Rasmussen, 2013). But these latter powers can be activated by individuals without a specialist, whereas sorcery requires a specialist.

Many Tuareg residents are Muslim, and semi-nomadic, with new social classes becoming superimposed onto pre-colonial social hierarchies in the past based on descent, with aristocratic, predominantly nomadic descent groups formerly at the top, militarily dominating groups of varying tributary, client, and servile statuses on oases. In the past, enslaved peoples of varying degrees of servitude, though owned and exploited in performing most domestic, herding, gardening, and caravanning labor, were often absorbed into Tuareg fictive kinship relationships with elite owners, the latter ideally obligated to care for them into advanced age – a practice followed by some and neglected by others. At mid-century, slavery was officially abolished in Niger. Today, Tuareg of diverse social backgrounds speak Tamajaq identify as Tuareg, and modern leaders urge them to identify on the basis of the Tamajaq language, though remnants and effects of older client and servile practices persist in some

regions (Bouman, 2003; Rasmussen, 2019; Rossi, 2018). Parents now attempt to arrange daughters' marriages, formerly endogamous, with wealthy men regardless of the latter's social backgrounds. Recent urban migrants still maintain close ties with their rural "home" villages and camps. Thus there are rapid, wide-ranging, and unpredictable social and economic mobilities, religious debates, and close cultural encounters.

(*Ark*) *echaghel*, (in some contexts, simply *echaghel*) was often translated to me as *la sorcellerie* in French. This is a generic category of action, and takes several forms. The type of sorcery in this article's central case study is called *mahiba*, approximately denoting, according to interlocutors, "love magic/sorcery", rumored to be very strong, its cure vulnerable to possible reinforcing by the instigator's counter-medicines. In addition to *mahiba*, love "potion" related-sorcery, there is also *borbor*, a type exercised by women. As a generic category of action, then, *ark echaghel* may apply (in agent and victim) to almost anyone, though persons in certain social categories, such as women and people with origins South of the Sahara (these latter called *Ikarkarwen*), are stereotyped as feared expert specialists one should consult if one wishes to target a victim. I heard *echaghel* mentioned in many conversations, usually in hushed, guarded tones and in private. Sorcery has enormous force sufficient to kill a human, even from a distance (Nicolaisen, 1961).

Like many others in the Sahara and Sahel, residents of Agadez and the surrounding Air Mountains have experienced droughts, locust-invasions, and state and non-state political, symbolic, and literal violence: colonial and post-colonial disruptions of trade, neo-liberal economic restructuring, Tuareg rebellions, militant Islamist insurgencies, and unemployment. Some have been propelled into labor migration, political exile, and refugee flight (Bourgeot, 1990, 1994; Kohl, 2009; Kohl, Fischer, *Eds.*, 2010; Lecocq, 2012).

Many Tuareg in Agadez combine or alternate occupations and residences between town and countryside, and still own property managed by relatives in the nearby Air Mountains. In more agropastoral rural communities, some have supplemented herding livestock with oasis gardening and market trading, and replaced camel caravans with trucks. Yet *ark echaghel* is neither new nor solely a response to modernity; for early accounts in Tuareg ethnography also mention this power (Aymard, 1911; Blanguernon, 1994 [1955]; Nicolaisen, 1961). Nor does *ark echaghel* belong to "popular" or "para-" Islamic knowledge, rather than orthodox Islam – itself a problematic binary. A few Islamic scholars who interpret the Qur'an can occasionally also practice malevolent sorcery, but most instead protect against or cure sorcery.

Islamic scholars (Tam. *ineslemen*), popularly called "marabouts", diagnose, divine, and heal with Qur'anic verses and amulets. Many of these non-organic conditions and their treatments, often involving psycho-social counseling, defy positivist empirical explanations. Most marabouts are very devout, respected, and tend to adhere to Sufi-influenced Tuareg cultural interpretations of Islam. Others are more controversial, influenced by *da'wa* Islamist piety movements, the latter mostly

non-violent, though a few more militant Salafist jihadists have entered some groups through marriage and clan ties (Rasmussen, 2019; Soares, 2013). Non-Qur'anic healing specialists, variously called *bokaye* (pl. Hausa) or *imaswaden*, (pl. Tam.), conduct divination and counseling, using cowrie shells, perfumes, and dreaming in contracts with non-Qur'anic spirits of the wild called *Kel Essuf*. Attitudes toward these non-Qur'anic specialists, many of whom come from marginal groups, are ambivalent, and they are often suspected of *ark echaghel*.

Alternating armed conflicts and peace accords have left some regions of northern Niger in turmoil, bringing doubt, fear, and unpredictability.⁴ Soldiers, dissidents, refugees, migrants, jihadists, alleged “bandits”(some in rumor, others in fact), and unknown strangers crisscross the desert and border regions at various times, for different purposes. Amid these emerging dangers, perceived and actual, are fears from rumors of some humans’ alleged anti-social uses of ideally positive ritual powers for personal gain.

The Case Study: Situated Researcher, “Suspicious” Activities, and Uncertainty

Fateful Walk in the Desert and an Unexpected Predicament in the Town

The central focus here, a type of sorcery (*ark echaghel*) involving love magic (*mahiba*), was suspected by friends and interlocutors to have been instigated surreptitiously by a Tuareg man, a town merchant of rural origin, and aristocratic social background, and from a maraboutique clan. He occasionally wrote Qur'anic verses, but did not practice professional Qur'anic scholarship. The alleged sorcery occurred when this merchant's consulted a non-Qur'anic diviner/medium in Agadez, called a *boka* (Hausa loan term) or “friend of the *Kel Essuf* spirits”, a descendant of formerly-enslaved peoples, and rumored to be a powerful *ark echaghel* specialist. The alleged female target/victim, a female guest in the merchant urban compound along with this anthropologist and several other persons, was catapulted into the “wild” (*essuf*), a psycho-social space of desolation and vulnerability to spirits, and underwent treatment by an Islamic scholar/marabout. Mutual friends counseled this anthropologist to also undergo treatment to protect against possible “contagion” of this condition.

Although I conducted fieldwork primarily in the countryside and lodged with local families there during my research on traditional healers, on one occasion, I happened to stay at the merchant's home in Agadez temporarily, on the advice of my rural host family, in order to escape possible aggression from persons residents

4 There have been several Tuareg rebellions against the central state governments of Niger and Mali. Causes include conflicts over taxation, coerced sedentarization and schooling, language endangerment, and perceived economic and political marginalization of northern regions. Also, national youth unemployment and limited state budgets contribute to tensions. See Bourgeot (1990, 1994), Hawad, 2020; Keough, Youngstedt (2019), Lecocq (2012), and Masquelier, Soares, *Eds.* (2016).

suspected were bandits: a group of armed men I had encountered on a walk in the desert. Those strangers were from farther west, near the Malian border, who had, according to local women's gossip, "abandoned 'real' Tuareg culture because they have no kin ties here, and have camped outside the village (like tourists do)". They had also enraged many people by publicly beating several local men accused of extra-marital affairs [which, though not approved, are usually not corporeally punished if discretely conducted]. This temporary stay in town led to my chance encounter with the train of events suspected by friends and interlocutors to be sorcery, and, later, to a cure with a puzzling aftermath.

So I followed my hosts' warnings and advice to go to Agadez temporarily until the unknown strangers moved on. I went by truck with some other travelers there, and lodged along with a few of them in the compound/courtyard of a home rented by an upwardly-mobile contact there, Hado (pseudonym), the man from rural Air who conducted market business in that town introduced earlier, was reputed to be prosperous, hospitable, and generous. We guests slept on mats and a few mattresses under a canopy in the courtyard. In contrast to some of their Hausa and Arab neighbors (Masquelier, 2009; Popenoe, 2004), most Tuareg do not consider it unusual or morally suspect for traveling women to lodge temporarily in compounds of male hosts in distant places, provided that they are in a group, and that hosts are kin or fictive kin.

Hado's two wives resided in the countryside in separate semi-nomadic villages. Like some other rural men starting urban businesses, only much later would he bring one of these wives, the second, to town to live after being divorced from the first wife, who like many Tuareg women, vehemently opposed polygyny. Like many other Tuareg in Agadez, he still had close ties with rural kin. But these ties can also be tense because of fears of jealousy (evil eye) and sorcery in cases of a kinsperson's economic success in the town, in particular if poorer rural residents' demands for assistance are not always met. Hado was working hard to achieve upward socioeconomic mobility, somewhat difficult though not impossible for rural Tamajaq-speaking men in a multi-ethnic town during intermittent political conflicts with the distant southern capital. After labor migration abroad, he had returned to the Air Mountain region, and began the long road to market trading, eventually becoming very successful and gradually moving to Agadez.

Thus Hado had a "foot" in two worlds. He practiced polygyny, which urban men from other groups often pressured Tuareg men to do in order to achieve social prestige and extend business partnerships into wider networks. Although he disliked the countryside and scorned rural beliefs and practices, he still felt their influence and maintained some property in the countryside. Although generous and hospitable, he revealed fear of vulnerability to *evil eye and other malevolent forces* in his frequent use of protective amulets, divination, and advice from both Qur'anic marabouts and non-Qur'anic diviners such as the *boka*. My rural, mostly semi-nomadic friends and interlocutors also gossiped about sorcery-related dangers, especially when one travels to a town: although they did not directly mention Hado or initially suspect him of

instigating sorcery, they asked me if I, too, did not fear *ark echaghel*. Marabouts offered to make protective amulets for me. They overwhelmingly asserted that, “although anyone may instigate or become victimized by sorcery, its rituals are practiced most skillfully by former clients (oasis residents, who formerly owed portions of their harvest to more nomadic noble descent groups and peoples) and formerly enslaved persons, originally from South of the Sahara”. On a road between Agadez and a rural region, a man of aristocratic social background pointed out a village our truck passed whose residents, in the past enslaved and client peoples of the Kel Geres nomadic noble Tuareg, were all reputed to be sorcerers. He remarked, “...they (still) can heal, but also can cause *ark echaghel*... (their *Ikarkawen* skill originally) from the outside, even as far as the Tidikelt oasis and the Sudan. They once tried to suck my blood at a bus transit center!” Specialists in the *Ikarkawen* type of sorcery may use their powers in either direction, however – to cause and/or to cure – and often appear to be one’s neighbor, but one more distant than the perpetrators of other powers of evil eye and mouth, which also can harm. These latter are more closely anchored in the community of one’s origin. As noted, for example, Hado feared these forces from possible envy from some in his rural community.

These stereotyping rumors – admiring marginalized peoples in attributions of skill, but also stigmatizing them in attributions of malevolence – reveal tensions between those of different class, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds in the aforementioned older social hierarchies, even as these are impacted by colonial and post-colonial economic and political transformations. In the twentieth century, oasis gardens were turned over to settled oasis residents who, as clients, had formerly owed nomadic noble elites a portion of their crops in exchange for military protection in wars. Also, colonial and post-colonial state policies of forced nomadic boarding schooling forbade the use of the Tamajaq language, prompting noble elites at that time to send children of their subordinates to school in order to protect their culture. Consequently, after independence, some persons of subordinate social status in the pre-colonial system received formal education before noble elites, and tended to obtain civil service jobs in the towns first.

Although the *boka* who assisted Hado in his alleged love magic sorcery, from an Agadezian formerly-enslaved family, did not hold a formal degree or civil service job, he was renowned and feared for his ritual skills, which acted as a source of informal power outside “officially” prestigious social statuses in that community. Neighbors expressed mixed feelings about him, sometimes scapegoating him for other presumed transgressions, reflecting some lingering stigmatizing, but perhaps also some guilt concerning past servitude, which is widely condemned by most Tuareg today. Several years after the rituals I witnessed, he was accused (accurately or inaccurately, I do not know, perhaps scapegoated) of stealing a suitcase from Hado’s compound that had disappeared mysteriously. Although some others disputed whether the *boka* had taken it, Hado terminated their relationship. The *boka* subsequently left Agadez, and no one knew his later whereabouts.

The Love Sorcery Rituals

During my stay at Hado's home, the Agadezian *boka* frequently visited him over several weeks, sometimes sleeping overnight in the compound/courtyard. Their conversation was in a far corner of the compound. No one was asked to leave, and I was invited to observe and audio-record portions of their rituals. The *boka* threw cowrie shells to divine for Hado on questions such as safe and dangerous days to travel, wise and unwise business decisions, and the outcomes of various social relationships, including those with visitors/guests, in particular, the women. Occasionally, the two men would sacrifice a chicken. One afternoon, the *boka* predicted that one of the female visitors would bring him good luck and happiness (*alheri*). He did not name the visitor. One of the local women visiting at that time, whom I'll call Fatima, was a frequent guest there. Also of aristocratic social background, and currently between marriages, she had travelled extensively, previously been in an informal business partnership with the host, and once had sold Tuareg jewelry items in France for him. Later, they had experienced some mild conflict over some allegedly "lost" or unaccounted-for items, but they still remained friends, with hints of flirtation. Fatima sometimes borrowed a radio from Hado, and reciprocally, he sometimes stored perishable foods inside a (rare and luxurious) refrigerator at mutual urban friends' home. Thus their relationship was characterized by "on again/off again" friendship, with past economic cooperation but also stress, and potential romantic involvement.

Hado also consulted an *amadas* (bone-setter) who administered a balm ointment and applied sandalwood, a scent used by some men, a marabout later explained to me, as "a medicine to placate spirits of the wild (*Kel essuf*); for men married to female spirits in a contract with them must sacrifice and offer animals in exchange for acquiring divination skills, and must surround themselves with perfume and incense to please their spirit spouse". Such spirits are jealous and demand faithfulness and animal sacrifices, becoming romantic and economic rivals of human spouses, thereby "draining off" the human household's resources (Rasmussen, 2001, 2015).

Hado did not become a diviner himself, but rather hired the professional diviner's services. His attention became focused on a human, rather than spirit woman: a traveler/visitor, Fatima. He often encouraged both of us to eat more. [Women who in some western viewpoints would be considered "fat" are in many local viewpoints, beautiful for their fertility and allure.] He would sit beside Fatima on a mat, and coax, "Let's eat meat!" This statement conveys much more than hospitality; it is a teasing pun, a Tamajaq euphemism for sexual intercourse. Food and eating have contagion and power. This also conveyed the importance of word-play in flirting, but also more: of food used as a channel of contagion of emotions.

Significant in the sorcery incident, therefore, were multisensorial modalities, symbols, and powers, verbal and non-verbal. Late on several evenings, I heard Hado rise, say "*Bismillah*" (denoting "in the name of God" – a blessing or benediction often pronounced to initiate or conclude an act such as eating, opening a market, bless a ritual, festival, or work project), and later pronounced "*Bismillah*" three more times. Here, aural, if not visual evidence suggested a religious power diverted toward ends,

of either resisting an attraction to a spirit woman, or toward causing a human woman to fall in love. But notably here, Hado did not perform full Islamic prayers, and uncharacteristically, he arose and pronounced this phrase well before the early pre-dawn call to prayer, thereby manipulating “orthodox” Islamic practices, and moreover, he had consulted recently with, not a marabout, but a *boka*. On that night and a few others, I was awakened by rustling and flapping sounds in the trees above. Over morning tea and coffee, I mentioned hearing these noises overhead, similar to birds, and another guest, terrified, exclaimed in French, “*La sorcellerie!*”, a widespread association in continental Africa (Stoller, Olkes, 1987).

After the *boka* sacrificed a chicken, specks of blood were visible in the shower stall in one corner of the courtyard – that of the chicken used to symbolically evoke the fertility symbol of menstrual blood. The shower shared by host and guests had an important role in this process, for its enclosed space on all sides could increase the likelihood of the victim stepping on or over the blood, or on its essence left over, even after the substance was no longer visible. Blood is particularly potent – a “key” symbol of life, death, and reproduction (Gottlieb, Buckley, 1988; Masquelier, 2009; V. Turner, 1967).

The sandalwood scent, also powerful, lingered beyond its initial cosmetic uses, in surrounding aroma – not ephemeral, but lasting, clinging to the atmosphere in the compound well after its application. Many use scent not solely as a cosmetic, but also medicinally, and scents have agentive consequences: once, for example, I had a cold, and friends advised me not to apply perfume while ill because the scent could transmit the cold. Body boundaries are not hermetically-sealed. During a spirit possession ceremony organized and held for one person, another present may also fall into trance. Also, infertility may be contagious. For example, if one eats with a childless person, the eating companion might remain childless, as well (Rasmussen, 2017).

Both ritual (the *boka*'s use of multivalent symbols) and social (other guests' rumors, gossip, and warnings) processes surrounding this incident strongly suggested that Hado, through the *boka*'s rituals, activated a sorcerous love potion/spell on Fatima, and possibly also on others close by, as a marabout later confirmed during treatment. Over time, the ritual seemed to work on Fatima. Like suspicious activities studied elsewhere (Borneman, Hammoudi, *Eds.*, 2009; Pelkman, 2013; Rabinow, Saminian-Darash, *Eds.*, 2015), ambiguous meanings of personal sentiments can be illuminated if placed in immediate and wider social contexts. Here, rumor, gossip, warnings and advice to me in their intersubjective construction of meanings, constituted a moral commentary, if not a conclusive “fact”. Hado was rumored to be a “womanizer”. Fatima left the compound suddenly. Later, she suffered from “illnesses of the heart, liver, and soul”, rumored to be in danger of being possessed by the *Kel Essuf* spirits of the wild. Mutual acquaintances warned me that sorcerous actions and their effects might be contagious, and suggested that I see a marabout for treatment.

The Treatment and the Aftermath: Emotions Awakened and Cast Away

So, following this advice, like Fatima, I saw a marabout. Thus I, like some other researchers (Favret-Saada, 1981; Stoller, 1989) was drawn into this network of verbal and embodied powers. The Sufi marabout whom Fatima and this researcher consulted specialized in treating “women’s problems”, advertised in a large hand-written sign on a cloth suspended on the wall of his household compound. Itinerant, and speaking both Tamajaq and Hausa, he spent part of the year in Agadez and part of the year in Zinder. After hearing a description of what ailed the patient, the marabout without hesitation diagnosed this condition as “definitely caused by sorcery, rather than by spirits alone... very strong sorcery,... only a marabout can undo this”. He inquired the patient’s age and if and how long she had been married. He touched the patient’s forehead with medicinal oil and recited a Qur’anic verse for about ten minutes.

He then prescribed oils, herbs, and incense. He instructed the patient to say *Magani yeggen* (Hausa and Tamajaq mixed phrase denoting, “big, great, or lots of medicine”) three times afterward. Note how this repetition in effect contradicted or counterbalanced the *Bissmillah* pronounced three times by Hado earlier. He insisted that “You need *kula bi*, a blockage against sorcery, to stop its continuing action and effect”. He also advised the patient to stay far from the suspected instigator, “or else he might reinforce his sorcery medicine”. Also, any sorcerous ritual – even a curative one against negative sorcery – might come back onto oneself.

The marabout also warned, “Amulets need reinforcing periodically for added ‘layers’ of protection. They work somewhat like booster shots”. He also explained, “One can cause people to fall in love if one writes the name(s) and keeps it (them) in a secret place and conducts additional rituals, for example, with cowrie shells, animal sacrifice, and oral incantations” (actions conducted by the *boka* and Hado).

Following the treatments, one day Fatima and I were walking in a market. We were offered a date to sample, but an unripe one, a variety yellow in color, and hard rather than succulent, with an extremely bitter taste. “Unripe dates”, a theme in some song verses at musical spirit possession rituals, metaphorically expresses “a bitter soul”, conveying the sadness of a secret love and/or a love that does not work out. Suddenly, someone approached and greeted us. He was Hado, but we did not recognize him at that moment. Only several days later, after encountering him again in recognizable form when he asked, somewhat chagrined, why he had not been greeted in the market, did it dawn on me who he was.

In the marabouts’ healing, what had been visible became hidden and invisible, in effect, the “magic” formula was poured back into the “bottle”, so to speak. This shape-shifting, unlike some others (Jackson, 1990; West, 2007), did not involve human to animal, but rather, a perceived metamorphosis from known host to unknown stranger, a distancing corresponding to the medicinal treatments’ purpose. As Bubandt (2014) observes regarding witchcraft in Indonesia, there remains lack of “perfect closure”, no direct proof, in these sorcery and “unwitching” incidents in Niger. But one has to take seriously locally-conventional types of evidence (Pelkman, 2013); indeed, in the United States, many popular assertions concerning

for example, vaccines, are not based on certain evidence. The next section considers conventional local wisdom on sorcery in relation to causality, certainty and uncertainty, ways gossip and rumor construct knowledge in what to reveal and not to reveal, and why.

Concluding Analysis: Sorcery, Agency, and Knowledge Construction in Gossip and Rumor

Sorcery Power, Causality, Speech, and Action

As a preface to warnings about possible sorcery and other dangers, Hado, Fatima, and others often commented that “rural persons, especially, like gossip (*awal* or *togerchet*) which can bring evil eye or sorcery. Nice people are especially vulnerable to this (force)”. One may be successful and prosperous, but must be generous and not stingy or ostentatious. Formerly, “nice” usually meant qualities associated with noble elites, such as reticence, reserve, and indirect speech by allusion (*tangalt*). Loquaciousness was the speech of smith/artisans and griots, important journalist-like mediators, who often acted as go-betweens for local chiefs, presided over state tax collecting, and sang praises of their patron aristocratic families, but also conducted political commentaries (Rasmussen, 2013). Yet in other less official contexts requiring ambiguity or secrecy, such as sociability with elites or discussions of prices of remuneration for work, goods, and services, smiths sometimes spoke an argot called *tenet*, and in joking or criticizing in the presence of former owners, formerly enslaved persons and their descendants sometimes spoke an argot called *tagenagen*. Although the old class-based distinctions in speech expectations and practices are breaking down, what persists is the ideal of discretion from fear of others’ jealousy or coveting, expressed in actions: for example, in keeping valuables hidden, not being too ostentatious, or not mentioning one’s preferences or desires too openly. Personal wishes, goals, and future plans need to be hidden. I was advised, for example, not to show my true food preferences, and not to flaunt belongings too openly. Once, for example, friends asserted that my camera shutter became stuck from negative gossip by someone who coveted the camera.

Hado, while generous and hospitable, was vulnerable to these dangers in his relative and obvious economic prosperity and his occasional neglect of rural cultural mores of reciprocity. For example, on one occasion, he ignored the usual requirement in the countryside for nobles to hire smith/artisans, who control reputations, to sing praises and prepare and serve food at his child’s nameday, and they publicly mocked him. Some of his gains came at the cost of social conflicts; recall, for example, that he had disputed with Fatima as a business partner over profits from the latter’s sales of Tuareg jewelry in France, thereby interrupting (for a time, at least) their reciprocal and congenial, and perhaps also, flirtatious relationship.

Despite most Tuareg women’s relative freedom of mobility and lack of forced seclusion, Fatima was vulnerable to some mild disapproval, or at least worry because

of her travel to town and beyond Africa to Europe, and her atypical distance from close kin. There are widely-perceived dangers to women in towns crowded with strangers in times of religious debate and socioeconomic upheaval. Reformist piety adherents who oppose prevalent Tuareg public sociability between the sexes can threaten one's reputation. Female guests in Hado's home had to be careful not to attract attention from adherents of one such piety group, Izala, who worshipped at a mosque nearby.

Also still widespread are beliefs that spirits and other dangerous forces attack persons during both literal and psycho-social isolation. A person's character may change on travel unless precautions are taken. When a longtime trusted associate allegedly swindled Hado from a distant location, he explained that action as resulting from that person's changed character from traveling so far away. Transformations of character may also be manifest in physical appearance of shape-shifting. Nicolaisen (1961: 139) reported assertions that Allah would turn "bad" marabouts who practice, rather than cure sorcery into animals. More recently, I heard individuals in political critiques refer to humans figuratively transforming into animals. For example, one man complained that a civil servant from northern Niger who now resided longterm in the capital city was "like a great chameleon, he changes colors (to suit purposes)". Although these shape-shiftings were not alleged to occur literally, unlike Jackson's (1990) account of Kuranko shape-shifting in Sierra Leone or lion sorcerers in Mozambique (Jackson, 1990; West, 2007), the images were used in gossip as tropes conveying perceived character changes and subversion of powers.

Conclusions and Broader Implications

How does sorcery shed light on rumor and gossip, and how do rumor and gossip shed light on sorcery? Doubt and uncertainty are central to sorcery and anti-sorcery "unbewitching", interminable experiences that remain continuously in doubt (Bubandt, 2014; Favret-Saada, 1981; Pelkman, 2013). In the Tuareg case, uncertainty in suspicious, covert activity beyond the immediate sorcery and treatment contexts perceived and commented on in rumor and gossip, which can empower persons marginalized in past social hierarchies (as in the alleged "bloodsucking" incident and sorcerer village) and in recent social upheavals (Hado the sorcery instigator), but can also reinforce old grudges and stigmatizing stereotypes (the *boka's* ultimate fate of being scapegoated). Within the immediate context of the sorcery and treatment, the effects of the Agadez love sorcery ritual symbols were more tangible and powerful, highly gendered and drawing on words, actions, images, and substances almost universally perceived as quintessentially feminine: fertility, birth, and menstruation in, for example, some substances used in Hado's ritual, such as blood, (from a sacrificed chicken, but symbolically, menstrual blood), sandalwood scent (an aphrodisiac), and cowrie shells (a fertility symbol widespread in Africa), and words usually pronounced in an "orthodox" religious context, "Bismillah", during the sorcery ritual pronounced

for different purposes. Recall also the images used by the marabout in his treatment: these also focused on the body and sexuality, but with purification goals. In addition to verbal word-play, both sorcerous and counteractive “unwitching” processes also involved non-verbal analogies, euphemism, and indirect allusion in their manipulation of objects.

Sorcery and speech about it can allegorically reveal larger moral preoccupations in multi-sensorial ways, and also reveal specialists’ careful observational skills and intricate social knowledge (Rasmussen, 2015; Hountondji, *Ed.*, 2009 [1997]; Van Beek, Peek, *Eds.*, 2013). Much Tuareg esoteric healing knowledge is derived from apprenticeship with a specialist, recalling rain-making in Benin explained by Hountondji (*Ed.*, 2009[1997]) as divulged only indirectly and in private – Fatima and I, for example, were obliged to undergo the maraboutique treatment separately. Thus there may be empirical discovery procedures not known to lay persons, and efforts to protect the secrets of the trade. Some rumors and gossip, moreover, have a basis in a “kernel” of another truth, harking back to a different context, as occurred in the Tuareg man’s fears of oasis sorcerers’ alleged bloodsucking as revenge for past exploitation by some (though not all) elites. Also, rumors and gossip reveal local concepts of evidence, even if literal veracity is uncertain, and more: these practices act as moral commentaries, especially in conjunction with sorcery accusations. Although there are many instances where gossip, rumors, and conspiracy theories are untrue (as for example, in conspiracy theories about COVID-19 vaccinations in the United States), they may convey critical social commentary such as lack of trust deriving from past medical abuses in history, thereby revealing a “larger” “truth”.

Rumor, gossip, and sorcery are therefore epistemologically complementary in providing ethnographic insights into alternative ways of responding to crises. The foregoing love sorcery case can help anthropologists understand how “other” worlds take shape according to what one is conditioned to look for or recognize, both in ordinary everyday life and in extraordinary and uncertain times.

One recent explanation of sorcery is that it is real (Stoller, Olkes, 1987; Stoller, 1989; Rasmussen, 2013; West, 2007). But what, exactly, does “real” mean? Certain incidents that appear to defy standard empirical explanations are still “real” in their effects. “Real” is not incompatible with uncertainty. More fruitful than exploring the “truth value” of sorcery is exploring the grounds on which local residents widely accept a given practice or event as true and their perceived effects. A focus on gossip and rumor in sorcery suggests that an uncertain ethnographic experience can be both real and filtered through imagination at once.

Acknowledgments:

Data here derive from my field research projects, all IRB approved, between approximately 1983 and 2017 in rural and urban Tuareg communities of Niger and Mali on spirit possession, gender, aging and the life course, medico-ritual healing and healing specialists, smith/artisans, verbal art performance, youth cultures, and cultural memory. In these projects, I gratefully acknowledge support from Fulbright-Hays, C.I.E.S., Wenner-Gren

Foundation, National Geographic Committee for Research and Exploration, Social Science Research Council, West African Research Association, Neubauer Foundation, Indiana University, and the University of Houston. All names of persons in this article are pseudonyms.

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