

RESEARCH ARTICLE	The Symbolic Marks on Traditional Crafts in the Ahaggar Region. A Heritage Between Loss, Transmission, and Valorization An Artistic Reading	
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Abstract Throughout history, nations have been measured by their diverse civilizational manifestations, including that deeply rooted heritage. The Amazigh society in general, and the Imuhagh (Tuareg)* in particular, have left us a rich and diverse legacy composed of various artistic expressions from one region to another. This diversity has attracted the attention of researchers and enthusiasts of Amazigh culture across different disciplines. Our choice of this topic is an attempt to highlight the social and economic values and functions through the use of various symbols on different materialsymbols that carry meanings and aesthetic values reflecting the level of creativity achieved by the Tuareg people in the Ahaggar region. This development and flourishing would not have been possible without an openness to other cultures. The Tuareg artist embodied his imagination in traditional crafts, creating a distinctive artistic style that set him apart from others.		
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Introduction:

There is no doubt that the memory of a nation stems from the memory of its parts; the deeper the memory of these parts, the more the nation's heritage is enriched. Thus, exploring and researching the contents of memory is fundamental to self-knowledge.

Through this scientific paper, we address one of the ancient communities deeply rooted in history, namely the Imuhagh (Tuareg)* community. Some European travelers and explorers have written about it, and popular memory preserves certain narratives and legends that reveal aspects of its history and civilization. Nevertheless, a significant portion of its vast heritage has not received sufficient academic study and research.

We chose the Ahaggar region as it serves as a link between the areas where the Imuhagh are present across the Sahara, and due to its exposure to influences from within and outside the country. To give the subject more realism, we take the Traditional Crafts Cooperative in the Sourou El-Mouallemine neighborhood in Tamanrasset as a model, being one of the most important producers, managers, and marketers of traditional crafts, and among the key actors preserving their continuity rooted in the aesthetic and artistic values of the Tuareg heritage.

➤ Research Objectives:

This research aims to:

- Identify the symbolic marks present in traditional artistic products and the meanings associated with them.
- Open the door to interdisciplinary research in this field (integration).
- Shed light on a heritage threatened by loss amid current transformations.

➤ **Research Hypotheses:**

- It is possible to uncover the meanings and significance of symbols through study, investigation, and comparison.

➤ **Research Significance:**

- Provide an added value to knowledge by exploring and analyzing the meanings of these symbols.
- Educate specialists in the field of arts about the symbols and their artistic forms to ensure their continuity.
- Blend authenticity with modernity while preserving heritage from disappearance.

➤ **Research Limits:**

- The study focused on symbolic marks and their uses in traditional crafts, and on identifying their meanings.

➤ **Research Methodology:**

In this study, we adopted the descriptive-analytical method, without overlooking the historical method, which serves as the main pillar in archaeological art studies.

Based on this, the research problem is defined by the following questions:

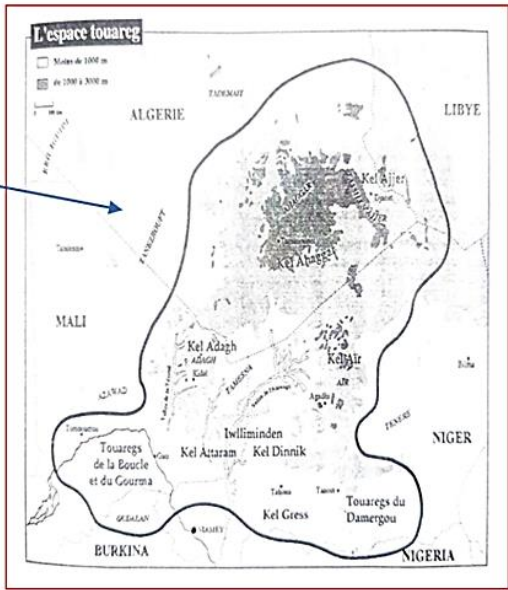
- How do the artistic products of the Imuhagh of Ahaggar contribute to the preservation of Berber symbols?
- What is the aesthetic impact of decorative symbols on various products?
- What are the appropriate mechanisms to ensure the continuity of this heritage amid current transformations?

Study Area Definition:

The Ahaggar region is located in the heart of the Sahara Desert, serving as a connecting point between the north and the south of the desert. It lies along an ancient trade route of great importance and covers an area of 530,000 km². It is bordered by Tassilin'Ajjer to the east, Ténéré to the south, Tidikelt to the north, and to the south by Adrar'Fughas and Air. The region lies between longitudes 1° to 10° East and latitudes 20° to 28° North. This strategic location has enabled it to play a mediating and supervisory role in trade exchanges between central Sahara and the Sahel. (PAUL, P. 1998, p.29)

Many of us may utter the word "Ahaggar," but few truly know its meaning. In the language of the Imuhagh, "Ahaggar" means "the great rock in a sea of sand." It is a massive rock standing amidst lands that, in the distant past, were volcanically very active. (H. Lhote, 1944, p.25)

➤ **Reasons for Settlement:**



- Availability of water, arable land, pastures, and wood-gathering areas.
- Development of the region and the emergence of housing patterns using various building materials and techniques.
- Agriculture was one of the main factors behind the settlement of the nomadic Inuhagh of Ahaggar.
- The Ahaggar region served as a transit point for many trade caravans traveling to and from Western Sudan.
- The arrival of social ethnic groups from other regions (Tidikelt, Ajjer, Niger, Mali...).
- The positive role played by the Inedan (craftsmen) in developing the economic life of the Ahaggar region.
- The emergence of various handicrafts (pottery, leatherwork, jewelry making, weapons manufacturing such as swords and spears...).

Applied Art among the Imuhagh (Tuareg):

Every human civilization has its own style that embodies applied artistic production, expressing the skill and creativity of its people. This is reflected in architecture and various products such as jewelry, leather, and woodwork, as well as in the aesthetic sense visible in the quality and nature of the engravings—considered a socio-environmental production, born from the individual's interaction with their natural and social environment.

A close examination of the geometric shapes engraved on leather, wood, and traditional jewelry reveals a simple translation of a rich artistic sensibility developed over various stages. The Tuareg man has practiced various forms of art since ancient times, as evidenced by the engravings and rock paintings known as rock art—the clear and undeniable witness to the deep roots of Tuareg art. These include geometric, animal, and human forms. These artistic artifacts are nothing but material representations of ideas and emotions, created to convey them to others or to refer back to them when needed. (LE ROI GOURHAN, 1964, p.263)

Factors Influencing the Development of Arts in the Ahaggar Region:

It is a well-known fact in the history of arts that different styles all share similarities in their developmental stages, as they are subject to a set of general factors that influence each style in its own way. These factors guide and affect the style at its inception and throughout its evolution, helping to shape its personality and characteristics. Among these factors are spiritual, intangible, and material influences.

Foremost among them is the influence of religion and spiritual beliefs, which play a decisive role in determining the type and quantity of artistic production. Religious traditions and rituals often require specific forms and types of visual and applied arts that align with their aims and fulfill their purposes. In fact, religion may use art to influence people, or people may use art to express their feelings toward their faith. (F. Chafai, 1980, p.30) This is clearly observed through the physical evidence spread across various archaeological sites in Ahaggar.

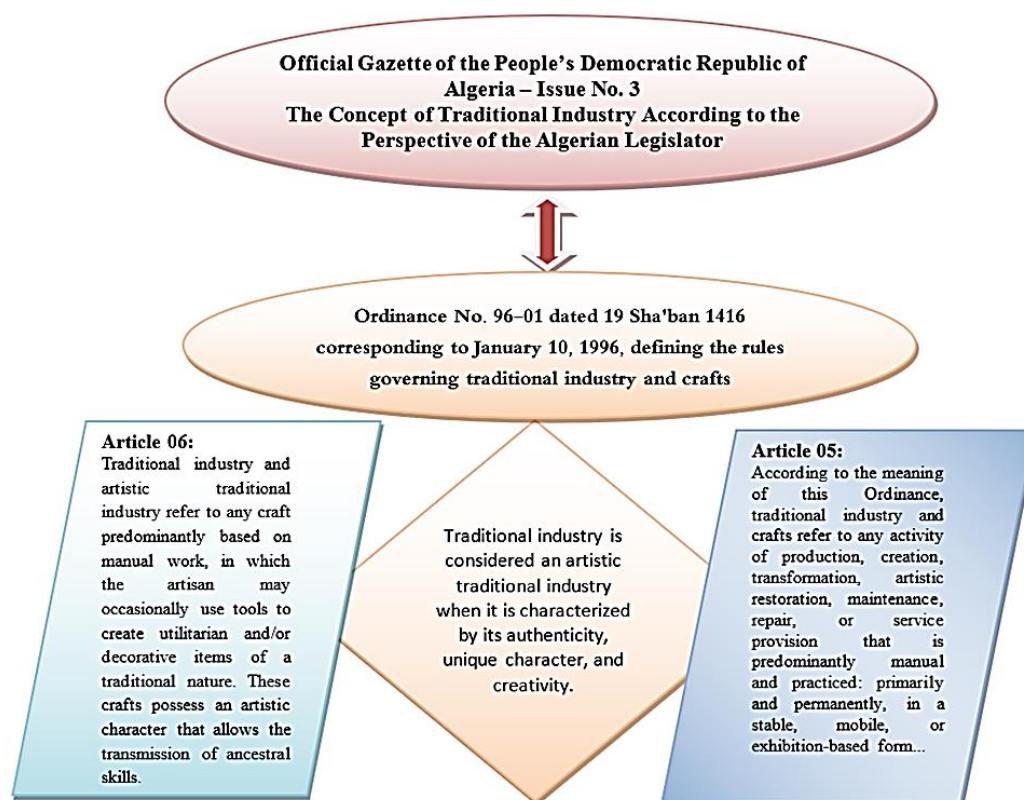
Another significant factor is the prevailing political systems in each nation, along with the resulting peace and stability or wars and unrest. Peace and stability tend to direct arts toward serving both public and private civil purposes. Friendly political relations between nations and the exchange of delegations often result in the transfer of artistic influences through gifts and trade. In contrast, during times of war or threats thereof, arts tend to serve military objectives. Wars may also lead to the presence of captive soldiers in foreign lands, which naturally results in the exchange and transfer of artistic styles from one region to another. Additionally, invaders are often influenced by the arts of the lands they conquer. A review of Ahaggar's history reflects this notion in the development of the region.

The economic situation also significantly affects the direction of art throughout its developmental phases. Prosperity or poverty greatly influences the volume, types, and value of artistic production. Furthermore, the system of wealth distribution among the social classes leaves its mark on architecture and art products, illustrating the varying living standards of each class.

Crafts and Traditional Industries in the Ahaggar Region:

Crafts and traditional industries are an expression of cultural and social awareness, conveyed through creativity in various forms of production rooted in the environment in which the individual lives.

UNESCO defines them as: "Products made by artisans either entirely by hand, or with the help of hand tools or even mechanical means, provided that the artisan's direct manual contribution remains the most substantial component of the finished product. These products derive their distinctive character from their attributes, which may be utilitarian, artistic, aesthetic, creative, cultural, decorative, functional, symbolic, or traditional, and they may hold religious and social significance." (UNESCO Declaration, 1982).



The Stages of Traditional Crafts and Industries in Ahaggar:

Based on our field study and the interviews conducted with a group of elderly practitioners of these crafts, we have identified the following stages in the development of traditional industries in the Ahaggar region:

01 – Pre-colonial Stage:

This period witnessed slow industrial development characterized by simplicity. Most artisans (Inedan) came from neighboring regions such as Aïr and Azawagh, which were known for Tuareg settlement. Trade caravans played a role in developing traditional industries by supplying raw materials and facilitating the movement of craftsmen to and from Ahaggar. The focus during this time was mainly on weapon-making (swords, spears, shields) and some wooden utensils.

02 – Colonial Stage:

With the expansion of French colonial control in the north and the Sahara, colonialism had a significant impact on all aspects of cultural, social, and economic life. In the northern regions, the colonial authorities redirected the population's attention from traditional crafts to agriculture. Secondly, cheaper and higher-quality European goods were imported, leading to unfair competition with local products.

Thirdly, traditional crafts were neglected by the colonial administration and received no support. In contrast, in the Ahaggar region, there was interest in encouraging traditional crafts and efforts to preserve the region's cultural heritage. Artisans focused on leatherwork (tents and furnishings), weapon-making, and woodcraft. Interest in jewelry-making also began to grow during this phase, depending on available raw materials.

03 – Post-independence Stage:

When Algeria gained independence, there was a renaissance in all fields. Tangible cultural heritage, including traditional crafts, received significant attention with the creation of dedicated government bodies such as the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Tourism.

From the 1970s to around 2010, this sector witnessed noticeable growth in the Ahaggar region due to the availability of raw materials, the revival of tourism, and the active participation of artisans—particularly the Asaghan Cooperative since its foundation and before—in numerous national and international festivals.

The artisans' desire to preserve their ancestral heritage and ensure its continuity also played a vital role in this development.

Factors Influencing the Development of Crafts and Traditional Industries in Ahaggar:

- Availability of raw materials of plant, animal, mineral, and stone origin.
- Marketing through Saharan tourism and exhibitions.
- State support for craft activities through the establishment of the Chamber of Traditional Industries.
- The family-based nature of handicrafts, which is a key factor in their continuity.
- Training children and encouraging them in these crafts by granting them the freedom to be creative and innovative.
- Preserving the transmission factor, as the risk of loss is clearly visible amid current changes.

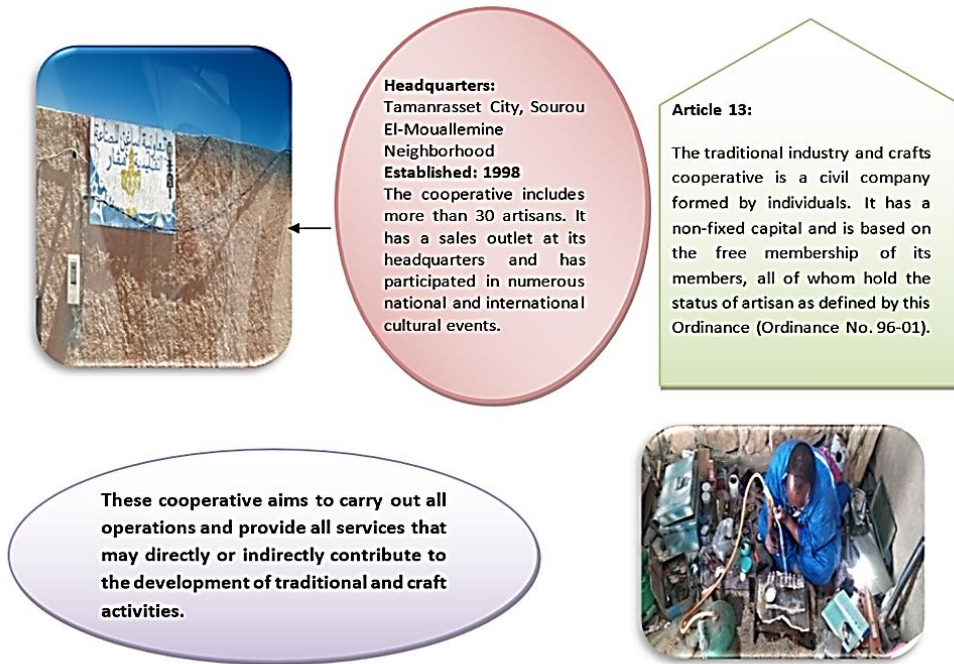
Field Study:

As part of the fieldwork, we visited the “Sourou El-Mouallemine” neighborhood, which is well known for its artisans' workshops in the region. There, we met Mr. Ben Abdallah Nour El-Din, who provided us with valuable information about the names of the oldest artisan families in Ahaggar. He also directed us to the eldest Inedan (craftsmen) from each family, considering age to be an important factor in terms of experience and knowledge regarding the history of these crafts in the region and their various products, as well as the artistic aspect represented through the use of different symbols.

Afterward, we engaged with the targeted sample group to shed light on various aspects of this craft. We used open guided interviews to gather information about the use and origins of the symbols.

➤ Study Sample Description:

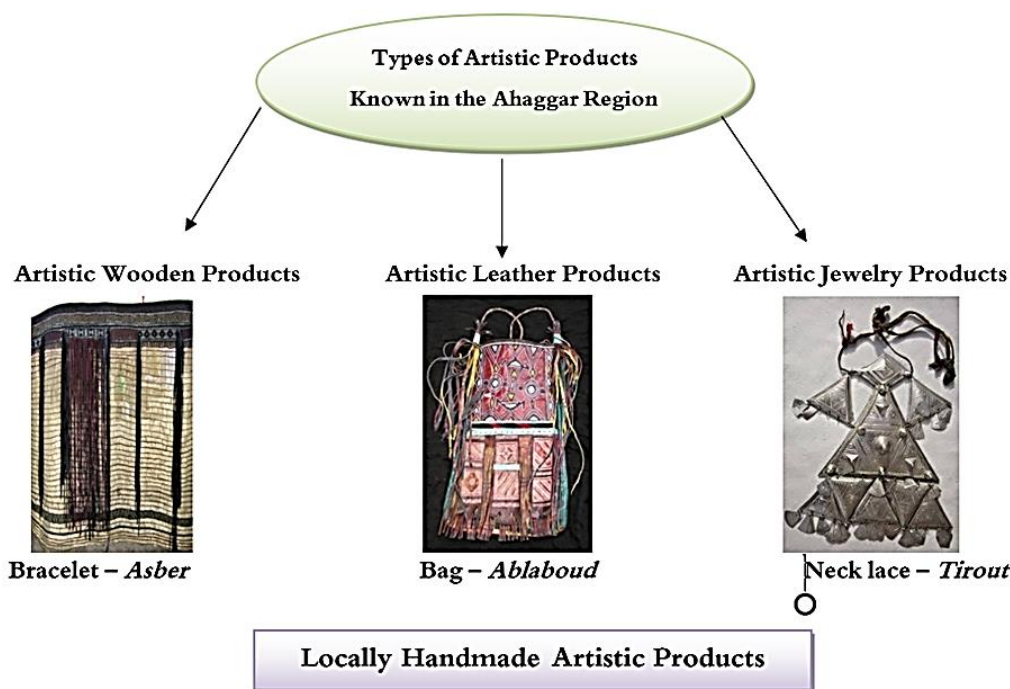
Asaghan Cooperative for Traditional Industry – Ahaggar.



This cooperative plays a significant role in preserving tangible heritage, represented by various artistic products related to our topic. The artisans of the Asaghan (Union) Cooperative have demonstrated that the continuity of this heritage is a shared responsibility. One finds children, adults, and the elderly exchanging knowledge and creating an atmosphere that ensures the transmission and appreciation of this heritage through various means and methods.

➤ Artistic Products for Which the Asaghan Cooperative in Sourou is Known:

The local artist has excelled in producing various artistic items inherited from the ancestors. Among the most renowned products of the Asaghan Cooperative are:



Specializations of Artisan Craftsmen (Inedan) – Producers of These Items:

- **Artistic Jewelry Products:** Exclusively crafted by men (*Inedan, Lemallemine*).

- **Leather Artistic Products:** Mostly produced by women, who are the true creatives in this field.
- **Wooden Artistic Products:** A male specialty due to the physical effort required, such as in making mortars and utensils.

Who Are the Inedan (Craftsmen, Lemallemine)?

The Ahaggar society is divided into social classes, each representing a segment of the community. The Inedan (also known as Lemallemine, or craftsmen) constitute one of the most important classes, known for their mastery of crafts and various industries essential to daily life. They have played a crucial role in the settlement and stability of the population in the region.

Their professions include blacksmithing, jewelry-making, weapons crafting, and producing camel saddles. They are considered the beating heart of the Tuareg (Imuhagh) economic, social, and cultural life. Since ancient times and up to the present day, these artisans have preserved the manifestations of Tuareg applied art.

The Inedan are not only skilled creators but also guardians of the Tuareg aesthetic, committed to the specific characteristics of Tuareg style through the artistic symbols that shape diverse artistic products. They are distinguished by their high level of craftsmanship in using traditional raw materials to create unique items of great cultural and historical value.



From the Asaghan Cooperative in Sourou El-Mouallemine Neighborhood

The Meanings and Symbolism of Engravings and Ornaments on Artistic Products in the Ahaggar Region

Symbols are inherited in their form and altered in their meanings. Starting from this premise, and based on our field investigation, we attempt to validate this notion, as we observed that some symbols show partial variation, while others differ entirely. Symbolism represents a material embodiment of intellectual knowledge. (Abbassi Abdeljabbar, 2008, p. 42)

An observer of the symbols used in various branches of traditional crafts in the Ahaggar region will notice what can be described as the use of the duality between voids and fills. The artist seeks to highlight the technique of shaping forms and worlds within a certain space, assigning them symbolic references and transformations that serve the product (e.g., modern stamps).

Through our study, we noticed signs present on house walls, textiles, jewelry, and pottery. When inquiring about their meanings, we found that some have no specific meaning and are mostly driven by artistic taste.

Leather crafts revealed the remarkable creativity of Tuareg women and their freedom of thought, expression, and inner knowledge. They managed to develop a refined artistic language that harmonizes with their handmade products.

Undoubtedly, we are facing a vast diversity in Imuhagh traditions and their reflection in artistic production this is the result of many points of convergence, even similarities, arising from processes of mutual influence (e.g., Tighatmine, Tifinagh letters).

A circle with a six-pointed star at its center — this symbol is widely used in applied artistic products among the Tuareg. It carries various meanings and connotations regarding the presence of this shape and has no relation to the Star of David. At the center of the shape is a sun, symbolizing life and light.

Source:

HENRI LHOTE.1955.P313

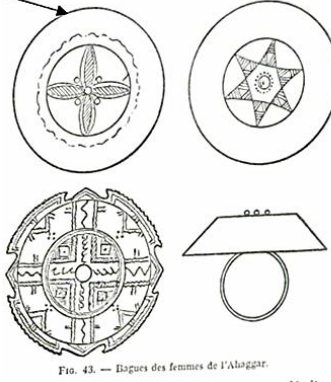


FIG. 43. — Bagues des femmes de l'Ahaggar.

Modern Craft Featuring Symbols with Meaningful Connotations

European Writers' Interest in Artistic Products

Examples of Symbols Featured on Artistic Products (Asaghan Cooperative)

Another important point worth emphasizing is that these symbols are, in fact, a human creation emerging from a specific cultural environment—such as animal footprints, stars, the sun, etc. The meanings of these symbols vary depending on their function or thematic context (religious, social, cultural...), even though they are artistic creations. It is also essential not to overlook the aesthetic dimension and the symbolic meaning the artisan seeks to express through their creative process.

A close look at the decorative shapes and symbols applied on various surfaces (leather, metal, wood, architecture...) reveals that these artistic works by the Tuareg (Amahegh) reflect their ability to adapt and transform all elements present in nature—be it natural scenery, surrounding environmental and material features, or those related to tales, legends, and popular imagination. They also reflect processes of influence and interaction with other human civilizations.

It is worth noting that ornamentation is one of the arts known to most civilizations and is connected to all other art forms.

Alifi Fawzi considered ornamentation a fundamental trait in certain art forms such as Islamic art, where the artist drew inspiration from everything visible—plant, animal, and human elements—to create ornamental works. (Alifi, F.S., 1997, p. 40).

In its artistic domain, symbolism is an indirect representation of things, avoiding explicit depiction, whether through concealment or suggestion. (Hauser, A., 1968, p. 56).



Examples of Symbols Featured on Artistic Products (Asaghan Cooperative)

Through this study, we identified several symbols or decorative forms and their symbolic meanings:

➤ **Taylatat Symbol:**

One of the most renowned and beautiful engravings frequently used by artisans in silver, copper, and even leather jewelry. It refers to a type of gazelle that once inhabited the Sahara. Due to its beauty, artisans named this type of engraving after it.

➤ **Triangular Shape:**

This shape is widely found across many human civilizations, though its meaning varies. Among the Tuareg, the triangle represents the tracks of the gazelle, a beautiful desert animal associated with rituals or beliefs related to femininity and beauty. Unlike other civilizations, where the triangle is linked to gods or cosmic fertility, among the Tuareg, it sometimes symbolizes the seated woman. There are also specific engravings known as (Tikeletn'Henqadh), which are triangles representing gazelle footprints.

➤ **Square Shape:**

The square carries deep semiological meanings. It is the secret of order, a symbol of the earth, and represents the entirety of nature. (Ghada, M., 2021, p. 162)

➤ **Circular Shape:**

The circle signifies completeness and integration. It metaphorically evokes the female body and expresses a dynamic exchange full of vitality, desire, forbidden pleasure, and passion. (Ghada, M., 2021, p. 162)

➤ **Plant Motifs:**

These symbolize sustenance, goodness, and growth, and are also used as protection from envy. They consist of four small leaves with a circle in the center.

➤ **Khamsa (Palm/Hand) Symbol:**

Associated with the number five, the hand symbolizes warding off harm, protection from envy, and fertility.

➤ **Broken Lines:**

The broken line symbolizes "water" and is often associated with the image of a snake—representing resurrection and the eternal bond with the earth. (Zeinab Ahmed, M., p. 20) These lines are widely used in artistic products, including jewelry, leather, and woodcraft.

➤ **Tifinagh Alphabet:**

The Tuareg alphabet consists of 21 letters and is considered one of the oldest scripts. It has specific writing rules and can be written from right to left, left to right, top to bottom, and bottom to top. Women were particularly keen on learning reading and writing, reflecting the cultural advancement and sophistication of the Tuareg people. (Abdelrahman, J., 1979, p. 28)

This consonantal script is still used today among the Amazigh of Saharan regions—the Tuareg—who call it "Tifinagh." (Meftaha, A., et al., 2010, p. 07)

Since the late 1960s, many new forms of Tifinagh have been developed, based on ancient engravings and the current Tuareg Tifinagh script. (Meftaha, A., et al., 2010, p. 07)

An observer of the numerous symbols used in artistic products will notice a significant resemblance and closeness between these symbols and some letters of the Tifinagh alphabet. This leads us to believe that the origins of this alphabet were symbolic signs whose meanings were mutually understood among the Tuareg users. These signs were later developed into a full alphabet, similar to the evolution of other ancient writing systems such as cuneiform and hieroglyphics.

For instance, the letter **T** (*yeṭ*) takes the form of two intersecting lines, the letter **R** (*yeṛ*) is shaped like a circle, and the letter **L** (*yeḥ*) appears as two parallel lines.



Tifinagh Alphabets within the Context of Rock Art (According to Abbassi Abdeljabbar)

The study of the art of any society relies on the study of its history, philosophy, religious perspective, and social life, along with all the changes that have affected these elements throughout history.

The Symbolism of Colors on Artistic Products Among the Tuareg:

The artistic products of the Tuareg of Ahaggar are distinguished by remarkable aesthetic features, particularly in how empty spaces are filled with colors according to the symbols used, throughout the different stages of crafting any item (leather, wood...). The surface is first painted with a single color and left to dry in the open air. Then, the artist draws various decorative motifs represented by well-known and commonly used Tuareg symbols.

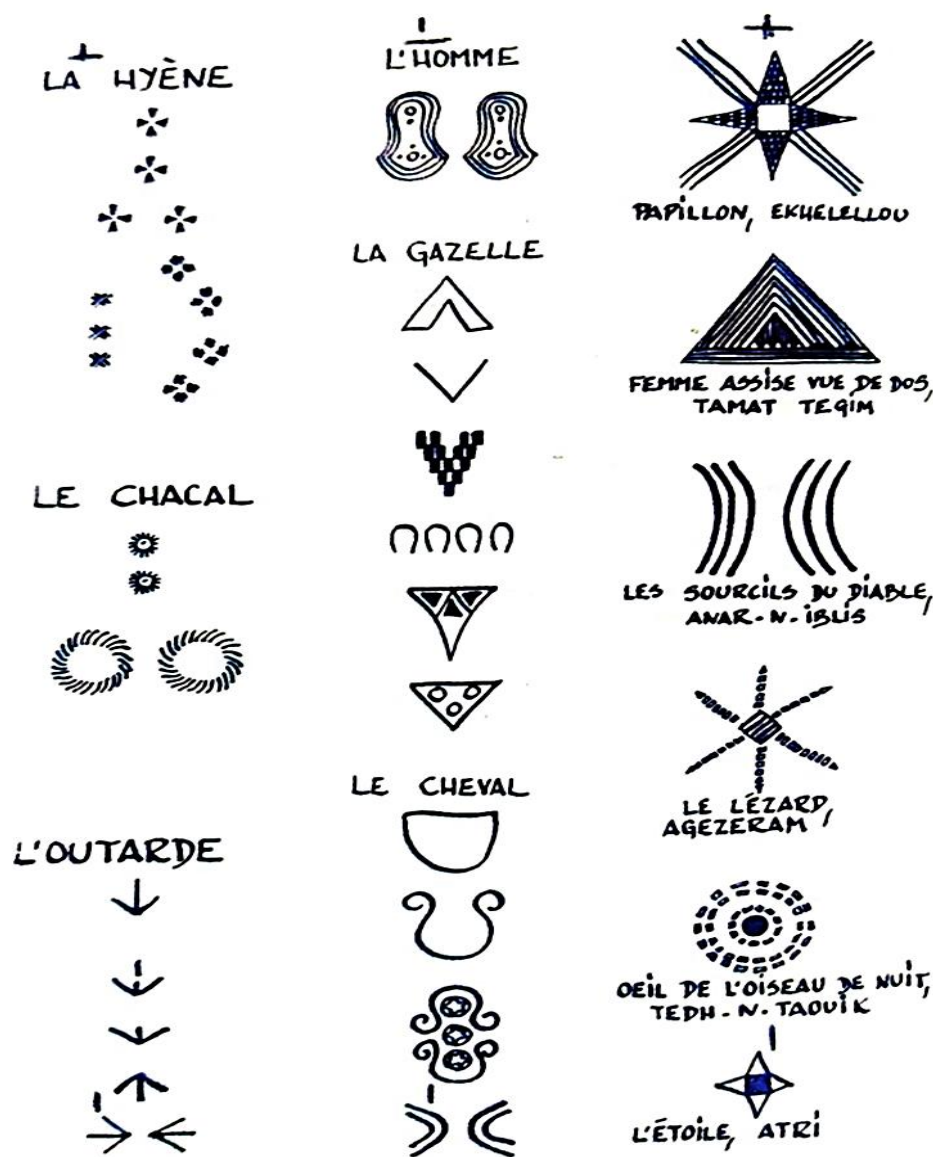
Colors enhance the artistic value of the product, as they add beauty to human life and express one's emotional state whether joy or sorrow. (Bellout, A., p. 182)



Image: Showing a pillow made from goat leather, illustrating color application techniques.

The use of these colors can be observed in all the symbols—slanted lines, circles, squares, triangles, lozenges, and even animal or plant shapes. The Tuareg artist obtains these colors through primary colors from which secondary colors are derived by mixing and combining them in varying proportions (Abdelkader, D., 2010, p. 720).

The most commonly used colors in traditional Tuareg artistic products are red, green, white, yellow, and black. All of these colors harmonize with the region's natural environment and carry different symbolic meanings.



Principaux symboles que l'on retrouve sur les bijoux et l'artisanat touaregs.

Excerpt from the magazine: Sahara - Edition 2000, p. 312

Guides Bleus Évasion

Study Results and Recommendations

➤ Results:

- The craft of jewelry-making within artisan families is exclusively practiced by males; it is considered highly inappropriate for women to engage in or even approach this trade. The same applies to leatherworking.
- Fathers (Inedan) follow specific, unified methods to teach children the craft of jewelry-making.
- Despite the younger generation being busy with studies and having multiple interests while keeping up with social developments, they unconsciously acquire the craft due to the artisan atmosphere that prevails within the family.

- The symbols (drawings and engravings) found on jewelry, leather, or wood are never random; each engraving has a specific meaning inspired by the artisan's environment.
- The symbols used by the Tuareg of Ahaggar show similarities with those used in other regions.
- Symbols are currently being used in modern textile industries and clothing embroidery (clothes, Asdakanan).
- Most of the symbols are derived from the desert environment, including geometric, animal, plant shapes, and Tifinagh letters.
- Our study concluded that heritage is being passed down through generations, as represented in traditional crafts.
- Some symbols are starting to be abandoned in favor of plant motifs, with increased reliance on modern technologies to produce desired shapes—this presents another challenge.

➤ **Recommendations:**

Based on the results obtained, we propose the following recommendations:

- It is essential to increase attention to heritage, as it serves as the raw material for enriching various fields.
- Support artisans who are engaged in preserving heritage and ensure their continuous training to maintain this legacy.
- Establish museums specialized in Tuareg heritage and enrich libraries with research in this field for proper valorization.
- Introduce tangible heritage as a specialty in vocational training institutions to ensure the creation of start-ups (entrepreneurship).
- Encourage small and medium enterprises operating in the fields of textiles, leather industries, and jewelry.
- Teach the symbols and their meanings, and focus on learning Tifinagh script, as it carries important symbolic significance.
- Schedule programs across all media and communication platforms to promote and enrich this topic.

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➤ **Tuareg:**

There is almost consensus on the attribution of the Tuareg in the Great Sahara to the Berbers in general, and more specifically to the Sanhaja tribe and its branches: Lemtuna, Gudala, and Massoufa (Ismail, A., 1998, p. 38). The Tuareg, or Imuhagh in their local Tamasheq language, are distributed across various Saharan regions in Algeria, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Libya. The ancient Tuareg sultanates include: the Sultanate of Kel Ahaggar, Kel Ajjer, Kel Adagh, and Kel Air. They are known for their customs and traditions, most notably the face veil worn by Tuareg men. Their strong adherence to these traditions is clearly reflected in their diverse artistic products. (Researcher)

➤ **Inedan:**

A Tuareg word meaning artisans or craftsmen, commonly referred to today as Lemallemine.

Appendix: Photo Gallery



Clothing Bag Decorated with Various Symbols Carved and Decorated Poles of a Tuareg



Tent From the Masterpieces of Artistic Products by the Asaghan Cooperative in Sourou El-Mouallemine - Tamanrasset