COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS ON MASKING (OR NOT) IN COPING WITH COVID-19: CUSTOMARY TUAREG COVERING IN NIGER, CONTROVERSIAL COVERING IN THE UNITED STATES, AND THEIR BROADER IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORIES OF DANGER, POLLUTION, AND CONTAGION

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Abstract: *This article explores attitudes and practices regarding covering in comparative perspective, focusing on the mask and masking and their promotion in two very different cultural settings that nonetheless also share some broad similarities: Niger, with particular emphasis on the Tuareg case and the mediating roles of smith/artisans in dissemination of cultural knowledge and health education, and the United States, with particular emphasis on politicians as mediators and Texas in these processes. There is analysis of the cultural-symbolic and socio-political re-workings of meanings and uses of masking in relation to these settings' prevalent, widely-held mores concerning facial covering and their wider significance for understanding theories of danger, pollution, and contagion in anthropology.*

Keywords: *COVID-19; Tuareg; Africa; United States; pollution; symbolism; politics*

Introduction: Preliminary Cross-Cultural Comparison and Argument

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a particular object came to the forefront of concerns, debates: the face mask. The question arising in the present analysis is, how can anthropologists gain insights from cross-cultural comparative

perspectives on attitudes toward facial coverings during the pandemic, as of this writing (2023) still very much with us even in the wake of vaccinations? Consider the following vignettes:

> Fatima, a woman who fled Mali's civil war and settled in Niamey, the capital of Niger, belongs to the smith/artisan social and occupational group, very prominent and important among the Tamajaq-speaking, Muslim, traditionally ranked, and semi-nomadic Tuareg people. She now re-directs her older skills in a new medium: making masks to protect against COVID-19 along with other refugee women there, and promotes the importance of wearing masks to prevent catching the virus. https://www.unhcrunhcr.org/en-us/news/stories/202015/5eabd6674/malien-refugees-niger-face-covers-prevent-coronavirus-spread.html
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> In a contrasting situation, but under surprisingly similar broader pandemic-related and other political tensions and violence in the United States, a group of prominent Democratic legislators fled Austin, the capital of Texas, not wearing masks on the airplane, in a conflict over voting rights measures they felt would adversely affect voting equity in their markedly unequal society. They became "stuck" in Washington DC, however, when many of them caught the COVID-19 virus en route there while not wearing masks on their airplane flight. (New Yorker 2021:48).

In Fatima's as well as other Tuareg communities, covering the face and/or head area is already a widespread custom of both sexes, more extensively over part of the face among men, signifying mores of reserve, respect, and cultural belonging within Tuareg society. But its meanings and uses are also changing. And in some other contexts, these meanings and uses now convey social distance in outside encounters. In Niger more generally, modest dress for both sexes, even beyond Tuareg society, features at least a modicum of head-covering, though not as elaborated or as extensive as the Tuareg men's face-veil or the still-rare veiling of some more devout Muslim women from diverse cultural backgrounds.

By contrast, in the United States, particularly in the South, many head and especially face-coverings are usually viewed with much greater ambivalence, if not outright xenophobia, signifying more "exotic" "otherness" and stigma. The Texas Democratic legislators, while predominantly opposed to policies of then-president Donald Trump, felt uncomfortable with coverings about the head and/or face, like many others in the US South. Also in the United States, many listen more to politicians they tend to agree with and less to biomedical physicians and scientists, though the latter are not unanimous regarding

whether to mask or not to mask. In Niger, even in cases of less enthusiasm about COVID-related masks, many listen to and take seriously social mediators, such as smith/artisans, whose longstanding expertise in verbal and visual arts and ritual and social intermediary roles confers much informal power. Hence some contradictions, but also prevalent trends in each society. During the height of COVID-19, how did these play out in attitudes and practices concerning protection against the pandemic in each society? In the pandemic crisis, both Fatima and the legislators from Austin had a similar role, each as a kind of unofficial mediator outside official biomedical science and authority in their respective countries.

While covering, in particular of the entire or part of the face, is more acceptable among the Tuareg in Niger than among some Americans, here I focus on less obvious but important changes and contradictions in each cultural setting. These changes and contradictions offer critical insights into this practice in relation to more general anthropological interest in social and medical hierarchies, cultural/symbolic pollution/contagion beliefs, and experience of and responses to danger.

This article explores insights offered by Tuareg covering and reserve/respect/distance among the different social categories in their predominantly Muslim, traditionally-ranked and semi-nomadic society into American controversies over masking, ambivalence toward covering, and also, more broadly, how the ethnographic and comparative data enhance anthropological understanding of concepts of danger, protection, pollution, and contagion, in contexts of inequality of access to cultural and medical knowledge. There is analysis of attitudes and practices concerning covering, health and illness awareness, and roles of mediators and commentators in disseminating evidence-based knowledge (or misinformation). Notwithstanding marked differences between these two cultural and national settings, they share some broad political and economic similarities, and contrasts and similarities between them illuminate wider issues brought to light by the pandemic era. Although a few conspiracy theories circulated in both the US (Bodner et. al. 2021) and in Niamey, Niger's capital city (Youngstedt, verbal communication American Anthropological Association, Seattle, Nov. 2022) concerning the means of protection from danger and the reasons for promotion of pandemic awareness, their respective responses to COVID-19 differed in other respects.

Several insightful pioneering analyses of covering and masking in relation to the pandemic have emerged. Some studies involve brief cross-cultural

comparison, for example, with India (Mohan and Bora 2020), and others focus more on a single cultural setting, for example, Norway (Tateo 2020, 131–151) and Ghana (Braimah 2020). As Tateo and Marsico (2019) point out, we need a way to create semiotic devices to escalate and de-escalate the meaning of objects from ordinary to extraordinary and vice versa. These authors constructively identify several semiotic devices through which this is done. One such process (Tateo 2021, 135) is that the contact/proximity between ordinary to extraordinary things can lead to an escalation by contact, but also to its deterioration by perceived "contamination". As Douglas (1966, 1992), Martin (1995), and Masquelier (2006) have shown, protection and dangers such as dirt and disease are culturally, socially, and politically constructed, often related to gender and class stratification, as well as symbolic classifications.

Approach and Analytical Framework

These interesting studies tend to frame masks and masking in immediate, individual dramaturgical, Goffmanesque terms (Mohan and Bora 2020) or in social psychological terms (Tateo 2021). The present article analyzes acceptance of masks, masking, and covering and/or controversies, even resistance over them in relation to broader social practices of covering and cultural meanings of modesty, reserve/respect, and pollution/contagion concepts in dynamic interplay with cultural mores and sociopolitical hierarchies. I juxtapose, compare and contrast two very different social/cultural settings of COVID-19 in terms of attitudes and practices regarding covering, analyzing their connections to wider cultural mores and political practices and more broadly, to pollution and contagion cultural translation issues in anthropology (Douglas 1966, 1992; Masquelier 2006) as well as theories of mediators between binary, opposed structural forces in polarization and hierarchy (Levi-Strauss 1966), for example, smith/artisans in Tuareg and some other societies (Rasmussen 2013). Also key here, I argue, are gendered ideologies and practices concerning covering, in particular, concepts of masculinity, revealed through contrasting attitudes toward covering in Niger and in the United States. I am not arguing that masking is universally accepted in Niger or that masking is universally resisted in the United States; rather, I focus on cultural contradictions within each society as well as widely-held, though not unanimous, ideas and practices in each.

Masking is indeed an interactive practice and a semiotic signifying process, but also a social and political construct, and can convey concepts of danger and

protection. Both similarities and contrasts between the Tuareg case in Niger and the southern (particularly Texan) case in the United States reveal much about attitudes and practices regarding danger, protection, reserve, distance, pollution, and contagion, and in the United States, racism, as part of social hierarchies and polarization of mental logics. In both these settings—though geographically and culturally distant, the "poetics" and politics of covering or not covering, as well as attitudes underlying them such as concepts of pollution, contagion, and stigma—come into play in ways that are amenable to some comparative analysis. Here I also hope to contribute to and enlarge the analytical framing of masks and masking by approaching this phenomenon during the era of COVID-19 in comparative terms as both a symbolic (iconic) construct and more: a social sign with meanings emergent in subsequent contextual responses (Barthes 1965; Peirce 1991; Silverstein 1976).

In Niger, as well as in some other African settings, partial or entire coverings for many, particularly of the head and neck for many Tuareg women and facial areas for many Tuareg men, are part of ordinary daily life, rather than extraordinary practice. Yet as in any cultural setting, there is meaning re-making in modifying the face through some sort of covering as "marked" in some way, depending on changes across time and variations across context.

 In Tuareg communities, it is customary for many mature adult men to wear the turban/faceveil and for many married women to at least modestly cover the nape of the neck and hair (Loughran and Seligman 2006). In the United States, particularly much of the South including Texas, face coverings in everyday life outside contexts of familiar rituals and celebrations such as the longstanding wedding bridal wedding veil and the popular Mardi Gras and Halloween masquerades are widely considered somewhat "exotic", even stigmatized. Facial coverings beyond these formalized contexts are most often associated with marginalized groups—sadly, prompting fear, suspicion, even hate and violence in xenophobic bigotry, racism, and scapegoating as for example, some hoodies and headscarves worn closely about the face. These prevalent negative attitudes toward face-veiling beyond widely-practiced rituals or celebrations, I show, constitute national pollution/contagion beliefs)—toward persons perceived as different and "dangerous". Recall, for example, misunderstandings and controversies swirling around so-called "Islamic dress" (Abu Lughod 2002), often based on misinformation and Islamophobia. These negative attitudes tend to persist concerning covering the face, but interestingly, not always the head (for example, the ubiquitous baseball cap is notably not stigmatized, though its

color and the way it is worn can be politically symbolic, as are, for example, the red MAGA baseball caps widely worn at Trump rallies). What is not familiar is often seen as ambiguous and therefore "polluting", (not literal "dirt", but dangerous). Mediators in myth and life are necessary in order to reconcile or "bridge" polar opposites and other perceived oppositions (Levi-Strauss 1966). Thus this essay hopes to offer nuanced insights on contagion, pollution, and bodily and personal boundaries in relation to the body politic (Douglas 1966; Masquelier 2006; Renne 2013), in Niger (with special focus on the Tuareg) and in the US (with special focus on Texas) respectively, which shed light on cultural acceptance or rejection of masking and covering during pandemic outbreak(s). The Tuareg case, I show, is useful analytically as a "foil' to the American case.

The data are drawn from this anthropologist's many years of longitudinal "on the ground" field research in Niger in rural and urban Tuareg communities in the northern Air Mountain region and in Niamey the capital, and from public-domain news media and secondary sources (Internet in both Niger and the United States) and "hard-copy" newspapers and popular magazines, as well as scholarly sources on the United States.[1]

Fatima the Tuareg smith/artisan's mask-making in Niamey, the capital of Niger, is part of a meaningful and powerful response to COVID-19 there. Even before the first cases in 2020, the Niger government had swiftly adopted preventive measures to halt the spread of the virus: a curfew, complete isolation of Niamey, and compulsory wearing of face-coverings in the city. In the United States, much public health policy was left to the states. In Texas most recently, where this anthropologist, author of this article, resides and works, the emphasis by Governor Abbott was on "individual responsibility" (ignoring effects on the collectivity). In some other states, similarly, some residents' defiance and anger targeted even health-care workers, rather than the pandemic itself, as their "enemy". In Niamey, Niger, opposition to COVID-19 policies have targeted not masks, but rather other social distancing rules against mass gatherings because these rules threaten important collective gatherings at mosques on Islamic holy days and rites of passage. Masking, despite some

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ambivalence, is not "strange" or novel there, given that customary dress for Tuareg and other Nigeriens involves some form of head covering for modesty. The Tuareg men's turban/faceveil is distinctive because, in contrast to most women's headscarves, it is more extensive and covers not solely the head, but also part of the face.

How does the cultural/symbolic marking of face-covering work in the meaning-making of concepts of safety versus not safety (danger) , and what exactly is protected in I-Other relationships in relation to masks or no masks? In the Tuareg case, also relevant here is the mediating role, importantly noted by Levi-Strauss to mitigate structural polarities in myth (Levi-Strauss 1966) of Fatima as a member of the social category of traditional artisans called in Tamajaq inaden (approximately denoting smiths, artisans, or craftspersons) in these processes. This occurs through her continuing (albeit in modified form) some longstanding roles of smith/artisans. These include visual art production and journalistic-like media communication as traditional go-betweens for local chiefs, which, I show, can mitigate social polarization in ways similar to, and perhaps more effectively than health-care mediators. For in the United States, health-care spokespersons have become politicized, polarizing public figures, rather than mediators in knowledge construction. Americans who oppose masks tend to evaluate knowledge solely on the basis of whether or not they "like" and agree with a public spokesperson in other ways and on other issues. Indeed, artists, physicians, and scientists have varying expertise on COVID-19, and some (for example, a few American physicians) themselves spread misinformation on cures, (Lena Sun, *PBS Television News* Tues. Aug. 8, 2023).

Although *inaden* among the Tuareg are not necessarily apolitical, they usually reach a broader audience (Rasmussen 2013) because of their arts, and in Fatima's case, also the artistic mask advertisement via the UNHCR Internet site. In other words, even with the spiraling resurgence of the pandemic driven by the Lamba, Omicron and other new variants in the U.S., many Americans tended to listen to politicians with whom they agreed on other controversial issues. In Niger, as well, there is political conflict: most recently, the coup-d'etat led by soldiers in Niamey. But the junta's primary motive was not dissatisfaction with state policies on the pandemic, but rather, with the state's handling, under President Bazoum, of fighting militants affiliated with Boko Haram, ISIS, and AQIM in the Sahara and Sahel (Mednick, *Houston Chronicle/Associated Press* 2023: A33), The junta also opposed lingering colonialism in the presence of French troops there.

The point here is that, in contrast to the discourse of smith/artisans in Niger, the discourses of artists, physicians, and scientists in the US, though not all the same, reflected and intensified factionalism during the COVID crisis, rather than mediation during that crisis. Indeed, there were threats of violence against public health advocates and "official" public health and medical specialists (for example, Dr, Anthony Fauci) and others promoting masks and/or other health mandates. Among some Americans, I show, more hostile attitudes toward, and negative representations of head and face-coverings and their promoters, especially masks during the pandemic, reveal not solely concepts of literal contagion and sanitation, but also more symbolic pollution, expressed in politization, xenophobia, racism, and other stigmatizing, and also suggest the problematic construction of knowledge when politicians, more than scientists or artists become mediators in the dissemination of healthcare-related knowledge.

The Tuareg case in Niger does not completely exclude politics or inequality—given the remnants of pre-colonial ranked social statuses, sporadic post-colonial tensions between Tuareg dissidents and the state over regional and cultural autonomy, and more militant Islamist piety groups' 21st century pressures—resisted by many Tuareg—to implement *sha'ria* law, including more extensive coverings (Bourgeot 1994; Claudot-Hawad 1993; Hawad 2021; LeCocq 2010; Rasmussen 2019). But the American case, I contend, revolves around more exclusionary xenophobic projects of conferring negative connotations, even abject status symbolized by face-coverings and more broadly, what is perceived as different, ambiguous, and threatening.

In Tuareg communities, social distancing and hierarchy originated historically in pre-colonial social hierarchies of inherited, endogamous occupational groups based on descent, monopolization of resources, and some local pollution beliefs. But tensions, while not absent, are mitigated by accompanying expectations of reciprocal rights and obligations in longstanding though changing client-patron social relations. These include roles of smith/artisans as go-betweens or "ambassadors" in delicate matters: for example, negotiating noble marriages and interceding in chiefly and factional rivalries and battles (Rasmussen 2013). The situations in both countries, as in any cultural crisis, are evolving and inconclusive. I am not arguing here for "perfect closure" or complete efficacy of masking advocacy during COVID-19 in either setting. I am arguing that both the Niger/Tuareg and US/Texan cases suggest the importance, more broadly, of comparative analyses of mediating processes between polarized social categories and of cultural contradictions in concepts of pollution/contagion in health crises.

Notwithstanding historic, cultural, political, and economic differences, a number of factors at play in perception of danger are similar in both cultural settings. Even prior to the pandemic, many Americans, like many Nigeriens, have been experiencing social upheavals, tensions, and changes: namely, ecological crises and climate change, for example, weather extremes, especially heat, droughts, and floods, and persisting though changing sources of inequality in regional, rural/urban, ethnic, and class tensions; inflation; widespread unemployment; increased gaps in wealth in both countries; and political violence, as in the Washington DC riots after the 2020 elections in the United States and the most recent coup d'etat in Niger.

Relevant History and Ethnography of the Tuareg

Many Tuareg, Tamajaq-speaking, predominantly Muslim, traditionally ranked and semi-nomadic, reside in the Central Sahara and its Sahelian fringes. Occupations include oasis gardening, herding, artisan work, Qur'anic scholarship, local and itinerant trading, and migrant labor. Many remain rural and semi-nomadic, but some have settled in agro-pastoral oases, large market towns such as Agadez, and Niamey, the capital city on the Niger River. Major occupations no longer correspond exactly to inherited stratified social statuses (of nobles, tributary, smith/artisan, and descendants of former clients and enslaved peoples). Aristocratic elites no longer militarily dominate the subordinates. There are intermarriages and emergent new socioeconomic classes (Kohl and Fischer 2010; Rasmussen 2021a; Rossi 2016). Most modern leaders encourage identity on the basis of the Tamajaq language, not the old social hierarchies. Older ideals of "noble purity" were reconfigured into goals of regional cultural autonomy during the recent Tuareg armed rebellions. Yet some concepts of purity/pollution remain salient, though modified in encounters with biomedical concepts of contagion (Rasmussen 2017).

Since the mid 1980's, the IMF and World Bank-mandated monetarized and neoliberal privatized economy have impoverished many in Niger, propelling Nigeriens, including many Tuareg of all social backgrounds, into refugee flight, itinerant trade, and labor migration (Kohl and Fischer 2010). Recently, other Africans have also entered Niger in two-directional migrant and refugee flows across the Sahara: many seek to cross the Mediterranean and enter Europe or to return back home.

Amid these changes, some longstanding Tuareg cultural mores and social relations persist that are relevant to covering and masking. Many persons of diverse social backgrounds still appeal to what were traditionally noble (*ima-jeghen)* elite ideals to judging or critically commenting on personal conduct, in particular, positively valuing reserve, dignity, and modesty.

Both sexes value head-coverings and voluminous clothing from not solely cultural interpretations of Islamic religious devotion, but also mores of reserve/ respect/modesty and aesthetic style preference (Loughran and Seligman 2006). In general, mature, marriageable and married men, not women, should cover the mouth and nose with the face-veil/turban (*tagelmust*). Most Tuareg women are not forcibly secluded or fully veiled. Married women should cover the hair and nape of neck with either a headscarf (*diko)* or a more enveloping scarf/shawl (*tesoghelnet)*, depending on social context. Smith/artisan women tend to wear the same headscarf covering as do other Tuareg women, but the former tend to allow this to fall more loosely, and go bare-headed occasionally.

Coverings for both sexes, as noted, traditionally have several meanings and purposes: first, for modesty, reserve, and respect; and also for protection from evil spirits who enter through the bodily orifices (Claudot-Hawad 1993; Murphy 1964; Nicolaisen 1961). Men and women of aristocratic social background, as well as women who are more religiously pious or married into maraboutique clans or Arabic-speaking families, tend to observe these practices most strictly. Thus both sexes vary in degree and styles of coverings about the head, though the upper classes, as elsewhere, tend to dress more conservatively, and modesty/reserve/respect is ideally central to their practices. But this value can be "tweaked" on occasion.

On the one hand, traditionally-noble elite ideals of respect and modesty are widely held, but on the other, there are also some variations and counterdiscourses surfacing in subtle resistance by subordinates. I saw mothers discipline small children who urinated in the wrong place, (e.g. inside a compound or near cooking materials or a water-container) and always rebuked them by chiding, "*Wur ge takarakit*" ("there is no shame/reserve/respect").

Some rebellious urban youths, still unmarried because of unemployment, wear the men's faceveil only on formal occasions, instead opting for baseball caps which, marabouts lament, prevent proper praying postures.

In an urban household of a family of servile descent, one young man raised his face-veil, usually a sign of respect and reserve, exaggeratedly high when an older guest of noble descent entered who was perceived as important, but

also a bit arrogant. In this hyperbolic action, the former also subtly mocked the latter, and everyone laughed. The foregoing incidents reminded everyone of officially immature and subordinate youths' and descendants of enslaved peoples' informal power over reputations, which counterbalanced some lingering social prestige of parents, elders, marabouts, and noble elites. Such license, in the older social order, limited elites' transgressions and abuses of power (Nicolaisen and Nicolaisen 1997).

Most smith/artisan men wear the men's turban/veil, but less strictly: at a lower, less modest level (not covering the entire nose and mouth, as many men of aristocratic background still wear it). The more "relaxed" style of many smith men signifies their lack of or lesser reserve , explained to me as necessary in order to mediate between warring and/or marrying factions.

 The reason smith/artisans are less constrained by reserve/respect and modesty and are less strict about covering is to express their non-alignment, necessary in their mediating between families; for example, in negotiating of bridewealths and presiding over official events where tensions might arise between the state and local communities: namely, immunizations, tax-collection, school enrollments, aid distributions, and news dissemination.

Smith/artisans remain predominantly endogamous, and continue to dominate most artisan work, which was formerly rigorously guarded from others' practice by special taboos and sanctions (Rasmussen 2013). Male smiths work with metals, stone, and wood. Female smiths work with leather, style women's hair, circulate announcing important events, and apply henna to brides and new mothers during weddings and namedays. Smiths' forges are important centers of gatherings, sociability, and news. In the countryside, these specialists manufacture jewelry for gifts to women on marriage, make tools for housework, herding, and gardening, and serve food and sing praise-songs at their (formerly inherited but now freely-chosen) noble patrons' rites of passage. Smith's praise-songs often also contain critical/comical social commentary, thereby exerting much power over nobles' reputations. Some persons of smith/artisan backgrounds have become journalists and *animateurs* (emcees/hosts) at urban festivals, thereby re-working their longstanding social intermediary, artistic, and ritual roles flexibly to suit contemporary social needs. The point is that traditionally and currently, smith/artisans are important mediating figures in bringing disparate, often contentious parties together, in negotiating between leaders and followers, and in their critical social commentaries.

Until a series of droughts, noble elite patrons ordered items from smith/artisans. Until the decline in travelers from sporadic political and religious violence and the outbreak of COVID-19, African civil servants, European expatriate workers, and tourists ordered silver and gold jewelry from urban male smith/artisans and leather purses and pillow-cases from female smith/artisans, providing them with lucrative income. But these income sources have diminished. For some, such as Fatima, economic precarity and political violence uprooted them from longstanding important roles and close client-patron relations in their home communities. Yet for smith/artisans, it is often easier to adapt to new settings and encounters without abandoning completely their artisan, oral history, and critical social commentary roles.

Fatima, around 43, learned how to cut, dye, and embroider leatherwork as an adolescent near Menaka in eastern Mali, specializing in goat-hide travel sacks, women's leather hair ornaments, containers for perfumes and jewelry, and cradle/slings for babies.

After migrating to Niger to escape drought and violence, Fatima resided in a traditional Tuareg tent on the outskirts of Niamey, Niger's capital. At the height of the pandemic, she received a UNHCR-sponsored electric sewing machine for her needlework and mask business. She commented: "The outbreak of the coronavirus has heavily impacted my artisan business. When I cannot sell my artifacts, I don't have money to eat. Nowadays people are scared to leave their houses. Nobody comes to buy my (traditional) products"[2]

Thus, Fatima and some other refugees could maintain and re-fashion some connections with their "home" cultures by bringing their skills into a UNHCR mask-making project. This practice compensated Fatima for her loss of support from her impoverished and uprooted noble patrons in rural Mali, and enabled her to practice remunerative employment and integrate into a new community beyond local client-patron relationships. In effect, Fatima transposed smith/artisans' longstanding non-aligned and mediating role and skill onto disseminating health knowledge on the Internet and in person, through the NGO reporting of her mask-making and selling: the factions here were not descent groups, but those in Niamey who took the pandemic seriously versus those who did not and/or were tired of prioritizing social distance over other economic and religious needs.

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[2] https://www.uhcr.org/en-us/news/stories/2020/5/eabd6674/malian-refugees-niger-face-covers-prevent-coronavirus-spread. Marlies Cardoen UNHCR USA: May 1, 2020 html.

Moreover, smith women have generally closer association to women's bodies (in hair-dressing and applying henna to brides and new mothers). Most Nigeriens from other ethnic/cultural groups also assign a similar special status to smith/artisans, and still depend on smiths for many goods, services, and information.

Smiths' lesser reserve (*takarakit*) enables them to pronounce what others cannot. These roles can "bridge" local and national interests, as for example, in disseminating news, invitations of important events, and advice. The Tamajaq term *takarakit* is difficult to translate precisely, but approximately denotes reserve, avoidance, or social distance in most contexts (Casajus 1987), the opposite of what anthropologists call familiar joking relationships. In other contexts, it is used synonymously with "respect". This complex attitude varies, not solely rigidly by social class, but also more dynamically and indexically according to interaction. It is absent in relaxed relationships between age-mates and cousins and during conversations between persons of aristocratic background and smith/artisans. Smith/artisans tend to joke lasciviously, recite normally taboo names in genealogies, and include sexual innuendos in their songs.

In addition to reserve, respect, and modesty, also important to most Tuareg are dignity (*imojagh*) and honor/decency (*echechek)*. Proverbs expressing these mores include "if in the shade, dress like the shade", and "the (men's) veil and trousers are brothers", and above all, refer to respect for women, reminding men of Tuareg women's socially prominent position as "pillars of society" (Kohl 2009:76).

Around puberty, young men should start to wear the men's turban/faceveil, *tagelmust*, which conveys a man's increasing reserve/respect/modesty toward women, elders, chiefs, and potential parents-in-law, his economic stability, and readiness to marry. The turban is wrapped around the head in diverse styles, and the top of the veil usually rests on bridge of nose and the bottom falls across the face to the upper part of the chest. At its highest level, this covers a man's forehead so that when the veil is at its highest, there is only a narrow slit around the eyes. At its lowest level, it may fall below the mouth and chin, thus exposing the entire face. It is adjustable. Its styles vary according to social context and social status (Claudot-Hawad 1993; Murphy 1964), often elevated high before foreigners, elders, parents-in-law, and women.

With the passage to the status of *amangad* (cultural definition of a mature man), once associated with owning herds and managing caravans, a man could go to war, attend meetings, visit women in courtship, become engaged to marry,

and carry weapons. In advanced age, most drape the veil more modestly, hood-like over the sides of the head (Rasmussen 1997).

There is occasional politicization of the men's faceveil. Dissident fighters in armed rebellions wore green fabric in their veils. A few Tamajaq-speaking men have dropped this head-covering temporarily in multi-ethnic towns to avoid being scapegoated by state and army forces as "radical" Islamists or as dissident "rebel" fighters, especially following violence and negative stereotyping portrayals by some media of Tuareg men as "bandit-like", veiled "terrorists". In Niamey, for example, some non-Tuareg scapegoated veiled ethnic Tuareg men following a bomb explosion at Nigelec, the electric power station, which prompted Tamajaq-speaking men in Niamey to temporarily drop their turban/faceveil) to avoid being targeted and attacked unjustly as suspected "terrorists". Indeed, it has been others beyond Tuareg culture—both inside Niger and beyond, in Europe and the United States—who more often politicize these and other face-covering accessories. Tuareg men must remove their veils for national I.D. photos and at security and customs posts during international airplane travel.

In other words, although some tense political meanings can be communicated through wearing or not wearing the Tuareg turban/veil in some contexts, these head-coverings do not usually, within Niger, signify either subordination or resistance, but rather, protection, and between most Tamajaq-speakers, belonging and respect.

Women, like men, start to cover their hair and nape of neck on marriage, and tend to cover more closely about their mouth when elderly. Most Tuareg women's head-coverings are less enveloping than men's (Kohl and Fischer 2010; Loughran and Seligman 2006), though as noted, this varies according to one's religious devotion and influences of piety groups. Most women, like men, emphasize reserve and modesty in specific social contexts, but even their more enveloping *tesoghelnet*, a long, elegant, flowing cloth wrapped around the head and body, like the men's *tagelmust,* consists of different parts, all named and adjustable (Loughran and Seligman 2006), but does not usually cover a woman's entire face. The upper section, for example, is draped more closely about the head when in the presence of respected chiefs, Islamic scholars, or parents-in law. As observed, women of smith/artisan and precolonial servile or client backgrounds tend to wear more abbreviated head-coverings except at rites of passage or when visiting marabouts.

The point is that in Niger, most head and facial coverings still usually signify positive gender, age, and cultural constructs among many, important

nowadays for not solely those of noble elite background, but also for many Tamajaq-speaking prominent, respected, and successful men.

In sum, men's veil and women's headscarf/shawl among Tuareg are therefore counterparts rather than opposites of each other in their meanings. Also, the wearers themselves are not usually symbolically polluted, marginalized or stigmatized in most contexts; rather, their social distance in interactions among Tuareg implies belonging and protection. Both are first taken up in gendered rites of passage, emphasizing the process of protective blessing/benediction (*al baraka*), the attainment of social adulthood, (readiness to marry), and protection from both literal bodily and symbolic dangers. Most generally, therefore, wearing coverings about the head conveys positive social and economic belonging to others sharing Tuareg cultural understandings, the latter by men in the past expressing ownership of the camel, sword, and nowadays, expressing access to jobs, motorcycles, and cars, and the former by women, expressing engagement to marry or married status.

Both head-coverings are also associated with literal protection from some diseases: some fabrics' indigo, for example, prevents sunburn and other skin infections, but also protects from pollution from non-organic illnesses caused by evil spirits and from malevolent powers of anti-social humans. Thus, coverings and their meanings are related to widely-held local attitudes toward danger, fear, and pollution/contagion. As soon shown, these attitudes and concepts take different directions among Tuareg in Niger accustomed to covering the face and among Americans not accustomed to covering and/or who attribute very different, ambivalent meanings to it, in the U.S.

POWERS AND DANGERS

Pollution, Contagion, and Protection: The Tuareg Case

In Tuareg society, reserve, dignity, and decency, closely related to covering and veiling, are by extension also important in concepts of protection against pollution, contagion. Whereas human, spiritual, and physical dangers are distinctive in western biomedicine, these forces are not always separate in Tuareg conceptualization, often glossed in Tamajaq as "dangerous" (*wa labasen*).

Positive protective and negative destructive powers are dispersed, ambiguous, and not always predictable, not immutable or static. They can be inverted or reversed, thereby encouraging constant attention to protection from danger, which, as shown, is one important meaning of covering the orifices

among Tuareg. For example, there are widespread fears, elaborate theories of causation, and efforts to protect against anomalous births. Negative gossip, "evil eye/mouth" *(togerchet)* from political rivals of a parent also may cause certain birth defects, as was suspected in a case of a local chief's deaf-mute son.

Organic bodily contagion approximating western biomedical contagion is also recognized: some illnesses, for example, measles and diarrhea/dysentery, require the sick person to be isolated, resting on a mat or blanket or in a shelter outside villages and camps. One can catch a cold (or more precisely, a cold "catches" the person) from aromas, such as perfume.

Although widely-held Tuareg fears of danger do not rigidly separate pollution and contagion, many illnesses that are not microbe-based but socially, morally, or spiritually-based can become manifested by physical bodily afflictions, and prompt sufferers to seek additional (supplementary and complementary) medical treatments. The important point is that in Tuareg society, the boundaries between what are termed in English as "pollution" and "contagion" and "inorganic" and "organic" are hazy and fluid. Many rural, more nomadic Tuareg in the past feared hospitals and biomedically-trained staff at clinics and in mobile immunization programs because of political tensions with the state and perceived discrimination (Rasmussen 2001)). But nowadays, most go to hospitals when local healers recommend this, though many patients cannot afford the medicines prescribed (Rasmussen 2021b).

Relevant here are vaccinations. Tuareg are not unfamiliar with vaccinations since herders have much experience with inoculating livestock animals, and consequently there is somewhat less fear these days of human immunizations or vaccinations among most Tuareg than among Hausa in southern Niger and northern Nigeria. The latter, more sedentary agriculturalists, are less familiar with inoculating livestock, and are more influenced than Tuareg by some Islamist militant religious warnings against vaccinations: for example, rumors that polio vaccinations cause infertility, or during the pandemic, "conspiracy theories" in Niamey that COVID-19 was a "white man's racist plot against black Africans" (verbal communication, Scott Youngstedt, American Anthropological Association, Seattle, WA., Nov. 2022).

The infertility rumors, as well as some reports of conspiracy theories in Niamey that COVID-19 vaccinations were a racist "plot" to kill Africans, approximate the fears of some American "anti-vaxxers" who shun being vaccinated against COVID-19 from dread of alleged side-effects, and who politicize this simply because of the "push" toward vaccinations by public health researchers

and scientists perceived as "elitist" and/or as aligned with the Democratic party. But importantly, many American anti-vaxxers tend to conflate vaccinations with masking, as I elaborate on in the next section. Many American anti-vaxxers and anti-maskers (often the same people) take seriously which politician says it, rather than the message itself, though on the other hand, as Bodner et. al. (2021) point out, some "conspiracy theories" have a basis in fact: as noted, some minorities historically experienced trauma from past medical atrocities. By contrast, for cultural reasons, Tuareg tend not to conflate vaccinations with masking.

In Niger, who says what is also important, given the historic ambivalence toward biomedical physicians and nurses (particularly in Niger's North), control over reputations by smith/artisans, griots, and journalists through their verbal arts, and allegations of harmful side-effects by some Islamist piety-groups' leaders (particularly in Niger's South). But masking, especially of the face, tends to be less opposed in Niger than other social distancing that prevents people from assembling together since the latter limit religious and social gatherings; bringing people together is very important culturally. Overall, however, the main problems for Tuareg as for others in Niger are shortages of vaccines and other medicines, their deteriorating from harsh climate conditions during transport, and unequal access to privatized health-care. An additional problem arose in July 2023: the closures of borders and airspaces by the coup d'etat junta, which prevented medicines and foods from entering the country.

Covering, Danger, and Pollution/Contagion/Xenophobia: The American Case

I now analyze American data suggesting pollution beliefs from secondary academic and popular sources. These include media reports on pandemic masks and controversies over them and other protections (for example, vaccinations), as well as my informal observations in my over thirty years of residence, teaching, and public-domain newspaper- and Internet sources in Texas, in terms of their political and cultural bases and implications for the dissemination of knowledge.

Juxtaposed against the foregoing Tuareg data from Niger, these data reveal cultural contradictions, ways of experiencing and responding to dangers, problems of inequalities more generally in each society, and ambiguous, disputed, and changing meanings of coverings, pollution/contagion concepts, gender relations, and mediators' roles in the dissemination of medical and other

knowledge—whether evidence-based knowledge or opinion-based, for example, conspiracy theories that arise in times of trouble whose content, like myths and legends, is more important than their context, style, or evidence (Bodner et. al. 2021). As Bodner et. al. (2021) point out, however, some conspiracy theories have a "kernel" of a basis in some other "truth," such as vaccine hesitancy stemming from fear among African-Americans of medical atrocities such as the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study (Bodner et. al. 2021). In Niger, similarly, a few conspiracy theories alleging racist plots in Niamey surrounding COVID=19 precautions also had a "kernel" of truth to them in historic experiences of French colonialism and racism. However, in Niamey, Niger, importantly, the difference is that masking is not coupled with vaccinations and reactions to them, whether supportive or not, tend to also be disentangled. While masking is more acceptable as customary than vaccinations, the latter, as shown, are of difficult access and subject to some political and historic tensions.

In the United States during and following the Trump administration, social factionalism and polarization blazed on, as well as racist and other violence, anti-immigrant xenophobia, Islamophobia, and what I term general social "atomism" (hyper-individualism) emphasizing individual "freedoms' but also, paradoxically, conformity (Bellah 2007; Bernard-Levy 2006; Putnam 2001; Varenne 2006). Yet this cultural contradiction—of hyper-individualism, even social isolation, combined with uniformity— does not ensure social connections or mutual care, as for example, expressed in language and practice: the proliferation of "self-help" manuals, "do-it-yourself" requirements on and off-line, "selfie" photos, and the Internet platform (formerly) named "Facebook".

"Individual responsibility" in Texas, in particular, as articulated by Governor Abbott of Texas, is not connected to state-initiated collective or infrastructural support. For example, in 2021 during a resurging of the pandemic with variants, Abbott still insisted on relying on personal responsibility without connecting this to structural causes or effects beyond the individual—in effect, a Utilitarian theory of society, earlier expressed by the late British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who in the 1980s proclaimed: "There is no (such thing as) society, ... (there are) only individuals and families".

Prevalent (though not universally-held) individualist mores in the US do not translate into acceptance of difference, non-conformity, or policies promoting inclusive wellbeing. Some head-coverings, in particular those obscuring the face partically or entirely, beyond certain customary festival contexts, are associated with demonized religious or ethnic "others", such as "bandits", "terrorists",

and so-called "Islamic dress" (a misleading gloss or cover-term for the actual wide variety of culturally-elaborated coverings in different Muslim and other societies) (Abu-Lughod 2002; Renne 2013)). As in Niger, there is politization of some head-coverings in specific contexts, though specific meanings are not identical. So-called "Islamic dress" is not a stigmatized gloss in predominantly-Muslim Niger, though as noted, Tuareg men's head-coverings can be stigmatized and glossed as "terrorist dress" during political tensions. Again as in Niger, some coverings in mainstream American culture may express, on the part of the wearer, modesty or respect, but this often does not signify the same thing to other Americans who fear cultural differences and thereby create subsequent re-definitions of not solely religious, but also cultural meanings: as when this anthropologist heard many in Houston observe that "masking is not part of our culture".

Anti-masking rhetoric in the United States, as in Niger, also has some strongly- gendered meanings. But in contrast to the predominantly positive gendered meanings of Tuareg men's partial facial-covering, in American contexts there was gendered symbolic violence in denigration of mask-wearers during the Trump administration as "not real men". Perhaps more than any other force, at the height of the pandemic in the United States, the image of the maskless then-President Trump spoke to people, especially his base, appearing "defiant, masculine, invulnerable" (Wright 2021, 48). He knew the virus was dangerous, yet he dared the virus to touch him, "like Lear raging against the storm" (Wright 2021 ibid.). Millions of Americans emulated the then-President's bravado, and the unchecked virus prolonged unemployment, upended efforts to reopen the economy, and caused many more hospitalizations and fatalities (Medina and Gabriel 2020; Wright 2021). Some (including men wearing, ironically, the ubiquitous base-ball cap at rallies) called wearing a mask "buying into a hype", implying weakness, thereby suggesting some insecurity concerning masculinities in uncertain economic conditions.

Despite his germaphobia, Trump was over-confident in, and proud of his immune system, boasting on multiple occasions that he never gets (even) the flu. Yet eventually, COVID hit him hard. After his cutting-edge therapies, including monoclonal anti-bodies—importantly, a privilege not available to most Americans at that time in the prevailing American for-profit health-care system—he recovered (though did not "cover").

In the privatized health-care system imposed with mandatory restructuring in the 1980s, (Heller 2019; Keough and Youngstedt 2019), the Niger

case broadly resembles the American system's marked inequality in access to health care, for both similar and different reasons and effects. Vaccinations exist in both places, but are of unequal access, with challenges in distribution and uncertain reception. In Niger as well as the United States, as already noted, some persons shun inoculations—in rural northern Niger, recall, many Tuareg feared hospitals and mobile clinics until recently, from perceived contempt toward Tuareg patients by some staffs and from fear of authorities' using patients' treatment-seeking to take censuses and control nomads (Rasmussen 2001). Others in Niger (primarily in the South and in Niamey) based fears on some Islamist religious leaders' warnings against alleged negative side-effects such as infertility.

In the United States, gender is also significant. Facial covering among some Americans opposing it is associated with inadequate masculinity; whereas facial covering among most Tuareg is associated with just the opposite: successful masculinity. Why? Responses to adversity and inequality are distinctive among the Tuareg: men should be "tough", stoical, and successful economically, though also, ideally, modest, respectful, and reserved socially. In uncertain times, men should display fortitude and endurance. Interestingly, despite some changing uses, meanings and styles of some rebellious youths' and other subordinates' turban/veil, these mores do not translate exactly into overall disdain for facial covering on all occasions, since, recall, those persons still revert to the face-veil in more formal contexts. In other words, the Tuareg men's veil still generally signifies a respectful attitude and respected status.

When Trump was ready to return to the White House after three days in the hospital with treatment from the virus then not widely available to most other Americans, can "he considered hobbling out of the hospital and then yanking open his shirt to reveal a Superman logo" (Wright 2021, 53). Notably, his masculine imagery (of ideal, respected—though not respectful—male here was not being covered, but rather being uncovered. Strength and fortitude were not, in Trump's idiom, signified by the face-mask.

Facial masking in the United States can operate as a sign differently, however, according to context; for example, masks are worn without resistance in New Orleans, Louisiana and Galveston, Texas during Mardi Gras celebrations, recognized positively on those occasions as artistic and cultural heritage. But in contrast to the Tuareg case of positive gendered meanings of much traditional coverings and mores of modesty, respect, and reserve, where Fatima's mask artistry is chosen as a way to promote protection from COVID-19 in health

education in Niamey, in the U.S., the meanings of masks have become reconfigured negatively by some American politicians, who have expropriated their meanings by associating wearing protective masks during the pandemic with the denigrating of masculinity, and sometimes also with misogynistic tones. During the 2020 presidential campaign, for example, after (then- candidate) now-President Joe Biden described former President Donald Trump's reluctant attitude toward masks as "macho", Tomi Lahren, a conservative commentator and Fox Nation news host, remarked that Joe Biden "might as well carry a purse with that mask" (*Houston Chronicle* Sunday October 11, 2020, A38), thereby feminizing him. By contrast, one could say that "real men" among Tuareg should ideally cover the nose and mouth, as shown, for reasons of dignity, reserve, respect, and avoidance of pollution and/or leaving the low status as immature male (traditionally, enslaved and client persons were stereotyped as "like children") and transitioning to high status as mature adult male (formerly, also aristocratic elite).

Moreover, the Trump White House staff denigrated and mocked those there who wore masks. Later, a number of staff members—including members of the Secret Service—were diagnosed with the virus. Indeed, in contrast to the meaning of masculine veiling in Tuareg society, which usually signifies respect for leaders and elders, in the United States under Donald Trump it was from "fear of the boss in the West Wing" (i.e., then-president Trump) that aides did NOT wear masks to cover the nose and mouth, even as the pandemic surged. Those rare officials who did so were "ridiculed by colleagues as alarmist" (Karni and Haberman and Media and Gabriel 2020, 1-8). Some Americans continued to hold anti-masking parties, despite continuing cautionary warnings to return to gatherings gradually, given the new variants and low vaccination rates in some US regions, particularly the South.

In early April 2020, studies showed substantial reductions in transmission when masks were worn. On April 3rd, 2020, the C.D.C. finally proclaimed that masks were "vital weapons"[3], using a military trope widespread in western biomedical imagery of protection from disease (Martin 1995). Yet it was admitted that "when you have to change the message, the second message does not always stick" (Wright 2021, 48). Then-President Donald Trump stressed that

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[3] https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/03/826219824/resident-trump-says-cdc-now-recommends-americans-weare-cloth-masks-in-public https://Chicago.suntimes.com/columnists/2023/2/8/23591132/ced-exaggerated-evidence-supporting-mask-mandates-column-jacob-sullum

masking was voluntary, adding "I don't think I'm going to be doing it". Yet recall that Trump is a notorious germophobe. He hates shaking hands, and recoils when anyone near him sneezes. He once chastised Mick Mulvaney on camera in the Oval Office of the White House: "If you're going to cough, please leave the room" (Ibid.:48). Years earlier, Trump told "shock jock" Howard Stern that he had a hand-washing obsession.

How could such a man refuse to wear a mask in a pandemic? He has a horror of contamination from germs, but this horror from biomedical contagion, I contend, merges with symbolic pollution beliefs in xenophobic, class, gendered, and racist attitudes, and while not shared by all Americans, is widespread among extremists, for example, in the recent hate-crimes. Trump used contamination/pollution imagery in several of his speeches advocating "walling" out immigrants, during his 2021 trip with Governor Abbott to the Texas/Mexico border, in asserting dangers of "rapists" entering the United States and in using such expressions as "sh---hole countries", symbols of penetration, (organic) dirt, and pollution to designate some poorer nation-states. While pollution imagery also sometimes occurred in the pre-colonial ranked Tuareg society, its virulence, as noted, could be curbed and counterbalanced by subordinates' mediating roles and some influence over elites' reputations. Moreover, pollution/contagion ideas can become merged in a different direction—toward health-care rather than xenophobia.

In this light, pollution beliefs are not so "exotic" or exclusively found in places beyond the United States when one considers that in the United States, anti-maskers and "anti-vaxxers" also hold pollution beliefs that are unconfirmed by biomedical research. Health information is limited in both Niger and the United States, albeit for both similar and different reasons. In Niger, even though the privatization policies of structural adjustment have fallen out of favor, their negative effects remain: by 2016, for example, almost half the population lived on less than US$2 a day, economic opportunities beyond traditional subsistence farming and herding are uncertain and few, (Heller 2019) and preventative care is of more difficult access for most people. In the United States, preventative care exams diminished during the pandemic from fears of contagion, and healthcare and medications are generally of difficult and unequal access based on the profit-driven health-care system, and additionally, also by fewer opportunities to interact directly with people outside intimate information circles. In both countries, communication often takes place between like-minded friends and kinspersons or in selective social media, in an "echo-chamber" of opinions.

There were others in addition to Trump who participated in this discourse. Many people around him while he was President tended to follow his example: then-Vice President Pence visited the Mayo Clinic without a mask, violating hospital policy. Many Republican legislators shunned masks, even after members of their caucus became infected with COVID-19 (Wright 2021, 48).

Although Democrats were more likely to say that masks should always be worn, anti-masking and pro-masking have not fallen consistently along rigid party lines. Yet if a Democrat advocated this practice, this was more resisted by the anti-maskers. Only later did some Republican politicians begun to publicly advocate wearing masks. Yet most prominent Republicans, even those who wore masks, did not publicly exhort anti-maskers to mask up during the pandemic. Inexplicably, the Democratic legislators from Texas introduced earlier did not wear their masks while flying to Washington DC.

In the United States, with some exceptions, many rural people have tended to be more averse to mask-wearing than urban people, a direct inversion/contrast to the Tuareg case in Niger, where rural older and more conservative persons tend to wear head and bodily coverings more. Yet masks and other bodily and facial coverings are not exactly equivalent in their meanings, notwithstanding some local cultural familiarity with covering. Thus, the UNHCR hoped that Fatima as a skilled Tuareg smith/artisan and her mask-making and promotion would mediate between ambivalent forces by her re-directing of sociopolitical danger and pollution toward pandemic contagion through her artistry and generally positive responses to her mask products, and in effect, her re-defining of coverings' meanings conveying reserve/respect and protection from danger toward masking as protection from COVID-19. There was some efficacy in this strategy, at least in Niamey, the capital city, where a number of persons began to wear masks promoted by Niger's health ministry until around 2021, when "pandemic fatigue" and the need to pursue work for survival brought resistance to other forms of social distancing, in markets, mosques, and homes. Americans, similarly, were also understandably concerned about jobs and the economy, but more adamant than Nigeriens about resisting mask coverings, except for the ubiquitous baseball caps American men wear which, notably, do not cover the face.

Despite some successful efforts by artists in the US to promote masking through decorative cloth designs, many Americans still tend to listen to politicians they agree with, rather than to artists, physicians, or scientists. Why? Again, instructive here are conspiracy theories, as narratives/stories which

circulate in times of limited information, uncertainty, and fear (Bodner et. al. 2021; Stewart and Strathern 2004; West and Moore 2004). Some American anti-maskers (as well as anti-vaxxers) have called the Coronavirus "a hoax". There have been rumors, unsubstantiated, that masks thwart facial recognition (Telford 2020: B2), and fears that masks can inhibit classroom communication as schools reopen. Others have asserted that the "government" pushes masks in order to inflate pandemic fear and, more generally, to control Americans' personal liberties in times of crisis. Others believed that COVID-19 and its variants were not all that dangerous, and spread rumors that masks actually caused disease, debunked by specialists who caution that this may occur only if one does not wash or disinfect masks.

In the United States, in fact, wearing a mask encountered less resistance than self-isolation or quarantining. This reflected the more individualistic orientation of many despite the popularity of online social media, and also, often, a lack of choice: many people could not afford to stay at home and self-isolate because they needed to go out, and as in Niger, survive economically. In the US case, this confirms another cultural contradiction: the co-existence of both individualist mores and socioeconomic inequalities. There have emerged a few exceptions, however: one leader, the Governor of West Virginia, Jim Justice, issued a mask mandate, in press briefings read out the names of West Virginians who had died of COVID-19, and appealed to more collective mores in urging residents to "be great, loving neighbors" and wear the mask.

During re-surging of the pandemic variants later, Governor Abbott still refused to mandate masking. Political divisiveness did not produce a coordinated, collaborative response against the disease/enemy. Anti-maskers and anti-vaxxers who protested against mask mandate plans in Missouri, in fact, hurled racist insults at a public health official and threatened him with physical violence. Dr. Anthony Fauci received death threats, and a right-wing organization proposed to try him in a "court". Four men opposed to public health policies were tried for a plot to abduct the governor of Michigan. Rather than targeting the disease itself, protesters targeted and stigmatized proponents of masking, social distancing, lockdowns of indefinite duration, and vaccinating.

Some leaders and other Americans therefore politicize the meanings of social distancing protection against COVID-19 differently from the politics and meanings of that practice in much of Niger.

There are suggestions of changing attitudes in the offing, for example, creative aesthetic variations on masks (Popescu 2020, pp. A-14 and B-23),

recalling the artistry of Fatima the Tuareg smith/artisan in Niger, but in 2021 in the United States, when hospitalizations began to climb in the surging variants, many still did not wear masks at crowded events, and some "mask rage"-related physical violence occurred. In Houston, a waiter at a bar/café was violently attacked by a customer when the waiter reminded the customer that masks were required by the café owner in order to enter that establishment.

Conclusions

In all societies, fear can be used as a weapon for ideological domination, but in different ways. Among Tuareg in Niger, as in the United States, fear of exposure to danger can also be politicized, for example, in traditional scapegoating of subordinates in sorcery and witchcraft accusations and in some tensions between different regions, ethnic groups, and social classes. In both countries and elsewhere, heated debates and scapegoating over risk, uncertainty, and misfortune often occur in wider upheavals, debates, and ambiguities over danger, inequality, and power.

In the United States, as in Niger, there have been climate disasters, disruptions of balance of political powers, increasing social, economic, and regional inequalities, and increased violence. In the U.S., as shown, some groups are demonized for political reasons, as in the racist comments by Donald Trump such as his designating of certain immigrants as "rapists" (in effect, as sexually polluting), and his designation of some countries as "sh---hole" countries during his first campaign. Those designated as marginal or not depends, among other factors, upon the political regime (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Douglas 1992). In the U.S. recently, there is an alarming rise of hate groups and racism incited by some politicians. Thus, the rise of racism-related hatred is related to politicians' ideological agendas that appeal to fears of increasing polarization of wealth in the United States. In Niger, some groups are similarly demonized during times of trouble, as in, for example, the negative stereotyping and scapegoating of Tamajaq-speaking men wearing the *tagelmust* by some non-Tuareg residents of Niamey after the Nigelec bombing.

Latent stereotyped beliefs emerge regularly in specific crises. These enable a community to restructure itself by absolution from certain specified moral obligations, as in Mary Douglas's examples of elders in the Congo and lepers in medieval Europe (Douglas 1992, 90). Context is important. As Rasmussen (2013) argued in an analysis of rural Tuareg witchcraft-like beliefs concerning

rural smith/artisans' alleged ritual powers, such accusations vary across spaces and change over time, and some tensions can be mitigated with non-aligned intermediaries.

During the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, Fatima benefited from easily-adaptable artisan skills, a socially interstitial or intersectional position in Niger's capital city where smiths/artisans experience less accusations of malevolent ritual powers than in the countryside, and the timing of her refugee flight from Mali to Niger, during an acute need to protect from virus contagion. There, she was less vulnerable to accusations of smiths' traditional ritual polluting danger, which still sometimes occur in the countryside upon others' misfortunes. In other words, her urban protective mediating role against contagion in healthcare "overrode" the negative "downside" of accusations of malevolent powers causing the disease.

The socially hierarchical and economically unequal profit-driven health care policies in the United States were not consciously or explicitly connected to "pollution beliefs". However, the imagery and signifying practices of Trump's health-related discourse came close to doing so. The point is that his discourse had consequences: of intensifying polarization of Americans and implied pollution beliefs in fear, transposed into xenophobia and racism, culminating in hate crime increases and ultimately, the post-election violence in Washington DC. Anthropologists must therefore consider commonalities and variations in danger/pollution and unequal access to healthcare over time and space. Globally and nationally, socioeconomic inequities between the global north and the global south, between wealthy and poor, and rural and urban populations in the distribution of medical resources recall Ginsburg's and Rapps' analysis, in another context, of stratified medicine in the politics of reproduction (Ginsburg, Rapp 1991). In Niger and some other African countries during the COVID period, there were delays and unequal economic and medical access to vaccinations, despite the extra, still-unused supplies of vaccines in the United States, though later efforts were made toward wider vaccine distributions to poorer countries. In Niger, for example, AstraZeneca and Sino vaccines became available in mid-2021.

Thus my findings suggest some approximate parallels between these cultural and national settings in degrees of politicization of covering, though the bases, meanings, and effects of politicization of covering in each setting differ. The foregoing findings also suggest that class and gender—in particular, masculinities--play a prominent role in both communities' cultural mores, symbolic

imagery, and political relations surrounding coverings, though in contrasting ways in each setting.

The making of masks in Niger by Fatima, the smith/artisan, also reveals new interactions, re-purposings, and re-arrangements of meaningful signs, shaped by longstanding social contextual meanings and cultural mores, as shown in transferring skills in Tuareg art to health projects. Fatima's art became focused on covering already familiar to many residents of Niger in ordinary daily life. Less familiar and more resisted for some in southern Niger and the capital city, was the Niger health ministry's focus on preventing gatherings for social distancing—hence some contradictions and mixed reactions there.

These processes recall the insights of Roland Barthes (1964) on the contextual elaboration, and motivated "performances" of signs and the insights of Michael Silverstein (1976) and Charles Peirce (1991) in social semiotics and the indexicality of signs as more nuanced in meanings, as manipulated in practice with re-constructed meanings subsequent to initial meanings. People make meanings of a face mask as an object related both to self (because it is something worn on the face) and to others (as exhibited in public) (Tateo 2021, 132). As a modification of bodies, masking reveals complex semiotic layers of meaning (Valsiner 2018). As Tateo (2021, 131) points out, meaning-making deals with the ambivalence of human existence, as signified in the mask, which evokes safety and fear and mediates in the auto-dialogue between "I" and "Me" through the "Other". This hetero-dialogue is characterized by some ambivalence in both Niger and the United States, albeit for distinct reasons and with different meanings.

Thus masking, not universally accepted, is a powerful sign that not only re-defines, but also draws on pre-existing cultural meanings of covering: in Niger among many Tuareg especially, as modesty and respect, thereby modifying and adding on new emergent meanings, but not completely transforming them. This is in contrast to the more extreme, polarizing "shock-wave" of facial covering's cultural novelty and association with racialized perceived cultural "outsiders" in the United States. Although persons of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds tend to cover modestly in Niger, among the Tuareg cultural familiarity with covering about the head and (among men) face, notwithstanding some changes and variations, translates more easily into masking against the pandemic.

As the pandemic and other events tragically play out in Niger, what the future holds is difficult to predict. As one of the poorest countries in the world,

the need for additional medicines is now even more urgent in the wake of the July 2023 military coup d'etat against the then-President Mohammed Bazoum and subsequent announcing, by some countries to Niger of withdrawal of aid to Niger unless the military junta agreed to re-instate the president. As of this writing, (August 2023), some lingering COVID rates have become obscured from media attention by the July 2023 coup d'etat; national and international focus is on the military junta, whose energies began moving toward ejecting French troops (Mednick, *Houston Chronicle* Aug. 6, 2023, A33). In the ensuing turmoil, healthcare will undoubtedly suffer from both withdrawal of some international aid and a likely increase in political violence. Fatima's continuing support by the United Nations agency UNHCR cannot be confirmed yet.

What is important in the present analysis is that, regardless of future results of political upheaval in Niger, the point still stands that insights from a comparison of covering's cultural meanings in Niger and the United States reveal how the mask and masking can convey fear, respect, reserve, and protection, or danger, and can cultivate or incite them. Prominent in the United States, despite its diversity and vastness, was a rigid binary opposition used in the language of health educators and popular media promoting masking: between science and "anti-science" (in effect, "contagion versus pollution") regarding the pandemic. Indeed, this "slippage" into binaries is difficult to avoid even in scholarly analyses of "pollution" and "contagion", reminding anthropologists of the need for quotation marks and caution with these and related epistemological labels and categories, such as "religion", "magic", "science", of longstanding concern in anthropology. Some "slippage", while hopefully minimized here, prompts critical awareness not simply that (already a truism in anthropology), but how these boundaries blur and shift across and within cultural settings. In other words, the broader value of the foregoing analysis is that we need to be critically reflexive and sensitive concerning the power of language and politics to frame understandings of danger.

More broadly, this analysis draws attention to the challenge of minimizing cultural bias in labeling or classifying systems of thought, whether "pollution", "contagion", that anthropology has long grappled with. Perhaps it is not possible to completely escape the limits of language or politics. What is possible is to show how there are both similarities and differences between cultural attitudes toward danger, as revealed by the symbolism and politics of promoting covering or rejecting covering, the danger and fear-related imagery used in doing so, and the importance, in analyzing these processes across cultural settings, of

grounding this imagery in social, political, and economic contexts. The foregoing data and analysis alert scholars to the need to be aware of the politically constructed, shifting boundaries between epistemological categories assumed to be immutable or mutually-exclusive.

American mask-wearers have tended to recognize health concerns more than non-masked persons, and for some time, at least, wore their masks for these reasons. Yet even some mask-wearers, like many anti-masking persons, have also politicized masks and masking. In contrast to Tuareg head and face coverings, American masks in effect signify not belonging, prompting ambivalence and ambiguity in the fragmented and polarized society.

The meanings of face-covering, whether among Tuareg in Niger or Americans in the United States, is also about much more than prevention of (biomedical) literal organic contagion in individual interactions. In contrast to the US, however, where "pollution", "contagion", and "anti-science" and "science" categories tend to be opposed and ranked, in Tuareg society, concepts approximating the western categories of symbolic pollution and organic contagion are neither rigidly hierarchical evolutionary "phases" nor mutually-exclusive, bounded categories (Rasmussen 2006). In effect if not conscious intention, Tuareg smith/artisan's mask-making foregrounds an additional form of purification, becoming a protection against not solely danger in the local idiom of "pollution", but also against biomedical danger approximating the western idiom of organic "contagion". In the United States, the reverse has occurred: anti-masking discourses of some politicians and others show a counter-discourse, from biomedical organic "contagion" concern to symbolic and political "pollution" concern with danger: in xenophobia and regional, class, and gendered discord. Here my intent was not to valorize or judge one cultural setting's categories of danger and protection as "more or less logical" over those of the other cultural setting; rather, I have sought to explore how symbolism and power articulate in tension in contexts of fear of danger in each cultural setting.

Thus, cultural and social responses to COVID-19, immediate and long term, can yield nuanced meanings of responses to affliction, fear, and danger.

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