



Participants in the Imzad teaching workshop in Agadez

## In Niger, preserving the cultural practice of Imzad strengthens women’s roles as messengers of peace

In Niger, a society where the public space is usually occupied by men, female Imzad musicians are an exception and assume a powerful role in society. The Imzad, a single-stringed bowed instrument that has accompanied the Tuareg communities of Algeria, Mali and Niger for centuries, is only played by women, and is used to pass messages of peace and social cohesion.

“In our culture, women who play the Imzad, you have to respect them and what they have to say,” explains Tamlait Tababekou, one of a handful of women in Niger who still know how to play this ancient instrument, which in 2013, was included in the UNESCO’s [Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity](#).

For the Tuareg, an Imzad is more than an instrument — it is an expression of identity and calls for the respect of *ashak*, a code of conduct and shared values. “Imzad is not only a musical instrument, it’s a whole culture. When people listen to the Imzad, they cannot do bad things, it calls them to be good and honest.” explains Tababekou.

Tababekou realized that this cultural practice might end if she did not teach the skill -- and the values of respect and honor associated with the music -- to the next generation.

In 2016, through the Niger Community Cohesion Initiative (NCCI), IOM Niger began supporting Tababekou to organize teaching workshops where she could pass on her knowledge to 15 young women in Agadez, a city in central Niger known as ‘the gateway to the Sahara desert’. A parallel workshop was organized in Gougaram, a small town farther north in the Sahara, by Almadinaht Ibrahim, who has played the Imzad her entire life.



Tababekou and Ibrahim



Impressions from the Imzad crafting workshop and the final performance at the court of the Sultanate

The NCCI is a program financed by USAID's Office for Transition Initiatives working in some of Niger's most remote areas to strengthen social cohesion and create community resilience to the threat of violent extremism. The program recognized the important role that Imzad music can play to promote the active role of women as positive agents of change in their communities. Strengthening the cultural identity of local communities also aims at making a society more resilient to extremist ideology.

Imzad music provides women with a public platform for expression and identification and facilitates exchanges between youth and older generations. In a society where youth often complain about a lack of involvement, the Imzad opens up an important space for young women to make relevant messages heard.

"When we play the Imzad, we can transmit messages of peace and social cohesion. We can help to make our village a safer place," explains a trainee from Gougaram. The Imzad training connected young women from very different backgrounds and allowed the young trainees to understand the role that they can play for the stability of the region by sensitizing others.

"People who play Imzad change," says Tababekou. "The young women who learn Imzad learn respect and are respected." In each workshop, young women learnt how to craft the instrument from local materials, decorated it and learnt how to play it.

After months of practice, the young women recently convened for their first public performance at the court of the Sultanate in Agadez. The day of the concert, excitement filled the air. The young trainees, dressed in the traditional dress of the Tuareg, took the stage in front of the region's highest authorities and a cheering crowd, who came in large numbers to pay their respect to the young trainees and the revered teachers. The girls started to play, a bit timid at first, but quickly gained confidence, moving the audience with their melodic tunes.

"When I play the Imzad, I feel very good. I feel like I have more power," Mariama one of Tababekou's young trainees said with a big smile after her performance. "I got a lot of support from my family and friends. And when I practice in the evenings, the neighbors join to hear me play."

Tababekou will continue teaching the young girls and hopes that one day some of them will decide to become Imzad trainers themselves. The NCCI will continue to support the training sessions and will soon bring the two teams from Agadez and Gougaram together to exchange techniques, encourage the young women to be respected leaders and continue conveying positive messages to future generations.

To learn more, watch a video on the Imzad training [here](#) (Only available in French).