

**THE *IMZAD* AND TUAREG MUSIC: GENDER DEBATES VERSUS BELIEFS,  
VALUES AND PROMOTIONS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper discusses the Tuareg people of the Central Sahara, outlining salient issues relating to the imzad (a Targai musical instrument) and gender. It examines the various ways in which gender and gendered meanings are derived in musical instruments. Drawing upon Veronica Doubleday's theory on gendered meanings constructed within relationships between humans and musical instruments, the paper examines the dual instrumental monopolies of the Targai (Tuareg women musicians) and the Targui (Tuareg men musicians) living in the region of Mali, Niger and Algeria. It argues that gendered monopolies and dominance in music and musical instruments is not a necessary debate; beliefs, value systems and hereditary among other factors, may necessitate the observed male-female monopolies in music performances (voice or instrument). Our cultural beliefs, values and safeguarding practices are of more importance when rightly channelled by our indigenous music, they can attract investors and promotions on the international scale. The paper contributes to the vast ethnomusicological literature on music and gender.*

**Keywords:** Musical instruments, Gendered meaning, Gendered identities, Male dominance, Music monopolies.

**INTRODUCTION**

From one nation and culture to another, we observe what has been termed as “gender roles” in music performance. Schulenberg (2000) elucidates on its historical antecedents when he noted that “from the Renaissance period, organists became a distinct class of male professional musicians and players of other instruments, formed exclusive male guilds serving the permanent church and court ensembles”(p. 75). Furthermore, conducting an

orchestra or choir was a “male-gendered role” in many cultural contexts. The Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra is said to have admitted its first female member – a harpist in the year 1997, reflecting the degree of male-dominance in this field of music. One outcome of male dominance in a musical instrument is the relegation of women to singing and dancing roles. However, the *imzad*, a female-gendered instrument is one of a few musical instruments that put the discussion on male-dominance on a reverse direction.

The *imzad* is a female-gendered traditional musical instrument that has gained worldwide recognition in recent times. Over the years, musical instruments of various kinds have acquired differing gender identities and associations. The gendering nature of the *imzad* initiated some thoughts on the need to balance the on-going debates on musical instruments and gender. This paper examines the Tuareg and *imzad* regarding its values and the traditional beliefs surrounding it as well as its earned international promotions. It discusses gender in the context of “the behavioural, social and cultural attributes associated with biological sex” (Coleman, 2003, p. 299).

Our discussions and analysis of Tuareg and the *imzad* traditions are drawn mainly from fieldworks and researches of ethnomusicologists as well as from video clips on YouTube channels. A survey of various research studies demonstrates that *imzad* traditions are extracted from fieldworks and ethnomusicological researches (Stiglimayr & Födermayr, 1970; Mecheri-Saada, 1986; Brandes, 1990). We consider it necessary to note vital information on the Tuareg people regarding their origin and locations etc, to establish a background for our discussion on their cultural traditions and practices that relate to their music and the *imzad*.

### The Tuareg Sahara Nomads

The Tuareg people of the Sahara Desert and Sahel, the transition zone in Africa between the Sahara to the North and the Sudanian Savannah to the South, belong to a large Berber ethnic confederation which includes south-western Libya, northern Senegal, Southern Mauritania, Central Mali, Northern Burkina Faso, the southern Algeria, Niger and northern Nigeria (See Figure 1. Also see Brito, Tarroso, Vale & Martínez-Freiría, 2016, pp. 372-373).

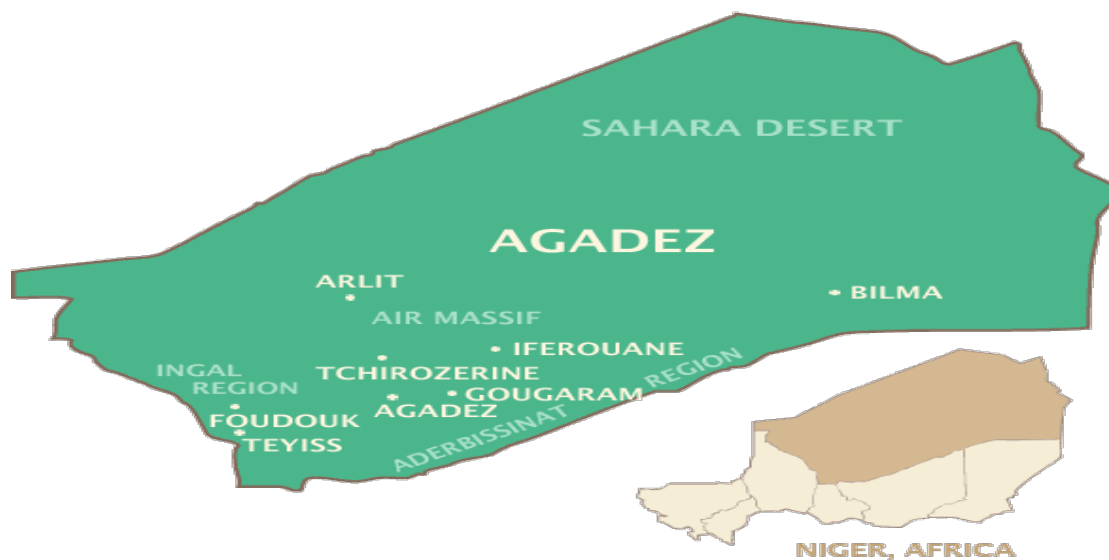


**Figure 1.** Map of the Sahel and Sub-Saharan West Africa showing the Tuareg region.

[www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3131511/Sex](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3131511/Sex) (Accessed on March 27, 2019)

“Tuareg” is said to be an Arabic word widely used by the French, meaning, “abandoned” implying, abandoned by the gods. Another source argues that it could be derived from Targa, the name of a city in south Libya. The Tuaregs are not comfortable with this term; they prefer using the term ‘Imashaghen’ or Imohag (Imuhar), meaning ‘free men’. The Tuareg people are

popularly known as “the nomadic tribes of the blue veil,” because of their traditional indigo-dye coloured cloth that they wear. This coloured cloth usually colour their skin blue or rather indigo. They have their territorial geographical centre in the Ahaggar region of the central Sahara Desert, with its administrative headquarters at the Tamanrasset - Fort Laperrine (Holiday, 1956, p. 48). There are four main groups of Tuareg namely Ahaggar, Tassili-n-Ajjer, Adrar des Ifoghas, and Air” (Seligman, 2006, p. 56). A very popular city of the Tuareg is *Agadez*, a city in central Niger known as “the gateway to the Sahara” (See Figure 2. below).



**Figure 2.** Agadez region in Central Niger with Coordinates 16°58'0"N 7°59'0"E; it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Agadez is the largest region in Niger, covering some 394,000 square miles – 52% of Niger; almost all is the Sahara Desert. The region is the heart of Niger’s nomadic homelands and is populated by approximately 500,000 widely dispersed people (<http://rain4sahara.org/our-work/where-we-work/agadez>). Accessed March 5, 2019

The language of the Tuareg (or in its purer form, *twarek*) is called “Tamasheq” (in the northern region) and Tamachek in the more populous southern region (Seligman, 2006, p. 58). These languages belong to the Berber branch of the Afroasiatic family. It is said to be a

tribe of semi-nomadic people with mixed religion of paganism and “lip service Islam,” that is, not strictly active Muslim practitioners (Seligman, 2006, p. 62; Holiday, 1956, p. 49). They are known for being “religious opportunists,” who believe and practice what suits them best.

From historical records, a large part of the Tuareg ethnic group traces their lineage to the fourth century queen, Tin Hinan (Seligman, 2006). In addition, some ancient scholars have advanced that Islam was introduced to this region of the Tuareg in the seventh century and then the “Islamic penetration intensified with the Hilalian invasion across North Africa of nomadic Bedouins from central Arabia in the eleventh century, driving many pastoral nomads further south into the Sahara or beyond” (Seligman, 2006, p. 58). Furthermore, the Tuareg are known to be predominantly nomads and agriculturalists, although, there are a few city dwellers with various social strata referred to as “castes” under the leadership of so called, “nobles” or *ihaggaren* or *imajeren* (Seligman, 2006, p. 59).

The Tuareg society is known to be a matriarchal society, hence, as Holiday (1956) states, “although authority appears to be invested in the male, in so far as tribal groups are administered by the *Amenokal* or king, it is through the women that heredity is determined” (p. 49). For example, if a woman outside the Tuareg tribe gives birth to a child for a Targui (Tuareg man), that child will not be Tuareg; but if a Targuia (Tuareg woman) gives birth to a child for a foreigner, that child will have a direct Tuareg descent. This socio-cultural practice strengthens the gender-based perspective of the *imzad* as it reveals the high position of the Targuia in the Tuareg society and consequently, the value attached to this gender-sensitive instrument, the *imzad*. Another special characteristic that distinguish the Tuareg from other tribes in the Northern African region is that their women never cover their faces, although they wear a head covering, which most times, is a blue veil (Seligman, 2006, p. 68). On the

hand, the Tuareg men (Targui) are seldom seen unveiled. This they wear as they approach manhood and it's worn continually, even during eating or drinking, and not even in his tent or in the presence of his wife (Seligman, 2006, p.68) as shown in Plate 1. The significance of the dress pattern of the Targui is the belief in divine protection from evil spirit entering to take control of them (Seligman, 2006).



**Plate 1.** The Targui (Tuareg men) and Targuia (Tuareg women). Courtesy CNRPAH, 2011.

<https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/practices-and-knowledge> (Accessed February 27, 2019)

### **THE IMZAD**

There are hundreds of traditional musical instruments domiciled in many communities around the world. Examples of African traditional instruments include the *turkana*, *samburu* (Kenya); the *Kakaki* (Nigeria); the *zummarah* (Egypt); the *maqrurah* (Libya and Tunisia). However, our focus in this paper is on the *imzad*, a Targai musical instrument known for its unique gendered meanings. Our interest in this gendered instrument of music is based on its internationally acclaimed recognition and the culturally established values, practices and beliefs surrounding the musical instrument which we perceive are some of the reasons for the

recognition and promotions internationally. The melodious sound that resonates from the *imzad* and its music is the pride and joy of the Tuareg culture. Tamanrasset in southern Algeria is considered the ‘home of the *imzad*’. The *imzad* is a single-stringed instrument played with a curved-round bow that uses horsehair. The body of the stringed instrument, is made of a half gourd (calabash) or wood (sound box) that is covered by animal skin - a stretched membrane often goat skin. The neck of the *imzad* is rough and normally projects at about 12 inches, on which the single-string lies over a bridge made up of two short pieces tied together to form a shallow “V” which is finally tied to the curved neck (Borel, 1991; Erica Friendach, USAID 2019) as depicted in Plate 2). The *imzad* collected by De Bary Harald Kruger in the region of Ghadames among the Tuareg in 2004 was of these measurements: total length = 66; diameter of calabash/gourd = ca. 29-30; diameter of sound holes = 4; Height = 14; bow B = 24.5 (Teffer, 2018). Although the origin of the *imzad* remains uncertain, Brandes (1991) postulates that for the Tuareg, the *imzad* (or *amzhad*; the plural, *imzaden*, meaning “hair”) is more of their expression of identity (p. 37).



**Plate 2.** The Tuareg’s *Imzad*. Courtesy of CNRPAH, 2011

The *imzad*, according to Holiday (1956), gets “its name from the bowstring, which is made from the hair of the women” (p. 50). However, another source says that in the Tuareg language, the *imzad* at first means ‘horse’ because the bow string is made of horse hair (Elsner & Kubica, 1983, pp. 136-137); many other sources agree with the latter position. Borel (1991) notes that “the playing techniques of the *imzad* is such that the internal ‘tempo’ of the melodies is expected to be ‘felt’ rather than rationally measured” and that characteristic ornamentations, are generated by “unconscious motory impulses” (p. 113). *Imzad* combines music and poetry whose theme varies from love, women, honour, the landscape, as well as journeys, an important interdisciplinary nature of the *imzad*. Borel (1991) outlines the four traditional forms in *imzad* music: (1) men’s songs with *imzad*, (2) *imzad* accompanied by male vocalizing, (3) *imzad* solo and finally (4) women’s songs with *imzad* (p. 114). This is with respect to the ethno-geographical context within which the Kel-Ahaggar play their music. Borel (1991) further maintains that the “melodic pattern of the songs, for instance, is often compared to the mountainous profile of the surrounding massif” with the titles of the songs frequently having reference to domestic and wild animals (p. 112-113). A value of the *imzad* is in its use to accompany popular songs that glorify the adventures and feats of past heroes. Its music is known to be hypnotic and passionate. In addition, the performances of songs and poetry with the *imzad* epitomize a high socioeconomic value among Tuareg nomads. A virtuous performer of Tuareg music with the *imzad*, which is highly valued in Bedouin culture, can obtain a high social status through her musical skills.

The various musical genres (Brandes refers to them as “forms”) of the Kel-Ahaggar and of the contexts within which they are performed include dance and wedding songs, lullabies, dances from northern Algeria, *tindé* drum songs, flute music, and religious songs. Brandes maintains that the main functions of these musical genres include: transmission of history,



incitement to social cohesion, the context of a therapeutical process, expression of joy, regeneration through contemplation, education through identification with cultural heroes, and cultural identity (Brandes, 2004). The *imzad* is often accompanied with some percussion instruments such as a tom-tom, which is made of a stretched gazelle skin and can be tuned by damping it with water. Brandes (2004) further stated, “When the tom-tom is dried, it produces a treble note and when it is wet, it produces a bass note” (p. 192). Alongside this percussion instrument is group handclapping. In Tuareg music and culture, a song is called *Asahar*, the rhythm is called *Azal*, while special songs which are performed by women at weddings are called, *Aliwen* and a dance song is called *Ezale* (Classic Music and Poetry in the Sahara Desert, [http://imuhar.eu/site/en/imuhartuareg/music\\_poetry.php](http://imuhar.eu/site/en/imuhartuareg/music_poetry.php)).

The *imzad* has been a companion of the nomadic people of the Sahara and the Sahel in their everyday life for many decades. Its position in the musical tradition of the Tuareg is highly noteworthy. The unique playing technique, traditions, beliefs and practices regarding the *imzad* earned it its UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity recognition in 2013 (Agada, 2015, p. 354). There is a belief that the *imzad* should be played by young and beautiful girls who accompany their songs with it (Teffer, 2018) and men fear curse if they play the instrument. It is also believed that in playing the *imzad*, the musician must sit upright with legs crossed (See Plate 3). The instrument must be put on the legs of the musician with the resonator being positioned close to the player’s body, while the neck is held obliquely from the body, although, this technique varies from location to regions. The curve bow is held in the right hand while the left fingers are positioned at specific spots of the string to determine the various pitches (Teffer, 2018).



**Plate 3.** Showing the sitting position for playing the *imzad* (Courtesy Erica Frendach, USAID)

### **GENDER DEBATES VS. BELIEFS, VALUES AND PROMOTIONS**

The male-female gender tussle in different musical genres is not uncommon in African cultures. Ozah (2010) describes “ÉgwúÀmàlà” as “a *women’s* dance genre that employs music, dance and drama as media for enacting the culture of the Ogbaru community” (p. 21). Ozah’s research explores the phenomenon of men entering the dancing space of égwúàmàlà, traditionally a sphere belonging exclusively to women (p. 21). In like manner, the *imzad* defines a music genre exclusive to women and when men attempt to learn and play this instrument of music, they are said to be entering the musical space of women and they are said to be at a threat of a curse. Now, the gourd trumpet, *Òpì*, used during the performance of égwúàmàlà in Ogbaru community, is played only by men, the *qlogba* (p. 29). So, we observe that in this music genre and dance performance male-female gender monopolies and meanings are derived.

The theoretical submissions by Veronica Doubleday (2008) on musical instruments and their gender relations provide a basis for our discourse on the *imzad*. The main tenet of Doubleday's theory on musical instruments is that, as commodities, musical instruments lend themselves to various forms of contest and that through monopolies and taboos, one gender group may claim possession over an instrument to the exclusion of another resulting in the gendering of that instrument. In line with this theory, Nzewi (2014), suggests that "some African drums evoke or generate mystical energies that inform design and usage" (p. 137) which in turn results in gender demarcations and preferences. So, musical instruments are gendered through "specific choices of material" as in the case of the double-headed *kwelli* drum of Tibesti, Chad Republic, which is usually made from the wood of a male acacia and restricted to use by male aristocrats (Brandily, 1990, p.152), through "male-female paired symbolism", as in the case of the two similar ritual flutes of New Papua Guinea, designated male and female, which must be played together with a hocketing technique (Lutkehaus, 1998, pp.245-246) or, in the case of the Tibetan Damaru drum which is traditionally made from the human skulls of a man and a woman (Doubleday, 2008; Helffer, 1984).

The gendering of musical instruments can be acquired by the relationship between the musical instrument and people. Kirkham and Attfield (1996) made it clear that "power and meaning in physical objects are constructed as the product of relationships between the objects and people" (p. 2). This relationship could exist based on the gender of the manufacturer or maker of the musical instrument. Although, the gender relations found with the *imzad* may have nothing to do with "specific choices of material" used in making the instrument or with the male-female paired symbolism earlier described, it seems to have something to do with the relationship that could exist based on the gender of the manufacturer. The *imzad* is made and played only by the female-gender. This reserved

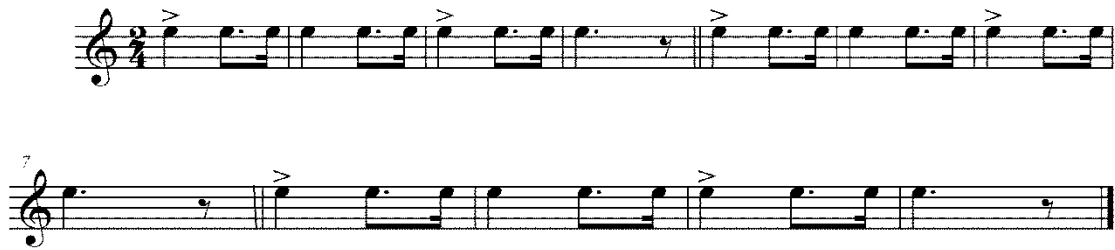
privilege amounts to a high prestige and independence for the Targai. This also establishes the very important role played by the female-gender in Tuareg communities, their words are considered very important.

Hereditary is another factor why some musical instruments are monopolized by a gender or class; instances of this type include when specialized knowledge of that instrument is handed down from father to son or nephew or from mother to daughter. This applies to the gender-relations regarding the *imzad*. Some Tuareg women have been making efforts to transfer the knowledge of the *imzad* from one generation of young girls to another with the intention of preserving the instrument from going into extinction as well as the cultural practices associated with it. Tamlait Tababekou is among a handful of local female musicians who play the *imzad* in Niger. She is recognized, particularly for her efforts in training young women of the next generation to play the *imzad* with the intention of preserving the cultural practice and the values of respect and honour associated with the *imzad* and its music (Ruge, 2018; see plate 4).



**Plate 4.** Young women with their *imzads* and their trainer, Tamlait Tababekou (seated right), at a workshop in Agadez (Frendach, 2018).

## Music by Targuia



**Figure 3.** An extract of Targuia Music (Holiday, 1956, p. 51)

Part of the training provided by Tamlait Tababekou for young ladies involves the crafting of the instrument from local materials such as gourd, tanned leather, horsehair and wood (see plate 5a and 5b).



**Plate 5a.** Young women being trained in crafting the *imzad* (Frendach, 2018)



**Plate 5b.** Young women learn how to craft the *imzad* from local materials—a gourd, tanned leather, horsehair, and wood. (Frendach, 2018)

In Tuareg culture, Women have a privileged position in the society; they play a role equal and sometimes greater than that of the man. Their girls are given the available forms of education. The *imzad* women musicians have the singular responsibility of propagating the folk-culture of the Tuareg through their music and songs. The responsibility to propagate these folk-culture, social cohesion, expression of joy and transmission of history strengthens the societal value and dignity of the *imzad* female musicians. More so, by preserving the instrument from extinction and its performance and cultural values, *imzad* female musicians are considered ‘life’ preservers as the *imzad* music is seen as a source of life to the people and as they educate and influence positive behavioural changes among the youth and the society at large they are messengers of peace and agents of change. In 2016, the efforts of Tababekou received the support of the United State Agency for International Development’s (USAID) Office of Transition Initiatives. USAID is a U.S. organization with the foreign policy goals of advancing peace and democracy in countries experiencing crisis, conflict and political transition. Tababekou’s role in advancing gendered relationships through the playing of the *imzad* is highly significant as the music training of girls is given special emphasis in the society.

As earlier noted, the *imzad* and Tuareg music has earned other international recognition and promotion. The inclusion of the *imzad* in UNESCO’s Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2013 is one of such recognition and promotion worth-noting. This paper acknowledges this international recognition vis-à-vis the number of such recognition received by nation’s traditional musical instruments and cultural practices. As of 2018, there were 508 inscriptions spread over 122 countries, with China having the largest number of inscriptions - 40 of these elements. These practices are said to be ‘good safeguarding practices’ (Dive into intangible Cultural Heritage, para. 1). All nominations and

inclusions in this list of cultural heritage represent the world's rich cultural diversity. They vary from handicrafts to poetry, instrumental music, vocal music, dance and wedding. The *imzad* and its music being one of them, though, gendered in nature has been considered one of the good safeguarding practices that have help to divert the attention of young people from acts of terrorism and many other vices. Its female-gendered nature has never been debated rather, it is so cherished by both male and female in the Tuareg communities.

The significance of the above-mentioned recognition in our opinion lies in the fact that one's efforts made to preserve one's cultural values and practices can yield great dividends of such international recognition and promotions. Over the years, the Tuareg have held firmly to the beliefs and practices that have been discussed in this paper despite the intrusion of the Arabs and French. This paper does not intend to promote all cultural beliefs and practices associated with the Tuareg music and the *imzad*, however, it intends to show the power of self-appreciation regarding one's own cultural values and systems. The *imzad* is highly cherished by the Tuareg people as have been reiterated throughout this paper. Ethnomusicological studies relate to "the study of music as culture or in culture" (Rice, 2014, p. 3). In the same vein, the Tuareg takes the *imzad* as a "whole culture," meaning, the *imzad* reflects "a sum of the ideas, beliefs, customs, values, knowledge and material artefacts" that they must bequeath to their children from one generation to the next (Coleman, 2003, p.179).

To further buttress the socio-cultural values of the *imzad*, we have noted that the *imzad* and its music are considered useful tools for transmitting inherited cultural conceptions expressed in symbolic forms, which affect their attitude towards life. Nonetheless, it is considered an important means of persuasion that can be used to get people who engage in illicit activities to come to their senses (Ruge, 2018). Again, the *imzad* is considered mystical (it is spiritual, supernatural and magical); it is played through the heart, not by focusing on the left hand while

playing and it gives power to its listeners. The *imzad* instils bravery and honesty in men who listen to it. UNESCO's account of the practices and knowledge linked to the *imzad* of the Tuareg Communities of Algeria, Mali, and Niger recognises the therapeutic function of the *imzad* music, in that it drives away evil spirits and alleviates the pain of the sick. The sound of the *imzad* reflects the player's feelings and moods, and an inability to master performance is considered a misfortune.

Retaining our African cultural values through our indigenous traditional musical instruments and music to preserve our cultural identity, values and practices ought to be of more concern rather than the contentions of male-female dominance in music and musical instruments, especially where there are no negative relationships experienced by any party. The Tuareg people have treasured the culture of the *imzad* music. No empirical research conducted so far on the *imzad* and the Tuareg people have expressed any debate on their gendered musical instrument and culture as it is with some other tribes or people group. In other words, there are no negative relationships in terms of the gendering of the *imzad* and its music; everyone in the Tuareg society has his or her peculiarity and uniqueness, therefore there are no arguments on the gendered nature of the *imzad*. It is, therefore, not a surprise that the practices and knowledge linked to the *imzad* and the Tuareg communities of Algeria, Mali and Niger, are inscribed in 2013 UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Cultural values and beliefs even when gender-related as it is exemplified with the *imzad* and its music, and especially when they express good value systems such as honesty, integrity, respect, excellence, hard work, dedication, and hospitality attract relevant investments and promotions by both local and international agencies; this is the case with the *imzad* and the Tuareg music that we emphasize through this paper. That said it is pertinent that when the



gendering of music and musical instruments as well as performance practises have cultural and societal gains the gender debates that is fuelled by many should be brought to its minimal or expunged.

## CONCLUSION

Men dominance in the construction and playing of musical instruments remains high, particularly in African cultures. However, women, in today's world, are breaking down socio-cultural taboos and restrictions that are long-established traditions of male-female dichotomies and spatial segregation through gender debates. While this paper stands for all musical traditions and socio-cultural practices with positive gender relationships, it strongly opposes all gender related ideologies that place negative and demeaning consequences on men or women. The gendered nature regarding the *imzad* and its music only does promote the image of the female-gender with no negative or demeaning consequences on the male-gender. The *imzad* is believed to be a mystical instrument of music with great values of instilling honesty, morality and bravery among the Tuareg people. Focusing on values derived from socio-cultural beliefs and practices prove more profitable than focusing on the gender debates which is plaguing the expected promotions, recognitions and investments that would have been obtained through musical cultures in Africa as the *imzad* has enjoyed.

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