

# CultureGrams™ Interview

**Name: Ismael**

**Age: 34**

**Gender: Male**

**Location: Niamey, Niger**

**1) Where were you born? Where do you live now?**

I was born in Agadez, in the north of Niger. Now I live in Niamey, the capital of Niger.

**2) Describe a typical day during the week.**

I wake up at 6 or 6:30 a.m., and then I walk with my friends to their work. They are teachers at the American school, and I walk with them so that they can feel safe in the neighborhood and so that nobody bothers them. Then I come back home, and I water the plants and fix the garden. After that, I do my laundry and put it to dry in the garden, and I cook something for when my friend Sean comes home. I go to buy groceries if we need anything, and in the afternoon sometimes we hang around the house with some friends or we go to a restaurant. Sometimes I go to visit my uncle, who is a customs officer, and I have dinner at his house. Then I come back home, watch TV, and go to bed at midnight, more or less. We don't have a guard during the day, so what I do is take care of the house and clean and cook.

**3) Do you identify strongly with a particular ethnic group?**

I am a Tuareg. Tuaregs look like Arabs, and in some things they share the same culture as the Arabs, but we are still very different. The Arabs are very strict. For example, a woman is not allowed to speak to a man if she does not know him. She cannot shake his hand, and she must have her face covered. Tuareg women don't have to do this. It is the Tuareg men who must cover their faces. I do it when I go to ceremonies. In these ceremonies, we have lots of music, and men and women dance. We have parties. We live a free life. But Arabs live a hard life.

We Tuaregs live in northern Niger, northern Mali, southern Libya, and southern Algeria. We are nomads, and we cross the desert on camels. That is why the French call us the Lions of the Desert, because we know the Sahara like we know our own hands. My family lives in the desert, so sometimes I have to walk five days from Agadez to get to where they are, because there are no cars. My family moves from place to place, always where there is grass to feed the animals. They spend a few days in a place, and then after three or five days, they move to another place where they can have more grass. The Peul people have cows, but our animals are camels, sheep, and goats.

Here in Niamey, you don't see many Tuaregs, but we are friends with the Hausa. The problem for the Tuareg is the government, but not for the Hausa people. In the region of Agadez, we have uranium. After Canada, Niger has the largest uranium mines in the world, but the government doesn't take care of the region. We don't have good roads or schools. Also, they don't allow Tuareg people to work in the uranium industry; they bring everyone from Niamey. If you go to school and you are Tuareg, the government won't give you a good job. If you are in the army and you are Tuareg, the government won't allow you to be a general or colonel. So we say, "Why? If we are Nigeriens like you, why don't we have the same advantages?" Many Tuaregs go to university, but if you have a good degree and you are a doctor, the government will only allow you to be a teacher. For all these reasons, the Tuareg decided to take their guns and face the government. My uncle is now a minister, but he used to be a Tuareg chief in the Tuareg rebellion. He fought against the government, but after the ceasefire he was in parliament and now he is a minister. He was shot during the war in the desert.

**4) What languages do you speak?**

My first language, the Tuareg language, is Tamashek. I also speak French, which I learned at school. I speak Arabic, which I learned in Agadez. Agadez is on the border with Algeria and Libya, and we, the Tuareg, are close to Arabs. I lived in those two countries for some time. I speak Hausa because 50 percent of Nigeriens are Hausa, so I learned it on the streets. I speak

Zarma, the language they speak here in Niamey, because I have lived here a few years. They also speak this language in some parts of Mali. I learned English at school, and also because in Agadez we have a lot of TV. We get the satellite signal from Algeria and Libya, and I learned a lot of English from satellite TV. I use English to speak to my American friends. Six languages in total, and I am fluent in all of them.

### **5) What role does religion play in your life?**

Before, in Agadez, I was Christian, but now I am Muslim. Not all Tuaregs are Muslim. Actually, centuries ago all Tuaregs were Christian. The symbol of the Tuareg is a cross with three points. You can see it on the saddles of the camels, on the Tuareg sword, and on the Tuareg tents. All of them have the shape of the Tuareg cross. *Ramadan* and *Tabaski* are the most important events for Tuareg Muslims. *Tabaski* is two months after *Ramadan*. The people who have gone to the pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia kill a sheep and have celebration. That pilgrimage is also a very important event in the life of each Muslim, and we have to do it at least one time in our lives. During *Tabaski*, everyone wears nice clothes, eats together with the family, and gives meat to the poor people who don't have anything to eat.

Here there are some Muslim mystics called *marabouts*, and they can give you powers. It is not only the Tuaregs who can have powers. The Hausa can too—it is all Nigeriens. Most Nigeriens are Muslim, and there are some *marabouts* (mystic people from Islam that study the Qur'an). If you want the power to stop bullets from hurting you, then you should bring the skin of a lion. The *marabout* makes a beverage with it that you have to drink, and then he gives you amulets to tie around your waist, arms, and neck. If someone shoots you, the gun won't work or the bullet won't hit you. The same thing happens with knives. If you bring the *marabout* the skin of a dead cat, he can give you the power to disappear when they arrest you. But it must be the skin of a newborn cat that has not opened its eyes. It also works to get you places if you don't have a car.

You can't use these powers for bad purposes. For example, if they arrest you and you are innocent, you can disappear and they will never see you again. Or if they try to mug you or try to hurt you, you can disappear. They will say, "Where did he go?" I have seen this happen. I was in Libya when the police arrested some Nigeriens. You know, in Arab countries there is no respect for human rights, so they started questioning the Nigeriens and beating them just because they were Hausa. There was one Arab policeman hitting all the people one by one, but when he got to this one guy, the guy disappeared just before the policeman could beat him. "Where is he?" they said. The *marabout* will only give you this power if he trusts you, if he knows that you are not going to rob a bank or to do evil. There was a case, for example, when our president was killed in 1999. He was at the airport taking a plane to Cuba, and his best friend shot him. The man shot many people with a big gun, but one of the bodyguards was a Tuareg, and he survived because he had power so that the gun didn't work with him. Everyone here knows that.

### **6) Describe your mealtimes.**

We eat sitting on the ground. Everyone does, even if they have a table in their house. We put a carpet or a mat on the floor and sit there to eat. I eat together with my family when I am in Agadez, but most of the time I am here in Niamey, and I eat with my friend Sean, sitting at the table. In Agadez, we get together a group of men, with my brothers and uncles. A separate group of women is made up of women, with my mother and my sisters and the rest. They eat after the men and in a different place—next to each other, but in a different group. I use a spoon to eat, but many people use their hands to take the food. It is always the women who cook the meals, and we sit and wait until they serve the food, and when we finish eating, they come and take the plates to wash them.

### **7) What is your favorite food?**

My favorite food is pasta and vegetables, but I am not vegetarian. I also eat meat, but as a Muslim, the meat has to be *halal* (slaughtered according to Islamic tradition). Many people here in Niger eat pasta with sauce, often one made of vegetables or meat. To drink, I like milk very much. Here in Niamey, there are not many camels, but in Agadez, we drink camel milk. It is very healthy, and it gives you strength. Also, on the streets or at the markets, you can buy *mouton*. It is the leg of a sheep that they put on the fire—not directly on the flame but very close to it. You can buy a portion for 500 *CFA francs* (about \$1), and they cut pieces of meat from the leg of the sheep with a big knife. Then you can put some salt and *piment* (chili powder) on it.

### **8) What is your role in your family?**

I have never been married, and I don't have children. I am close to my family, but they are far away. My parents are separated, so my father lives in Agadez and my mother lives in the desert; she is a nomad. My father does not work anymore; he is a retired soldier. My mother lives with my grandfather in the Sahara. My father calls me every week, but my mother cannot call me because there is no network in the desert. I don't have a good job or much money, but when I can, I send something for my mother, even if it is 20,000 *CFA francs* (about \$37) to buy candy for the kids. Last month, my uncle went to

Agadez by plane, so I sent some money with him, and my mother came from the desert to Agadez to meet him. Then she called me and told me that she had the money.

#### **9) Describe your home.**

Here in Niamey, I live with my friend Sean in a very big house with four rooms, three bathrooms, a kitchen, a very big living room, and a big garden with a swimming pool. I relax in the TV room but also in the kitchen when I cook. We don't own the house. It is paid for by my friend's work. It is decorated with some musical instruments from West Africa and some paintings. In Agadez, we had a normal house in the desert. You have different little buildings, and each little building is a room, like in Timbuktu. All the houses in Agadez are made of *banko* (mud). There is not much rain in Agadez, so the *banko* stays and you don't have to repair it very often. Every two years, you fix it a little bit and that's it. The bathroom is an African toilet—another little house in the corner of the lot, where you can go to the bathroom and take a shower with a bucket.

#### **10) What do you do during your leisure time?**

My favorite sport is soccer, like many people in Niger. We also have wrestling here. We call it *lute traditionnel*, and Niger is the best in the world at that sport. It is also very common in Senegal. We have championships every year in February, each year in a different city. From every city of the country comes a team of 10 people, and they compete. The team who wins gets the sword, which is the trophy. They also get prize money from the government. The players have to attack each other, but not violently. They just try to take the other one to the floor. If one of them touches the floor with his knee, then he loses. If someone is very strong, he can lift you and throw you to the ground. I used to do it when I was kid.

#### **11) What holidays or events are most important to you?**

My favorite event is dance parties. I don't drink, but I go to the night clubs to dance, not to be drunk. I never sit down there to drink and talk. As soon as I walk inside, I buy my Coke, put it on the table, and go dance. I am international. I dance everything: American, African, Latino, Arab music. I also dance to rumba music from Congo. All the clubs in Niamey know me because I dance it very well. They ask me, "What do you drink? You are never tired!" But I tell them that I paid the entrance fee to dance, not to sit down and drink. If I want that, I go to a restaurant. When I was in secondary school in Agadez, we had dance competitions for different kinds of music. I can also dance to pop music, like Michael Jackson. In secondary school, I learned how to dance the rumba. In Tuareg music, people dance by moving the arms and the hands and going up and down, but Congolese music is very fast. You move all your body, you jump, and it is good for the heart.

#### **12) How confident are you in your country's economy and your ability to make an adequate living?**

Niger is not a poor country. It is a rich country. Here we have uranium, gold, and animals. It is the number one country in West Africa for exporting meat. The problem with Niger is corruption. We are just 14 million people, but the government is bad and they steal the money. You see the politicians with big houses and nice cars, and that's all bought with the Nigeriens' money. Last year, the members of the parliament stole 40 million *CFA francs* (about \$73,000), so they were asked to give the money back. That is too much money! There is money, but the government is bad. That is why the people are poor. If we had a nice person in the government, like Nelson Mandela of South Africa or Evo Morales of Bolivia, we would be better off. Now they also found oil here, and the Chinese are exploiting it. Tunisia, for example, has little oil and no uranium, but if you go there, you see nice cities, because the government is Arab, and they know how to take care of their people. If you go to Angola, you see they have a lot of oil, but the people are poor! Here in Africa, the government steals the money. Here in Niger, there is also slavery. A long time ago, the Europeans and the Americans had slaves, and the same was happening here. Here you have white and black Tuaregs, and the white Tuaregs like my grandfather had black Tuaregs as slaves. In some villages in the north of Niger, they still have slaves. Those slaves are the children of other slaves. If you are a slave, your children will continue to be slaves, and they will continue working for the same person.

#### **13) How do you usually get around?**

I have a motorcycle. I bought it when I came to Agadez from Libya. It is easier to move around on a motorcycle than in a car, because the gas is very expensive and it is very expensive to fix a car. With my bike, I can buy five liters for 3,000 *CFA francs* (about \$5). If my bike breaks down, I can fix it at the mechanic just there by the road, and for 5,000 *CFA francs* (about \$9) they will fix everything. If you have a car, you will have to spend at least 10,000 *CFA francs* (about \$18) per day in gas and at least 20,000 (about \$36) to fix it. There is also too much traffic, but if you have a motorcycle, you can go faster. If I want to go to Agadez, I take the bus, but I could also go on my motorcycle. It is a Honda, a strong motorcycle. I could go everywhere in it, even to South Africa if I wanted to and if I had the gas. This bike was brought from Nigeria.

To go to Algeria or Libya, you can go by camel or by car. Algerian, Libyan, Nigerien, or Malian Tuareg—we are all the same. We speak the same language, so we don't have borders. We don't need visas or documents. The desert is our country.

When I went to Libya, I was in the southern part of the country. There are many Tuareg there who came as refugees, so I worked there. There is a big refugee camp just for Nigerien Tuareg, and Libya covers the whole thing. There they have restaurants, shops, and houses. Everyone speaks Tamashek. I worked in a shop and in a restaurant.

**14) Was life different for you growing up in this country than it was for your parents?**

Life is much better for me. I could go to school, but neither my father nor my mother went to school. When my father was young, there were no phones in Agadez, and no internet or things like that. When they were young, the French were here in the country. But up there in Agadez, things were just the same. It hasn't changed much. My father and I had the same bad experience in our lives: we were both arrested.

My father was arrested in Agadez. The government was trying to arrest all the important officers that were Tuareg. They came at night, when he was sleeping, and they came in three tanks with 15 soldiers each, armed with guns. They surrounded the house, went in, and put the guns to my father's, brother's and sister's heads. They said, "You have to come with us." My father explained that he had been a soldier for 20 years, but they said that he was a soldier during the former president's time and now there was a new government. At this time he was retired. They put him in the army tank, and they emptied a bottle of urine on him, all over his body. This was because if you have powers, the urine will break them. The soldiers knew that some Tuareg can disappear when they are arrested, so the urine stops the power from working. Some other powers can stop the guns from working or even make some knives break when they try to stab you. If you want to beat a person with powers, your hand will stop in the air before touching them. After arresting my father, they took the mayor and the director of the school and other important Tuaregs. They did the same with all of them, because when these people have powers, you can't stop them with guns or knives; you've got to neutralize their powers with urine. The soldiers took all these people to the Tuareg camp, and they beat them up and tortured them. They kept 12 Tuareg in a very tiny room. In the morning, my father's arms and legs were numb. It was too hot and crowded in there. They kept him for six months.

**15) What has been the most significant event in your life?**

When I was in secondary school, there was a war between the government and the Tuareg rebels. There were soldiers from the army with guns all over towns like Agadez. If you didn't look black enough, they would take you to the soldier's camp and beat you up. Many people left Agadez as refugees and went to Algeria and Libya. The soldiers went to the desert to fight, but there they were defeated by the Tuareg rebels. So when they came back to Agadez, they would beat the civilian Tuaregs. They would go to the market and just arrest any Tuareg and beat him up. This happened to me as well.

I was on holiday with some of my Hausa friends. There were six of us, and the soldiers arrested us. I showed them my student card, but they said, "We don't care. You have to follow us." We refused, and we said that we were students. But one of the soldiers, one with a gun, pointed to the sky and said, "If you don't come with us, I will shoot so that more soldiers will come, and they will kill you." So we followed them to the soldier's camp, and they took us behind a house. They had a tank filled with water, filthy water with trash, dirt, and excrement. They said we had to jump in the water. I had nice shoes and nice jeans, and we didn't want to go in. We said, "What?!" I was the only Tuareg. The others were Hausa and one Fulani, but they arrested all of us just because of me. One of my friends said no, but the soldier put the Kalashnikov rifle to his head and said, "I will kill you now." So we went inside. The water was very dirty. It stank and was the color of chocolate. There were about six soldiers pointing at us with guns, and they started to hit us on the head with sticks so that we would go down under the water. When I wanted to take my head above the water, they beat me in the head and I had to go under again.

After they were sure that we had drunk the water and that we were tired, they took us outside. It was a very hot day, and it was about three in the afternoon. The soldiers told us that we had to crawl on our forearms, like soldiers do in their training, but we had to do it on the hot, sharp rocks on the ground in Agadez. I still have the scars in my arms from all the cuts I got from the hot rocks. While we were doing it, they were giving us electric shocks with electric sticks. They were pressing us to do it fast, and so I did. My father was a soldier, so I knew how to do it, but when they saw this they asked, "Oh, why do you know how to do this? You must be a rebel!" I said I was not, and I explained that my father was a soldier and that I was a student, but they didn't believe me. They just wanted me to say that I was a rebel so that they could kill me. If you say that you are a rebel, it's over for you. There is no justice. We had fainted, so they woke us up and forced us to look directly at the sun. After that, they forced us to "make whiskey." That means that you put your finger in the ground and you must spin around it. We were falling down and fainting. It was torture, and we were only 18 or 19 years old.

Then a big convoy of soldiers started coming with the big officer. So the ones torturing us got scared because it was illegal. They told us to leave. I had to go into the dirty water again to get my shoes. My friends ran away, but I didn't. There was

nothing left for me to lose. I was not afraid anymore. I said, "You can kill me now." That was 15 years ago, but until now I will never forget this man who tortured us. He was a Hausa, with a shaved head, very big muscles, and a big stick in his hand. He started beating me so that I would go. I couldn't feel my arm for a few weeks after that because it was very swollen. When I left, I met my friends at the river. This was in August, and during that time of the year, we have nice clean water coming down the river. People come to wash themselves, and women come to wash the clothes. When they saw us coming, they said, "What happened to these people?" We were covered in mud. We looked like vampires. We went in the river to wash, and the water turned brown with dirt. After that experience, I decided that I had to leave. Even going to school was dangerous for me. That is why most people leave Agadez.

**16) What does being a citizen of your country mean to you?**

I like being Nigerien, but I am not Hausa; I am Tuareg. Many people think I am Arab because I look Arab. Nigeriens are more peaceful than the people from the other countries here. I have lived in Libya, Algeria, and Cameroon, and I have seen Chinese, Ghanaians, Egyptians, and Sudanese, and the Nigeriens are always the best. The people from Nigeria or Ghana or Egypt cannot be trusted. They will be your friends, but maybe some day they will betray you. But Nigeriens are very peaceful and nice. That is why you see that in Niamey there is no violence like there is in Nigeria or in Guinea. We don't have the idea to be aggressive or to steal. I know the Nigerians and the Guineans because they worked with me in Libya, and I can say that they are not like Nigeriens. I can know where they are from even if they don't speak. Also Chinese people came to buy to my shop there, but they never paid! In all those countries where I have been, if I need to look for a job, and I say that I am from Niger, I will get it, because people trust us.

**17) What do you worry most about?**

I think I worry about my health. If I have my health, I can have everything else. I worry about my family, and I worry if they are sick or if something happens to them. I always hope that they are good and having a nice life. I also worry about my friends. I would never like to hear that something happened to them. That is why I walk with my friends to their work in the mornings—so that I can take care of them. I don't worry about me too much, because I will be okay. But I worry about the people who are close to me. I also worry about going to the United States, because I know it is difficult to get a visa and also very difficult to get the money. I have many friends here from the United States, and I want to visit there and go with them.

**18) What is most important to you? What are your most important aspirations for the future?**

I want to find a good job in the future. I would also like to marry, but not just any woman. I need to meet a nice woman that I really like, not someone that I will divorce in two months or that has to marry me because of her family. I don't care what part of the world I'm in. It could be Pakistan or South Africa or Europe. I will be where I have to be for my job. It also depends on my wife and if she wants to stay here in Niamey or go to Agadez or go with me to another country. I don't care about the job either, because I have worked in restaurants, I have worked in shops, I can cook, and I know how to fix cars and motorcycles, so any of those jobs will be good for me.

*Interview submitted 2010.*

CultureGrams		Comparison Data Table										
Nation	Region	Area (square miles)	Real GDP	Internet use (%)	Cellular telephones (per 1,000)	Literacy (male %)	Literacy (female %)	Daily calories (per person)	Infant mortality (per 1,000 live births)	Life expectancy (years)	Life expectancy (years)	Probability of death
Australia	Oceania	2,967,892	\$39,900	708	906	99%	99%	3,054	5	79	84	NA
China	Asia (East)	3,705,407	\$6,700	225	302	96%	88%	2,940	17	73	77	6%
Egypt	Africa (North)	386,662	\$5,900	166	184	83%	59%	3,350	26	70	75	7%
France	Europe (West)	212,935	\$32,500	679	789	99%	99%	3,654	3	78	84	2%
Germany	Europe (Central)	137,847	\$34,200	755	960	99%	99%	3,496	4	76	83	2%
India	Asia (South)	1,269,219	\$3,200	45	82	73%	48%	2,440	49	66	68	16%
Japan	Asia (East)	145,913	\$32,600	752	742	99%	99%	2,761	3	79	86	2%
Mexico	Americas (Central)	758,449	\$13,200	222	460	87%	85%	3,180	18	74	79	5%
Nigeria	Africa (Sub-Saharan)	356,669	\$2,300	159	141	76%	61%	2,700	93	47	48	37%
Sudan	Africa (East)	967,500	\$2,200	102	50	72%	51%	2,260	72	53	55	24%
United States	Americas (North)	3,794,100	\$46,000	759	680	99%	99%	3,774	6	76	81	4%

\*U.S. Dollars