

France

## La Fabrique nomade: valuing migrants' unused skills

Samy Archimède, [Basta!](#)

Pottery, marble work, embroidery... Migrants often find it difficult to make use of their professional skills in their host country, but a project, La Fabrique Nomade (The Nomadic Factory), that started in Paris last year, is working with migrants to value their hidden talents. The association has a threefold objective: to uncover migrants' skills, to change the way they are perceived by the host community, and to help them integrate professionally.



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At the end of the table, two calloused hands work delicately with a long tool resembling a scalpel. Yasir is revealing the paws of what will soon be a tortoise. To the front of the body he attaches a little ball of lightly shaped clay, fashioned by young Emilio, and the animal takes shape. It is April 1<sup>st</sup> 2017, and we're at the National Institute of Crafts (INMA), in Paris. Today, the teacher is a Sudanese refugee.

Yasir Elamine, who came to France three years ago, has been a potter for 22 years. Emilio, 13, is here with his father, Nicolas, and eight other Frenchmen of all ages, to learn about the art of working with clay. Two hours earlier, another workshop, hosted by Abu Dubaev, a Chechen refugee, was devoted to the work of stucco-marble. The event is organised by the La Fabrique Nomade association, with the aim of showing refugees in a different light: *"We want to show that these people have know-how that they can also transmit. To show they can give and not only receive."*

The idea for La Fabrique Nomade was first mooted by Inès Mesmar, the founder, around a year and a half ago. During a casual conversation, she discovered that before her mother came to France, she had been an embroiderer for about ten years in the Medina of Tunis. *"Then, she completely abandoned this activity, to the point that she never even talked to her own children about it, and I knew nothing until I was 35,"* says the young Franco-Tunisian.



*Inès Mesmar* (© Damien Grenon)

What difficulties did she encounter that caused her to hide so much of her past? Inès did some investigation, and realized that her mother was far from being an isolated case. She met Yasir, who "planted potatoes and tomatoes" for a social enterprise in Rueil-Malmaison, a Paris suburb. *"When I saw the photos of the ceramics he did when he was in Sudan, I told him 'you have gold in your hands, you have a real talent and you have to be able to exploit it'".* In the beginning, Yasir, a master potter, was sceptical: *"Here I have no choice, I have to accept what is given to me"*. But the founder of La Fabrique Nomade convinced him otherwise.

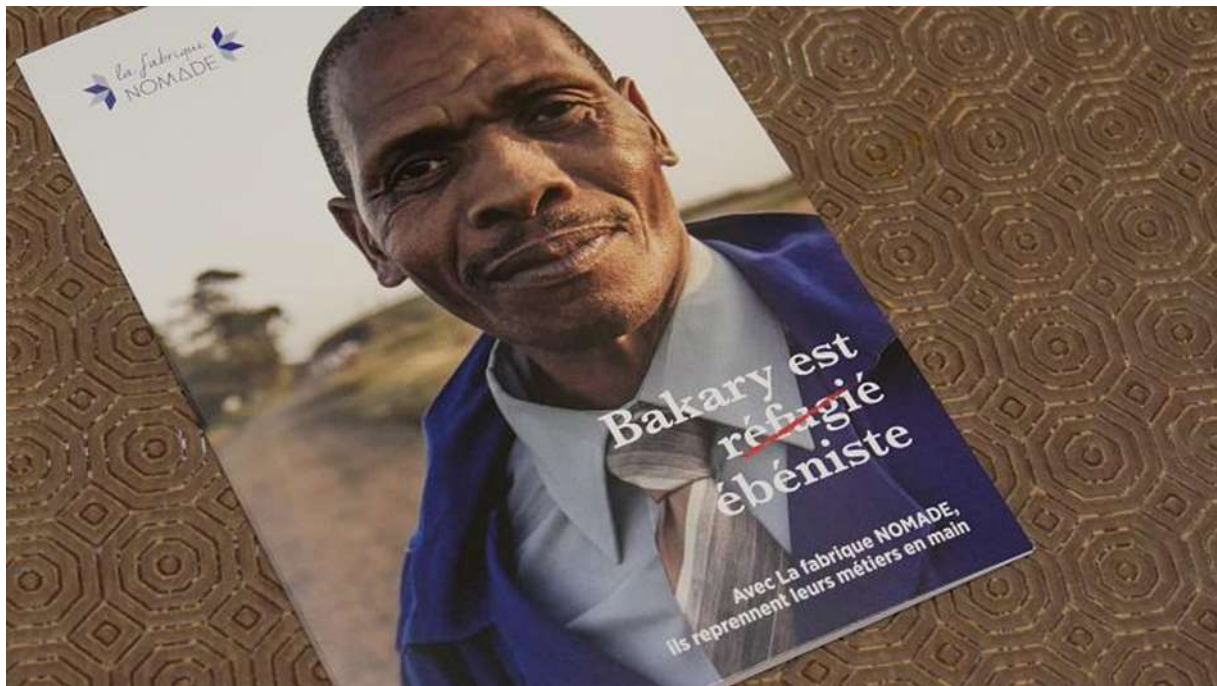
### **Seeing is believing**

The INMA workshop crowned a year of canvassing the institutions to give substance to the project: to bring the talents of migrants living in France back into the open. Two other refugees followed in Yasir's footsteps: Abu Dubaev, a stucco and gypsum (plasterwork) specialist; and Ablaye Mar, a Senegalese embroiderer.

A collaboration with French designers led to a collection called "Traits d'union", highlighting the work of the three craftsmen, which was presented to the public on April 1st 2017 at INMA, a venue usually reserved for top French crafts people. *"The quality of their work is proof of their capabilities. The problem for them is that it is difficult to demonstrate their skills by sending a CV."*

According to INSEE, the French statistical office, the unemployment rate for non-EU immigrants in 2014 was 20.7%, compared with 9.1% for those born in France. These figures probably fall short of the reality because they do not take into account the many foreigners who have never been to the job centre. Beyond changing the perception of migrants, the La Fabrique Nomade project also to facilitate professional integration, through three types of action: support, networking and promotion.

*"We help them to set up a project or get in touch with companies that could employ them,"* says Inès Mesmar. The latter is often preferable to starting a business, which is more uncertain: *"However, this option is often chosen by people facing discrimination. To escape, they create their own job. But they soon encounter administrative or managerial difficulties, and are finally forced to put the key under the door."*



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### **International exposure**

La Fabrique Nomade has identified 25 artisans since October 2016. *"But we need resources to support them,"* says Inès. A [crowdfunding campaign](#) has been launched *"to finance the equipping of a workshop: the machines, the pottery wheel, the oven, sewing machines... This equipment will allow us to release the skills of these craft workers, and to give them the necessary tools to create."*

While awaiting this crowdfunding, the works of Yasir, Abou and Ablaye were exhibited in May at Galerie Joseph in Paris, during [D'Days](#), a Paris design festival. *"This was the first time that refugee artisans were presented on the same stage as French and international professionals",* says Inès Mesmar. Yasir did not miss this event. Since he left the Rueil-Malmaison potato fields, his vision has changed: *"I have been a potter for more than twenty years. I do not want to stop this work."*

**La Fabrique nomade:** <http://lafabriquenomade.com/>

**Original article (FR):** <https://www.bastamaq.net/La-Fabrique-nomade-l-association-d-insertion-qui-valorise-les-savoir-faire-des>

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