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Tār tōkle tofa tār ghimit.

Better to walk without knowing where, than to sit doing nothing.

A Tuareg proverb

"We share it. I feel all thrilled about it, and then it is really nothing when we would need instead twenty liters of water. The men do not know what an orange is. This world in which we live, only those herewith into it can understand it."

[Antoine de Saint Exupery]

By Soumy Ana

<http://www.ummah.net/islam/taqwapalace>

Chapter FOUR:

The Fruits of the Grove



Photo courtesy: <http://www.nara.gov>



Photo courtesy of Bernhard Loersch: <http://www.tamanrasset.de>

The day after our arrival, I met a gardener and asked him questions about the harvesting. The brown dates, golden as the moon's fingers were laid on the ground for drying. I could also see a complete area full of the palm branches holding their fruit like necklaces of honey drops piled up against each other. They would soon be sold on the European market, under the name of 'Muscat dates'. As for the dry and yellow dates of lesser quality, they would be eaten up on the spot by the *Khammes*, the peasants who were hired by the Tuaregs during the harvesting period. These peasants

usually received one fifth of the crop benefit. The gardeners were free men; they gave life to the oasis. I liked to be in their company. Pieces of material were rolled up around their heads, and they wore pure white *jellabas* for full protection against the scorching sun. One could hear them singing for hours without ever seeing them under the dense tree branches.

As usual, I carried a pencil and a small notebook with me, always attentive to anything I could scribble down. I wanted to memorize every detail of this trip because it was so miraculous. I was sure there was a purpose to it, brought up by my destiny.

The *Khammes* liked to recite these verses, which I copied in my journal:

*We make the gardens grow, and the cereals that
humans harvest
As well as palm trees,
with long branches and regular barks
In order to feed the mortals*

As I would discover later, there were many uses for the dates and the date palms. Combining flour with goat cheese, people made date cakes. Pressed in a jar with a hole at its base, dates were reduced to

honey. Sometimes this honey was mixed with butter to be used as reserve for the *Khammes*.



The beasts chewed the kernels; the women used them sometimes as jewelry or used them as money.

The entire oasis was made of palms and lived on palms. That was the very reason why the palm tree was considered here "the sister of the man" while the camel was considered "his brother". Men were intimately related to everything that lived there, and they took great care of their groves and animals. The ladies so young that their arms looked as white as the mother-of-pearls or the men who

wore their beards clean and neatly cut, if asked, all had this sentence on their lips for an answer:

*Whoever is kind to His creatures, Allah is kind to him,
so be kind to every man on earth, whether good or bad.*

After I had observed the gardeners, I decided to tour the oasis. I had the feeling I knew all the lakes in this place as if by heart. This impression of belonging rose new emotions in me. These emotions crept to my soul and moved a lot of deep questions inside my head. I was quite at the beginning of my trip in the desert, and I had already the sensation that I had reached the end of life. Something had to happen here. I did not know what it could be, but I was certain of it. I was before the origin of life, not anymore before its final products: industry and technology. I was learning the way men built houses from clay and palm trees. I was learning how one could build his own soul, with his own hands. Here, everything had a particular savor. The very odor of the fresh dates drying under the sun smelt like a woman's perfume. Every little thing was a wealth as precious as life. Furthermore, there was a feeling of completeness. In the Western towns, food was mostly processed, so we somewhat forgot what a tomato plant looked like. Here, each part of the oasis contributed its life to the place. It lived on its own,

in the middle of the desert. For instance, every little drop of water tasted somewhat like dates, was impregnated by the odor of the palms. Everything was related; everything had its utility; nothing was wasted. The palms were transformed into torches. The floss of buds was made into very dry ropes that resembled big serpents. The leaves were used in wickerwork. The wood served for carpentry. Even the palm thorns were collected in order to pin little girls' dresses or the dead's shroud.

I stopped and looked around me with awe. I felt the urge to understand what was around me, what life really stood for, without witnesses, without books to tell me what to think, without the comfort of my European life, without the worries of a daily routine that made me forgetful. The women who were passing by me now looked like forgotten fairies from another world. They wore heavy silvery jewels and pressed their water jars to their hips. Some put them on the top of their heads, fixing them on wreaths. While their hands were busy holding the jar and a cloth around the face, the wreath was held in place by a thread that they kept in their mouth. The large dresses that moved with deep shadows always seemed to precede them. They did not make any noise in the sand, even if sometimes the heavy bracelets named *khul-khal* tinkled in pairs at their feet. The *fibulae*, heritage of the ancient Rome and embedded

with coral, kept their cloaks in place while glistening between the palms. It was particularly beautiful here and traditionally made of two ranks of triangles and ovals.



While I was watching them pass, still thinking, Hanifa, a tall Arab with eyes as clear as the sea began walking with me. We wandered along the river full of shade and fragrances of all kinds. Hanifa had been my friend for sometime. We liked to have frequent conversations together. This afternoon, he looked sad. I asked him what was tormenting him so much. He hesitated, bent his head slightly, and avowed:

“Well, when I heard our sheik’s commentaries about the bird... you remember from yesterday?... well, I felt suddenly full of shame.”

He stopped. I insisted he continues his story.

“Well,” he repeated with some hesitation, “yesterday morning, as I was walking by the water bank, something happened to me. I was meditating when, suddenly, I saw a fig floating on the stream. Hungry, I picked it up and ate it. I was following the episode of the bird when I remembered that this fig probably belonged to someone else and had its “nest” somewhere in this grove. I would like to walk up the river now and find the orchard where it comes from. It should not be too hard. Would you come with me?”

“And what would you go there for?”

I would reimburse its owner for the price of the fruit.”

I said: “Of course, Hanifa, let’s go.”

I knew it was useless to argue with Hanifa because his honesty came from a deep faith that could not be contradicted. The long year that I spent in Arab countries had taught me this already. As a friend, I would therefore run along without a word. Some of the Muslims, I noticed, were so afraid of their God that they would not pick anything from the ground in case it would be a part of something

given in charity to somebody else or something stolen. They would leave a bill there, at their feet, just watching the wind carrying it away and they would not think twice about it. In fact, they would not even receive something for free since they thought that one had only what he thrived for. Though extreme, I thought this decision was admirable. After all, my companion knew the desert better than I. Some Arabs had very strict principles, and their religion prevented them from neglecting any detail. Maybe Hanifa was afraid to be considered a thief in the eyes of Allah. Who knows? Anyway, I was curious about the after-effects of this act.



Photo courtesy: <http://www.nigerbend.com>

We soon arrived in a fig orchard, the only fig trees of the oasis. It was not difficult to imagine how the fruit had dropped into the river and was carried away. We promptly looked for the owner. He was inside his home; the sun still burning outside.

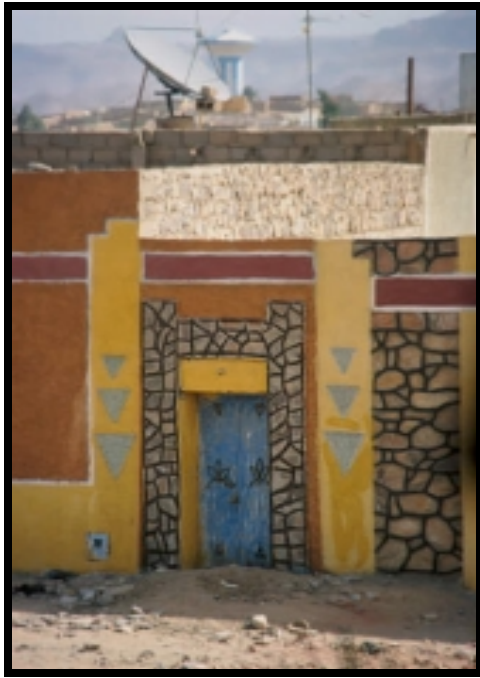


Photo courtesy of Bernhard Loersch: <http://www.tamanrasset.de>

Hanifa began:

"Assalam Alaikum brother. May Allah grants peace upon you and your family."

"Wa iyakum, brother, the same unto you. What business drives you here, brother?"

"Yesterday, I found a fig that belonged to you, and I ate it. Give me your price, and I will reimburse you."

The man reflected for a minute, then said:

"Brother. Your gesture speaks for yourself. I see that you are honest, that you are God fearing. Meanwhile, I cannot take your money."

"Thus, what do you want, brother?"

"I'd rather like that you marry my daughter. But watch! She is deaf and dumb. What do you say?"

The young man, in his fear of God, and seeing his honor at stake did not hesitate. He accepted the marriage, only if the girl agreed to it. I was speechless. Such a bargain! I could not believe my ears. When we left the orchard, I announced gravely:

"You can refuse the marriage, Hanifa. You are not forced to accept. Besides, the girl has a handicap; it is a lawful reason to refuse."

"O, my friend! Don't you know that I am already aware of all this? I have confidence in Allah. He knows what He is doing, even when I do not know what I am doing myself."

A few days later, the wedding was celebrated. All the people present had been invited. Ourida, Meriem, Oun-Er-Rebia in particular adorned themselves with art, and were among the most beautiful. They wore yellow amber necklaces, and Nigerian shells. They hung silvery lozenges on their breasts, and rich drop earrings.



Photos courtesy of : <http://www.nigerbends.com>



Photos courtesy of: <http://www.nigerbends.com>

These beautifications were so heavy that some of the rocky bracelets they wore could hack up a woman's arms if she was not careful. But they did not care about it; indeed they were used to it.

Some other women had put number of *tissac* on their fingers. The *tissacs* were rings cut in the shape of stars or flowers; one could hear in them the tinkling of the small pebbles kept inside. Most women counterbalanced the weight of their veils by copper keys.

The jewels made of silver, gold, coral and amber looked like an armor on the bride's chest. The young girls had covered their hands with henna, and had used the walnut bark to paint their gums and lips orange. They also tainted her eyebrows lightly with the *tekkai*. They then had dotted the bride's face with a dark colored and perfumed gum. As I knew, they had mixed the gum with other perfumes like *ghalia*, *patchouli* and *schab*, and they had shaped the mixture into pearls that they had hung at her neck. Tonight, not just a couple but an entire population was being married, like they had been married for centuries. Tuareg tribes residing miles around had been invited; it was rare that such a feast was held in the oasis, but the girl belonged here.

Among these young girls, there were three singers of Islamic songs. Later, they would join the caravan going to the Al-Hoggar. They themselves wanted to meet Dassine and see her marriage, but that was

not the only reason. They had inherited the blood of the Tuaregs, so they wanted to discover their ancestor's ways they had only heard about by their father.

The latter had settled in the oasis for years now. This was rare for a nomad, but people's mentality had changed quickly! I suppose people had looked at him with a lot of curiosity. Anyway, he seemed not preoccupied by this. For his three daughters, going to the Hoggar was a challenge; he knew it. Whatever could happen to them, it was the apprehension that was the most beautiful part of the trip, the fear for what they were about to find. Ourida, Oum-Er-Rebia and Meriem knew well that there were no liberty for them in the Ahoggar mountains. They would still be prisoners of their dreams.



Photo courtesy: <http://www.nigerbends.com>

But the future spouses had just arrived with all their families.

For the wedding itself, witnesses asked the consent of the two engaged people, then dates were exchanged, as well as the dowry that

the bride had freely selected prior the wedding. Finally, the men jumped on their mounts, and dared each other in the spirit of diverse tournaments. Then the night finished with the recital of traditional songs, and calm conversations. It was simple and pleasant. Men and women were not mixed but had a way of interacting that was subtle and agreeable.



Photo courtesy: <http://www.nigerbends.com>

Several days later, I saw Hanifa again. He was transformed with joy. He walked beside me, and explained the entire affair. His wedding night had been full of surprises. Indeed, the bride he discovered behind the veils was astonishingly beautiful, henceforth without any handicap. The day after the wedding, Hanifa had asked the father-in-law the reasons for his lying.

“Why, brother, did you say that your daughter was deaf and dumb?”

The man replied:

“Despite all appearances, brother, I did not lie. I have simply used wisdom, saying the truth in an untraditional way. My daughter is indeed deaf, since she never heard any dishonest word. She is indeed dumb for the reason that she never uttered any word against her modesty. In trying you, I wanted to ensure for her a good husband, actually, the best.”

“And what did you answer to this, Hanifa?” I said, excited by the story.

“I?” he retorted. “I answered him that certainly Allah inspired me what was wrong and what was just the day I ate this fruit, because I could never find a better wife than my wife.”

I also thought that everything had been said the right way. I was less inclined to judge now. Destiny had ways that escaped our immediate understanding. Good could come from what appeared wrong at first and bad could come from the good as well. There was no way to know in advance. The desert life appeared again so mysterious to me! People lived here so differently, so against the principles I had experienced all my life, that I had to be willing to understand in order to see all its beauty. I also realized that Hanifa’s honesty was exceptional, and truly precious. In spite of all the new world discoveries, the general occidentalization of the African countries,

there still existed an untouched population, a population of faith. And I knew how lucky I was to have found these people, true people who were yet holding to a way of living issued many centuries ago. The whole world could live upon credits, the sincere Muslim would always refuse to owe even a date to anybody else. When trust had become rare in the world, Hanifa had given his word of honor and had kept it. Then I understood what he had said once to me:

"You will not have faith unless you give up what is dearest to you" [A Haadith].

Yes... That was faith!

All these situations were new experiences for me. I was learning the values I had forgotten from these strangers who happened also to be my friends.

In a few weeks, after the men and the beasts would have gotten their fill, we would depart for the Hoggar region, the mountains in the center of the Sahara. A new life, other perspectives now seemed to widen. How much would I change? Over there in the capital called Tamanrasset, there was an airport, and the possibility to fly back to Europe. Would I have enough courage to go back to my former life? By the time I would reach Tamanrasset,

would it already be too late to go back? What would happen then? Could I be strong enough to quit such beauties and refinements?

Only God knows.