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Tār tōkle tofa tār ghimit.

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

A tuareg proverb

"Oases!

They floated in the desert like islands...

Oases!

Ahmet told me: 'The next one is much more  
beautiful!'

The next one was much more beautiful, more full  
of flowers and rustlings

The day after, there was nothing I loved more  
than the desert."

[André Gide, from *Sinbad Le Marin*]

By Soumy Ana

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

## Chapter THREE:

### *Pouches in the Sand: Oases*



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

We awoke again the next day with the rising of the sun. While the men prepared themselves for the morning prayer, I found two scorpions under my covers. They sometimes came during the night, creeping under the saddles in order to find some warmth. Fortunately for us, they were too sleepy to react at the moment they were found.



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

Somebody lit a fire. That was fortunate because I was trembling with cold. It had frozen so much during the night that the puddles of water formed over plastic bags and created by the morning dew, cracked under our feet. In spite of that, the nomads were happy. They would be home soon, in the Hoggar. An *imochar*, a noble Tuareg, prepared the morning mint tea, the only drink available that so well appeased the throat and burned the stomach as it quenched us. A delicate fragrance of green tea and mint leaves rose into the air, smelling much better than a perfume. It announced more water in the vicinity and more water meant better chances to find people. Joy danced into my heart, almost against my will. A Kell Ajjer Tuareg sung in the distance. The voice did not belong to anyone among us. I turned around, astonished.; another caravan had joined ours on the way to the Hoggar, and as it departed, the men continued talking though at a far length from one another.

A voice in our camp was praising the pride of the nomads:

“Oh! Noble *imochar*, did you see Dassine?”

“Yes, she is under the tent; she is looking for a husband. The snow at the top of the Atacor mount is as little eternal as her youth. Dassine must elect a twin heart before she becomes old. Remember this, O you, noble *imochar*, if you look for meeting this beauty, she is looking for someone like you now.”

“And when is it most favorable to arrive?”

“As soon as the stars disappear, as soon as the jealous rivals quit, then nobody will cross the *Tanezrouft* in order to kill each other for the beauty of Dassine.”

“Do you think that the destiny of Dassine is about to change?”

“O! The girl is restless as a gazelle tail.”

Then, they began to sing. The mountains, visible from miles away, were so impressive that they looked much bigger than they really were.

*“I have for camels the mounts Tebout and Tengerenga*

*I have for mehari, the mount Adray*

*My saddle rug are the valleys of Ad and Taressa*

*The girdle fringe suspended to it are the palms of Tamira*

*My belt is the hills of Kamita.”*

The men were in haste now; they ate handfuls of dates while traveling. During the stops, they rinsed their mouths with plenty of water, and brushed their teeth with the stubs of branches, which when chewed, opened in concentric layers. These natural brushes came from branches of the Iraq or the palm spines. They gave to be nomads the white of their teeth. The men thought about the nicely complexioned women. They uttered, one after the other, the songs of

the Hoggar and composed some more for those who waited for them, nearby, playing the violin, under the tents.



Badi especially thought about Chennou:

*“Those who adorn themselves with earrings and necklaces,  
Those who fard their faces and dye blue their temples and  
their cheeks.*

*They are sheer mirages from the valleys.”*

As I listened to them, it was not anymore these monotonous and endless songs, but a suave, deep chanting. At the same time, the men moved their calves joyously on the neck of their *meharis*. I could almost imagine, in this context, men and women clasping their hands in the wind.

The nomads told me that women were waiting there for the men to come. They already dreamed about it. In those courteous places, the *Targuias*, the noble ladies, would play on drums and young couples would recite poetry. Those would also have the opportunity to wander in the dunes, hidden by the night, to meet their lovers. They would communicate their desire by signs traced in the palm of their hands, but would not touch more than their hands yet.



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

Women in the desert were like oases; they were permitted to quench the men's thirst and leave them full of hope in the desert tracks. As for me, I had never experienced this type of deep respect the male Tuaregs felt for their women. I had known a lot of women, but I never could be attached to one of them in particular because I was too much interested in my travels. The nomads seemed to know a sort of love that went beyond them, beyond the physical satisfaction. I asked Badi:

“Have you already been married, Badi?”

“No,” he said plainly.

“Then, how do you manage to live six months in the desert without a woman?”

He blushed a little, then he said by way of friendliness:

“Traveling in the desert is like fasting: a few drops of camel milk and a handful of dates is enough for the appetite of the body. The rest of the time, we pray or we meditate about the world, we sing, we joke, we thank Allah for being alive. Our arrival in the tribes is like a feast. WE rejoice in the smiles of others.”

“But a man is a man, isn't he? After spending a hundred days in the desert, wouldn't you like to join your own family and be with your own wife?”

“Yes indeed, a few men have a wife here and another one there. Life in the desert is a family affair; the couple is not reduced to itself; we learn how to live with others. How to accept two wives to prevent ourselves from sinning is sometimes part of it.”

I understood perfectly what he was saying, and I felt close to him, even if our two cultures were opposite. Of course, there were things not easy to accept like sharing several wives, but it was better than cheating on them.

We still walked in the direction of the next oasis. We had to take a turn and lengthen our trip on account of the rivalries among Tuaregs's tribes. But, most of the time, there was only one way in

the desert: from oases to oases, from a well to another. It was the hospitality law. It was also a survival law. People planted trees and left behind irrigation and groves that did not serve them! Only those who would come later would benefit from them since fruits took years to mature. Here also, people talked to each other's hearts. Nothing was intended without tenderness, and it was indeed a population that was tender despite its harshness.



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

A popular Tuareg proverb evoked the basic solidarity in the Sahara. It said:

*“The path opened up, even if it has turns.*

*The king, even if he became old.*

*Take away your tents, bring your hearts together."*

The nomads repeated this proverb on any occasion. Bahh recited it once to me, as a gift. Everybody was thankful to Bahh for so many things! This beautiful man with a tanned face belonged to the world of gallant jousts and lost kingdoms. One would think he was coming from many centuries ago. His benediction was to be born in the Tuareg land. He hardly could have lived somewhere else. It's he who initiated me to the Saharan folklore.

Bahh raised his arms towards the horizon, then said to me:

"The heart is the first sanctuary in the bareness of the desert. We think about our wives; they are half of the faith. We dream about our families; they are the first to receive the benefits of our journeys. We respect them, and we sing with melancholy, still thinking about them. The second repose for the eyes is the varicolored ribbon made by the caravan. This ribbon goes through dunes and rocks. Everyone of us has put his steps in the steps of the others. The third rest for the eyes is the sight of little green pouches that emerge in the bareness, and from which a simple error takes away: the oasis! "



Photo courtesy of: <http://www.saudiinfo.com>

The oases? They were a guiding mark in the desert as are the stars in the celestial vault. The oases! They were a complete and miniaturized ecosystem. They still surprise me, after all these years.

Oases! Sometimes they were located near a *wadi*, a water stream that was totally or partially dried up. The bottom was usually garnished with big pebbles, and scorpions, snakes that had trouble living in the middle of the desert found refuge there. The most deadly reptile, the thorny viper, lived there too. It was a viper more than one foot in length and with protuberances over the head resembling thorns. People said it could project itself into the air at

man height, and they also said it could go as fast as a running horse. I did not know where the legend ended and where the truth began, but I had once the occasion of seeing one. We saw one on our way. My companions rushed to stone it as it flashed into the sky.



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

We arrived soon in one of those small and green pouches.

This time, it was not a mirage!

As we entered it, the temperature dropped suddenly a few degrees.

We made camp far from the lake for fear of the malaria. The dark green fruits of the palm trees had already been spread on the ground so they could dry. We were at the date harvest season. The violent colors of the orchards immediately surprised us after the pastel color of the sandy tracks. O, the bright colors of the oasis bearing too many sweet fruits and which took the exclusivity of our senses! After days of walking, we felt intoxicated. I even cried out of joy! The beasts that had felt the fresh vegetation as well as the fresh water from the irrigation channels in advance, pulled on their bridles. We ourselves felt carried forward by an inner will,

hypnotized that we were by this green pouch. The oasis once had floated in the horizon like an island in the bare ocean. It was like a banner in the wind, and it seemed to beckon us to come in. At its entrance, we instantly heard the voice coming from the minarets where men recited the call for prayer through the carefully designed windows.



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

A few minutes later, I found my way to the mosque. I hesitated a little. I did not know how I would be received. However, some men came to greet me on the threshold of the construction before they

disappeared inside an immense and luminous room. Outside, the recitation echoed long in my ears since it was the first sign of life that became perceptible as we walked in. It said something like:

*Come to the prayer, Come to the Success.*

*There is no God but God, The Only One*

Some housewives draped in white trotted in the dew in order to go and fetch water to the main well. I turned away from the building's entrance and was on my way to meet them when I realized that they were alone. Because of modesty, they brought back the brim of their cloaks over one eye while carrying a jug of water against their waist. They probably felt strange about meeting a foreigner here, in the middle of nowhere. I still went to help them.



Photo courtesy of: <http://www.saudiinfo.com>

Despite the heavy palm trunk arduous to manipulate, I clung to it and pulled. At this very moment, the well-digger appeared, and I hurried my steps away. I was thinking about this strange custom prescribing the women to cover their faces and head. I thought also about the women who wore transparent veils, showing glittering apparels under them. There was the religion, and the interpretation of the religion, then there was the tradition. Everything was mixed for some and clear for others. I did not know what to think exactly. But, as a law, all Muslims respected hospitality. It was sacred! They all knew that fasting was compulsory. At the same time, scholars preached in the mosques to educate the common people. How many

were attracted? How many remained ignorant? Here, there were a lot of young people. They knew! They were youngsters who left in order to study in the towns, then they came back as helpers during the crop season. They did talk about what they saw over there because they understood that the urban men and women had changed too much. Over there, the Occident had tried to steal their souls as they said. Here again they felt safe. Women were so soft and considerate; it attracted them back! Men needed their spirituality in order to live. They were happy here. A certain number of females went to school, especially since the religious men came to teach them and since the little girls had the opportunity to go to the Coranic school as it was prescribed in their religion. They learned as well how to read and how to write. Careful to be modest, all the veils draped about themselves, over their heads and over their soul, faith would be what would tie them to their land.

The sun was high in the sky, still I was listening to the muffled sounds in the oasis, like the sounds on the beach line. Outside, the children read and recited something. I felt so far away from my own world! I wished I could go back to it for a few hours! But fundamentally I was happy; I had found a light, and this was the most important thing. But, I would have liked to share it with my people. I thought maybe I would have been disappointed by their

reaction. They would not have understood. To understand the green pouches, one should consent to the burning sun and acknowledge the difference.



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

As I was sitting watching them recite, a clamor suddenly rose from the encampment, and the sheik's friends appeared on my right. A man was holding in a rug a baby bird named in Arabic *hamarah*. I immediately saw that the mother of the bird was following and was flying in every direction, in anger and fear. The sheik came and joined the men, then he asked angrily, pointing at the mother bird:

“Who has hurt this bird, taking its baby?”

“I,” answered the man. “The nest prevented us from harvesting, so I wanted to move it around.”

Then the sheik ordained that the nest be brought back in place, and advised to continue the harvest as usual, at the exception of the tree where the birds had nested. Soon, everyone returned to work.

This was not a major event, but it struck me as bizarre. The life in the oasis was so mysterious to me! These men, usually so fierce, seemed suddenly to be as sensitive as women could be. There was something incongruous at the sight of them taking pity on a simple bird as they took pity on me, and at the same time looking so stout and tough. I followed the sheik to the tree men had taken the nest from. I heard him, visibly moved, say:

“Don’t you see that every creature in the sky as on earth praises the Lord, even birds in their nests? Each creature knows as well its prayers and invocations as God knows everything they are doing. And therewith, you do not know how they do declare His Glory.”

Turning towards me, he changed his tone of voice a little bit, and declared:

“A bird’s existence is like a living petal. Its life is nothing, but very necessary. Its work in here is utile. All life is precious, because our survival depends on it.”

I smiled to show him my approval, still puzzled by his words.



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



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

I began to meander around the orange grove, among the shadows and the primary colors. Alone! It seemed as if everything was bathing and emerging from these basic colors: red, green,

yellow, blue. It was also a peaceful light because it seemed to emanate directly from the soul. Every little thing was in a state of hatching. The light gave to the greens and to the yellows a depth, as it happens for jewels. The shade, under its influence, appeared more natural, thickless. The branches bowed because of their loads of fruits, and the palm trees, too tall, leaned under the sun to form bridges of shade. They seemed to say: be in peace. The pace of its inhabitants, a little bit doleful, added to the charm of the place. Otherwise, every little thing seemed to prostrate, every minute, redefining every gesture. Effectively, the movement of the gardeners seemed like the motion during the prayer. He would bow, kneel, and stand up the same way. It was the same motion from the earth to the sky, and from the sky to the ground, all around us. It was also the same gesture of the well-digger who manipulated the tree trunk of the well in the far distance.

The old men that I had met this very morning in their way to the mosque had almost finished dusting rugs and oiling hundred of lamps from the mosque. Leaning against the mud columns, they had some rest. I was walking on the sand, like near the seashore, feeling at peace. The gardeners of the oasis, called the *Khammes*, did not stop for a minute. They moved rocks, dug into the sand with

assurance. They also harvested. But very soon, the oasis would be silent. People would reenter their houses to have dinner and spend the night. The stars were now apparent in the sky through the remaining daylight. They were the cause for the glimmering of the drops after the watering of the groves. And over the trees, the moon put a golden green layer.



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

I laid down, and put a heavy cloak over my shoulders. I was happy. So happy.