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*Tār tōkle tofa tār ghimit.*

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

A tuareg proverb

"From now on, wherever I would be, I would always  
deeply regret the country I remember by the  
presence of the sun and the sand, the country of  
deep gardens and where the winds roll clouds made  
of sand on top of the dunes, while chiseling them  
whimsically, through the centuries, unceasingly."

[Isbelle Eberhardt]

**By Soumy Ana**

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

## *Chapter TWO:*

### *Crossing the Reg*



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

Marouchet, worried, touched the hump of his camel. By doing this way, he could evaluate the distance the animal would be able walk and still sustain the draught. The next water hole was still far away, and we had been navigating in the Tanezrouft for two weeks. Our lips were swollen, cracked by the dryness of the air, and our eyes were red. Above hollow cheeks, our stares looked into an ocean of sand, becoming more and more vague, enduring.



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

The water was tainted red in the *guerbas* as if the pouches contained the fire from the earth they had scratched to sipper a few drops of liquid. The red color actually came from the skin bags themselves, adding to the already poor quality of the water. Inside

the skins, the water was muddy, full of goat hair, warm and tasted strongly of sulfur and magnesium. When we drank out of them, a disagreeable sensation went through our entire bodies, then the thirst came back more vividly. We had to drink about three gallons of water per day, but we were far from obtaining it. Seeing how dry our skin bags were, I realized that my sufferings would not end with the apparition of the nomads. But I was resigned. It was still better than agonizing alone in the sand. Marouchet and his brother Bahh stopped and threw down one of the camels on the gravel, away from the sight of the other animals, then they quickly cut the carotid artery, uttering the name of Allah. The meat became *halal* (ritually pure) thereafter. Inside the camel, we found a greenish and nauseating liquid that the beast had kept in its three stomachs. Despite this, we eagerly drank from it. We were so happy to be able to quench our terrible thirst for a while that we drank without a word.

The conversations had become rare during the long hours of dryness. Once in a while the people of the desert looked at me intently and sighed with melancholy. They certainly took great pity on me because I had already spent so many days, alone, in this bareness. They carved the best morsels from the dead camel and gave some to me, then carried away the parts that could be eaten rapidly. In order to console themselves from the loss, they often declared:

“Allah gives us life, then takes it away. This is how it is!”

They had found me, a while before, agonizing on the sand of a small oasis, lost in the vastness of the *reg Tanezrouft*. I remember. Two dark blue veils bent over me; two eyes black as ember had glowed into mine for a spark of life. Seeing that I was still breathing, one of the Tuaregs had immediately approached my lips with the skin bag. I cried out of surprise as well as out of pain; my face had become a living wound. The man reassured me, calmly: "Patience is a good disposition, there is no better work than this! Drink!"

They repeated then with calm and confidence: "Al alli therkhil-khâh! Al alli therkhil-khâh! -- Indeed, life is like this!"

Afterwards, they did not ask me anything for three days. They let me rest under a tent straightened over the hump of a camel. They fed me with dates and fresh camel milk, the greatest treasure of the desert, after the water.

Those days of profusion would however not last too long. Although rescued in time, I was far from being saved. We had the desert to cross as a new trial. Sudan was left far behind us; we directed our feet in the opposite direction, towards the Hoggar, in the center of the Sahara.

Now, the evening had come. The carcass of the camel laid uncovered to be polished by the desert sands. We had reached at last, after miles and miles of nothingness, a new water hole that would take a few days to dig out. On a stone, the tea boiled; with the dates. Tea was the only remedy against the sand hurting our throats. Some

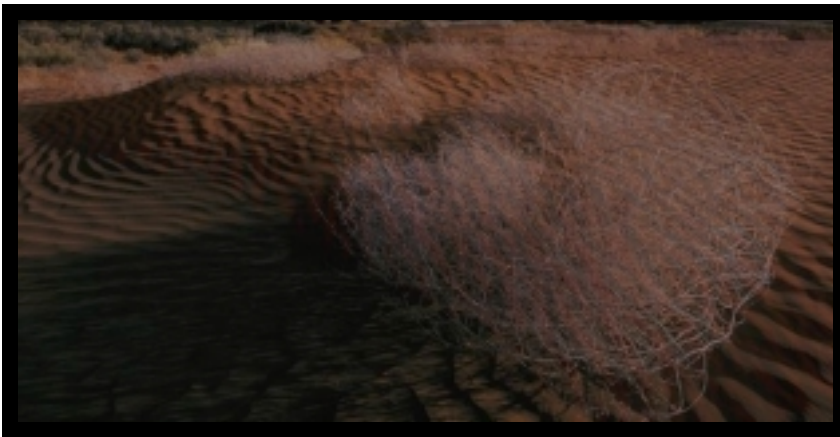
of the Tuaregs prepared the *kesra*, the bread baked under the ashes, to which they added an exquisitely smelling aromatic plant, the *dinharh*.



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

Because I was honored with some scientific knowledge, I stopped, the few plants that languished in the bareness. That was my pastime of the evening or the early morning. During the day, we had to keep the same pace for hours; no time for rest, no time to look around. So, when the night came, and before I fell heavily on the ground, I investigated a variety of plants that popped out around me. They were rare, of course, but those who survived could persist ten years without the benefit of any rainfall. Each type presented thorns and shrinking leaves so that their exposure to the sun and evaporation would be minimized. They were quite amazing. These

plants, only a few inches above ground, could bear roots several yards underground. In some cases, a thin salty film drawn from underground would cover the plant completely. The salt, very absorbent, would hold any humidity left in the air. Another plant could be entirely hidden by a coat of hair for protection against the sun rays and against the atmosphere. Other plants had their roots protected from the heat by a chalky case. Certain plants, as far as I could remember from the books I had read, could even develop antibiotics at their roots in order to prevent other plants thriving on their sides. Fascinating! I was able to recall all my previous courses about the Sahel. I also had some practical experiences since I sold exotic plants and aromatic herbs. Each plant had developed its own means of resisting the most severe milieu. It was the same for 'the plant of resurrection,' also called 'the rose of Jerico' or *Helianthemum canadens*, the tumbleweed.



The plant itself looked like a free shrub. I could see one or two along the desert of rocks. It was to be found in number in the Ahoggar region, the domain of my companions the Tuaregs, as I would later discover. The plant's shape evoked within me something bare and in anguish; it suited perfectly the region known for its various legends of spirits and demons. When the humidity became rare, the rose of Jerico could withdraw its roots from the ground, and appear like a pellet of hair, apparently dead. This shapeless form, absolutely dry, was then drawn here and there by the winds. It could hibernate this way for years.

After a rainfall, the plant was resurrected, took root again, unfolded its branches, then burst forth anew.

When I raised the question of the shrub among the Tuaregs, they looked at me in awe. Here, people disliked witchcraft. They all kept silent, their hands tightening their veils over their face, except for Bahh who declared, meditatively:

*“Assuredly, rivers can emerge among stones; some rocks crack over and the water pours out; some rocks can split in fear of displeasing Allah”* [The Qur'an]

I realized how much the landscape and these men were alike in their constant contradictions. Here, the alive proceeded from the dead, and the dead proceeded from the alive, definitely, persistently. Here, indigence was in harmony with refined speech. This spoke of the very truth of the desert, the terrible joy in the solitude. The plants

followed the same rules. The plants could survive in the form of grains as long as a hundred years, some even for thousands of years, without any water, any substance coming from the soil. Then, one day, God knows why, they sprouted from the ground, out of nowhere.



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

In the Sahara, six hundred and twenty sorts of plants died and were recycled constantly. However, as far as I was concerned, no plant could symbolize the migration of the Tuaregs as well as ‘the plant of resurrection.’ My companions of solitude always wandered here and there, in search of a water hole some place, and were compelled to live for the hour or for the minute, never thinking about tomorrow, as if they were going to die today. I looked like one of them now. After

my landing in the desert dunes, I was happy to get rid of the responsibilities of my business, and to be able to take root, somehow. Here, my only concern was to stay alive and strengthen my body. I was testing, with some interest, the powers of my body in extreme climatic and physical conditions, and I was amazed how it reacted; I was satisfied to notice how I was able to adapt myself to this new existence.

After our dinner made of bread and dates, Marouchet passed by me and came sit by my side. He had just spread on his eyes the *dazould*, a sticky powder made of special stones. The eyes were constantly aggressed by the heat, the wind, and the dust; the *dazoul* protected them. While packing his gazelle horn, the applicator, in a red leather pouch, he stared at me for a minute. His eyes were sparkling like lakes, the white of them seeming as white as the mother of pearls. He declared:

“You do not realize yet what the greatest of solitude is. There is worse. You come from countries like Sudan or the white country where everything is easy.”

“And what is the greatest of solitude, Marouchet?” I asked.

“The greatest of solitude? It is when one has trampled the desert underfoot for years, and he has lost confidence in Allah. Yes, sometimes, the Greatest solitude comes when one is over confident. Solitude does not spare anyone; it turns us crazy, but we get used to it. But the greatest of solitudes? Never! Even our *amenokal*, the

*sheik* of the tribe, felt it. If it touched him, then who are we to try to avoid it?"

My curiosity was awakened. Numerous tales had been told to me about people who had been lost in the desert, but the *amenokal* Moussa ag Amastane himself! How could a chief of the chiefs have been wandering in the bareness all alone? I urged him to tell me the truth about it.

Marouchet signaled to Bahh, his brother, to approach; older, Bahh knew more stories. When he sat among us, Marouchet asked him:

"Bahh, my noble brother, tell us about the day our *amenokal* met Amena."

"Well," he said, thinking deeply, "we only know our chief's version of the story. May Allah bless him. This is what I remember of his words: at the beginning of the century, our brothers from the Hoggar directed their steps towards N'Chaia for a raid. Our *amenokal* was a young man then; his courage was legendary, and this time, as many times before, they had come back victorious. The tribe would not fast this year because of anger. The moment came of his returning in the Hoggar. Because he did not want to know any defeat and was proud of his victories, he strayed from his path, following a gazelle in the dunes he did not want to lose. He killed her but lost all tracks of his caravan and wandered for thirteen days in the Sahara. No soul was visible to him over there. The thirteenth day, he fell, hurt by thirst and by the scorch of the sun, defeated at

last. I do not describe you this part, you have already lived it a few weeks ago. You know all about it now."



**Moussa-ag-Amastane**

I smiled approvingly. He continued:

"Our *amenokal*, nonetheless, reached the well of Takket that he knew about; that shows how brave he was. There, he collapsed due to hopelessness and exhaustion. Solitude had brought back to him fantasies and illusions in number. So, he hardly believed his luck when, a woman from the Issequamarel tribe appeared before him. He first thought she was Dassine whom he had so many times dreamt about. But, no, she was just an old lady who had come to water her livestock.

She cured him, by Allah's will, found a camel for him and goods for a safe return. You should see our *amenokal!* Since then, he was so grateful to her that he immortalized her name in the songs of the Hoggar. Amena can still hear the poem Ag Amastane created in her honor many miles around.”

Bahh began to sing softly:

*“When the moment came, Amena!*

*We made our camels kneel by your well.*

*Like a legendary hero,*

*I spent thirteen long days*

*Lost, half buried in the dunes, rolling on the sand, thinking I was going to die.*

*But I did not yet accomplish what I was predestined for.*

*I was more dead than alive*

*Death was approaching;*

*And my heart said: I love only Amena”*

After a while, Bahh completed the poem himself:

“Coming back home, walking on the sandy paths of the desert, men walk, and that is enough! They sing the traditional ballads, endlessly. They sing the songs their brothers uttered themselves for ages, and that is enough for them.”



I looked at him with admiration. Like many nomads, Bahh was only able to speak in rhymes; all his words formed a continuous poem. This tradition already existed during the pre-Islamic period. At this time, parents even sent their children to the nomads in order that they would be educated to speak in verses. Nowadays, eloquence was still a pride, and each new creation contributed to the personal reputation of the Tuareg. Bahh still sang:

*“And now,  
In this instant,  
Our wives gather around the fire.  
They squash their hands over their hearts,  
as we are late to return.  
We will soon be here,  
Do not scare,  
Play the violin and wait.  
Oh, Allah, The Almighty,  
Don’t let me die  
Before I caress my beloved one.”*

Marouchet was deep in thought, near me, as if in a profound melancholy. He seemed torn apart by some personal memories. Maybe he did dream about a beloved who was waiting for his return, and he grieved for her company silently. Marouchet was a very private man and was very much respected for this trait. It certainly would be shameful for him if his privacy was uncovered even once. It was without doubt his secret garden, his garden of delights, and his repose on earth.



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

The next day, we resumed our long hours of walking. This routine was broken down from time to time, either to dig up a well, or to eat corn bread and a handful of dates. And as everyday, we stopped in the middle of nowhere. Men of the desert had, undoubtedly, an intuition to direct themselves, an intuition that defied the ordinary. It was comparable to the sense of direction migrating birds naturally possess. The instinct of the man who conducted our caravan was so developed that he seemed preternatural. Though blind, he drove us without any hesitation towards an invisible target that he was maybe the only one capable of perceiving. He guided the caravan by what seemed like a spark of light at the corner of his eye, or by a special intensity of the sun between his shoulders, or when the smell of some particular place reached his nose, or when the wind was blowing on a certain soil, and he said that the soil’s quality constantly evolved from one place to another. These insignificant signs were sufficient for accuracy in direction. A true miracle!

I verified the exactness of his claims ten or fifteen times a day with the help of my compass and a map. It was not exactly a compass but rather an instrument to read the place of celestial bodies. Well, the man never missed the road. Hence, I found the nomads used their bodies as compasses, and their experience was so complete that the rotation of the sun was enough for guidance. Somehow, the memory

of the passage was engraved in them. Each one of them could one day be in charge of a caravan, so they had to learn.

The rare drops of milk I could sip from the she camel were like an Edenic liquor, as soft as honey, but not intoxicating. Bahh invited me to this ceremony one night while he was reciting the Qur'an. The verses were beautiful and mysterious. They described Paradise, saying:

*“They will drink a pure wine, sealed with care,  
Those whose armpits will smell of musc;  
A wine melted with the Tasnin fountain’s waters,  
A spring where will refresh themselves but  
Those who are closest to Allah.” [Qur’an]*

The milk entered our bodies like a liquor, then it left in our mouth a sour taste since our tongues were too dry to keep any flavor intact. I remember that my entire body shook as if all my senses had been risen after a lengthened hibernation. Fortunately, we had only two or three days of walking, and we felt relieved to finally arrive somewhere. The *reg* was, after all, an empty space. For the enjoyment of the senses, we desired to FEEL again, to feel something different than the sunburns. As for me, the sun gave me a constant fever.



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

As we traveled in an endless shore of pebbles, time seemed abolished, and we felt as if we had entered into eternity. For the Tuaregs, it was a habit; time for them was meaningless. For me, on the contrary, it was painful, and I had to endure it everyday, and again everyday. The only moment I felt at ease was at night; I knew by then that another day was over, and we were closer to our destination. At night, I was cold, terribly cold, due in part to the heat we experienced during the day. I would come closer to the fireplace and I would immediately sleep in order to forget. The notions of space and time melted in my head, due partly to the mirages, partly to my wild imagination. Sometimes, in the middle of swinging mirages reverberating the Tanezrouft far from the place we stood, the

gravel slowly changed colors, from black to gray, to pastel, to green and blue. At these moments, I felt as if I was lost in an aurora. Our unique guiding marks were then spots of vegetation, and subtle impressions, or a star moving in the sky. Nobody there was looking for a better place to settle; we just stopped there, in the middle of nowhere, and that was it. The landscape remained desperately bare and uneventful, with the same distance to the horizon as to the heavens, and it even happened that sometimes, at night, we traveled between stars and galaxies.

The Tuaregs had multiple songs about their two companions in the *reg*, the Milky Way, and the camel. They talked to them, revealed them. Gathered around the campfire, they used to praise their mounts, to talk about their qualities:

*“My camel is like a storm,  
the thinnest of all animals;  
When he turns his head towards me  
His mane appears soft as silk  
I feel compassion towards his sufferings,  
I too, I have felt all these hardships.”*  
*“O, my camel  
Your hump is loaded with grease  
You carry charges heavier than any other animal.  
My brother,  
Walk always ahead, like the camel ahead of a caravan”.*

Using Arabic poetry, the nomads sang about the daily life, the beauty of nature, about historical facts that occurred in the tribe. The singing was born during the long crossings of the caravans, when they passed under the stars, when the imagination was at its extreme. This practice was nothing related to the ornament or the false courtesy of the western courts. It was, on the contrary, a profound and authentic feeling, as deep as the submission to God. Indeed, the believer, lost in the immensity of the sky and the immensity of the earth, could really feel here, the divine will.

Weak, and at the mercy of natural events, the nomad was completely dependent on the natural elements, the weather, the courage of men and the resistance of the animals, also the marks on the ground and in the sky. It was because of his humility, his resignation that the nomad gained his best *jihad*, his best holy war, a strife against himself.

With his stick in hand, the man pushed the animals' legs, being careful not to hurt them. In the desert, it was said that the man and the animal were attached to each other as the bones to the knee; one was not thought rich because he possessed a piece of land, but because he had a herd of camels. The man who lost his camel was no longer considered a lord. The one who found it again, often after a sand storm, and a hundred miles away, was considered blessed by divine guidance. Otherwise the Muslims believed that the camels procured forever warmth and food.

They also believed that, in Paradise, there would be pastures for the camels, among rivers and plenty of shade. At least, this is what the guide from the caravan had told me once. Except for the fact that the camels used to groan and complain when they were loaded, they could run very fast during festivals, and were the first companion of the nomad. This was due to the fact that they were bestowed extraordinary qualities in order to serve men, I believe.



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

Camels were generally called “the ships of the desert”, partly on account of the swaying movement of their bodies when they walked. They actually used two legs on the same side when they were moving. When a nomad arrived from a ride, it was common to feed his mount along with him. Therefore, after the water and the beverages, the camel was the greatest wealth in the Sahara.

After a halt in a Bedouin camp once, the pious man of the tribe recited to me these verses:

*“All the creatures are a family to God: and He likes most those who are most beneficent to His family.”*

*“Who is gentle with his camel, feeds it properly, will have his name registered by Allah, and he will have reported as many good deeds as his camel would eat straw.”*

*And “Who digs a well will be rewarded regarding by the number of camels that have benefited from this well.”*

My companions sang and improvised:

*“The power of thinking is as magnificent as a man riding his camel.*

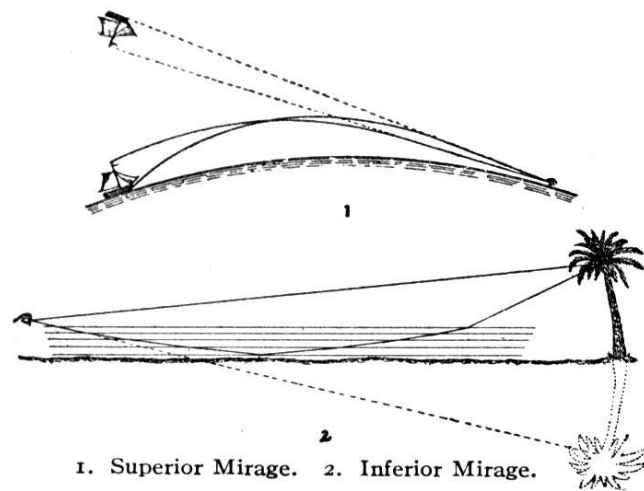
*The stupidity is like a vicious camel.” [Haadiths]*

For them, the mind’s powers evoked the race of a camel. In the desert, and especially the Tanezrouft, the mind was hassled by short and fugitive thoughts, then by long thoughts. One liked to feel the spiritual inside himself and also outside. So, in the *reg*, everything was emphasis, as in poetry: a rock looked like a mountain, a sip of water seemed a sip of nectar. But, after a few weeks, I felt that all this must stop before I became cracked. All these extremes, it was too much for me. I dreamed of human guiding marks. I dreamed about the next oasis.

Distances in space and in time seemed altogether the same. The huge Tanezrouft made us conscious of two important and

imperceptible notions: the geologic time and the astrological space. In the night that was falling upon us, one could imagine the presence of the *kel es Souf*, “the people of the void” who effaced the paths, dried up the wells and provoked the whirlwinds. They seemed to rejoice in that behind our backs.

The *Kel es Souf* manifested themselves in every possible way. Sometimes, it was the sudden apparition of an encampment displaying sumptuous tents that we wished so much to encounter on our way. There, a beautiful woman dreamed, waiting for us, waiting to drag us to our death. It was a mirage.

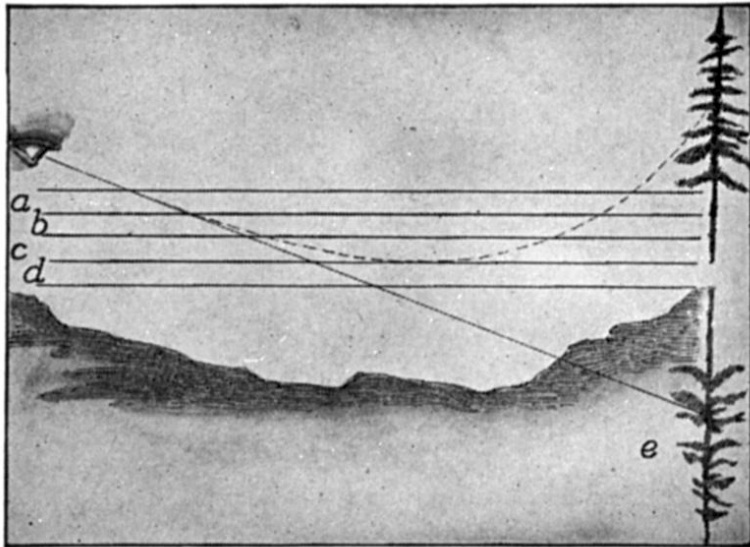


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Thus phenomenon was natural in the desert and even photos could be taken of it.

The intense heat on the ground produced layers of air more or less fresh as they were high in the sky. The refraction of the light on their interfaces gave birth to the refraction of things more or less real, actually existing miles away. This phenomenon was called “mirage.” Then, during the day, the flat horizon of the *reg* was crossed by waves of colored lights or seemed to be a wide lake.

Sometimes mirages appeared just before dawn when the density of the beds of air overturned. This latter phenomenon, quite rare, reflected for some minutes a genuine landscape existing miles away. But mirages had, at intervals, enchanting surprises to offer. We could cross over a wall of imaginary golden dunes in something that looked like puddles in the distance. The Tuaregs, as far as they were concerned, believed that mirages were created by people who had died of thirst and wanted to attract new companions. Therefore, in order to countervail the pervasive effects of the mirages, they used their speech that allowed them to spread knowledge.



MIRAGE IN THE DESERT (SEE PAGE 4530)

Let it be supposed that the air strata decrease in density from *a* to *d*; a ray of light coming from an object (the tree) will be refracted in passing downward through the stratum *a*, still more in passing through *b*, and so on until it penetrates a stratum which may be *d*, where the ray is totally reflected. The direction of the ray will then be upward, but will be refracted toward the perpendicular as it passes through strata of increasing density, so when the ray reaches the eye, the object will appear in the direction of *e*.

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