

WITHOUT HEART YOU HAVE NOTHING

INNER AND OUTER PATHS OF THE TUAREG

Trebbe Johnson

AS A FULL MOON GILDS THE ROCKY, RIPPLING EXPANSE OF THE SAHARA and the temperature drops, Lili moves close to the fire, drawing his thin legs up so his knees are close to his chin. Beneath his loose trousers and long threadbare cotton tunic, his feet are tough and calloused after a lifetime of walking through the desert. The *shesh*, the long length of fabric that Tuareg men wear, both as protection against sun and sand and also as an adjustable veil that they can quickly pull over their faces when they feel moved or embarrassed, is drawn across his chin and mouth. Lili is probably in his seventies now—the Tuareg, the nomadic people of the Sahara, tend to be vague on questions of Western-style time. He moves slowly and has a persistent cough, but he is full of vigor. When one of the younger men who are gathered around the fire says something that amuses him or strikes an opinion, he springs to alertness, looking over his shoulder to say what he has to say before settling back again into reflection. When he swings up onto his camel, he is even more magically transformed. Suddenly he becomes tall, proud, noble. His carriage is that of a man five decades younger and he rides like one, too. At a *tindi*, a festive event in which Tuareg women sit in a tight cluster drumming, singing, and trilling while the men circle them on prancing camels, each sex expressing admiration for the beauty of the other, he is like a young knight embodying strength and grace.

To the Tuareg the desert is full of life, information, and meaning. They know where the oases are, where in a vast expanse of sand and rock stands the lone acacia tree where one can find shelter from the hot sun. Lili's friend Ouhetta, a caravan chief, or *madagu*, can tell which tracks in the sand belong to which of the many camels he's in charge of. These men, and the Tuareg women who head each family,





still lead their herds along ancient paths that have been worn into the rock by thousands of generations of people and animals. In a landscape where black volcanic mountains have worn down to black rocky outcrops, which have broken off as black boulders, which have crumbled to black stones and flaked to black pebbles, the horizon changes slowly. The narrow paths that connect the landmarks and sources of water in this formidable terrain give a sense of the many people who have passed this way on their way to somewhere else. Sometimes the paths are so faint that you have to step off them to see them, reflecting the sunlight in hues just slightly different from those of the untrodden pebbles on either side of them. In the Teneré, the area of the great dunes, they disappear entirely, and then the slowly shifting longitudinal alleys among the towering sand hills become the paths.

Lili himself is a veteran of the salt trade caravans that used to cross these paths through the desert. Although he is not inclined to spin heroic tales about his youthful adventures, when pressed he'll describe the longest caravan he ever participated in. As a young man he was part of a group comprising about forty men and three hundred camels.



Together they traveled more than a thousand miles, setting out in the Ahaggar mountain range of southern Algeria and crossing into Niger. The men traded millet for salt that they scooped out of flats in the Bilma Oasis, shaped into columns using lengths of palm trunks as molds, then wrapped in mats.¹ Continuing on, they traded the salt for fabric, dates, metal goods, and other supplies. The journey lasted half a year. The men set out before dawn and walked until late afternoon. In the Teneré they kept going far into the night. Around his neck one man carried a small brazier on which coals burned continually in the moisture-free desert air. Three times a day he made sweet Tuareg “shai” tea and circulated among the men, offering three servings in a tiny glass. The first serving everyone received was “bitter like life,” the second “strong like love,” the third “sweet like death.” If

someone died on a caravan, he was buried where he fell, since that was where death had called him.

In recent years the Tuareg have been increasingly forced into a settled lifestyle by national borders and the insistence of governments that people pass over these borders only with a passport. To get a passport, of course, one must have a fixed address, a concept that is anathema to nomadic people. Droughts have further stressed the people by reducing their herds of goats and donkeys and especially their prized camels, while the allure of material goods draws young people to market towns like Tamanrasset in southern Algeria. The salt caravans have decreased, since shops have taken the place of a couple of traders bartering over goods spread out on a mat between them; highways have replaced narrow paths worn into rock, and trucks are the new camels.

Despite the difficulties, most Tuareg, young as well as old, still prefer to live in the desert. Ouhetta claims that if he spends more than a few hours in Tamanrasset, he starts to feel sick. All a Tuareg really needs to survive, adds our guide, Adem Mellakh, are millet, dates, and a little camel milk. Adem is the ideal host, warm and watchful at the same time, a diplomat who can make everyone feel at home, and at borders and airports negotiate easy passage for his tribe and his groups. Like the other Tuareg men, he regards women as the real “bosses” of the culture. According to legend, the “Mother of us all” was Tin Hinan, a heroine and matriarch who united the disparate Tuareg tribes, established an outpost in the Ahaggar, and introduced a shared culture and language to the people. Among the Tuareg, in stark contrast to the Arabs, the men cover their faces, while the women simply drape a loose

scarf over their heads. Occasionally, we pass their temporary camps, barely visible among sheltering rocks or behind an acacia tree. The woman stands tall and straight, the scarf blowing around her head, watching us pass. Around her the circumference of settlement is minimal: a tiny tent made of woven mats cinched together, a herd of small black goats, children playing, a garden coaxed out of the sand. The women make the decisions, take care of the herds, and teach the children; the men lead caravans when they are able.

Although the caravans are not what they used to be, they still crisscross the desert, sometimes for trade, sometimes, as in the group we’re in, as journeys for a small group of Westerners who long to venture into this immense desert and, midway, spend a few days alone in contemplation. The rhythm of the modern caravan varies a bit, since our group stops



not only in the evening, but also during the hottest hours of the day for lunch and a rest in a rare spot of shade. However, the daily concerns of the Tuareg guides are the same as always: obtaining water, gathering deadwood for the fire wherever it's available, caring for an ailing camel, readjusting the load of a pack camel when it becomes unbalanced and hence agitates the whole herd, practicing the old ritual of making and drinking shai, and following the ancient paths to the next stopping point.

TUAREG LIFE is regulated not just by outer, topographical paths but by an inner, ethical path as well. This personal compass is referred to in French, the language of Algeria's colonial government until 1962, as *le chemin*, "the Path." The Path consists of three parts: *ashek*, *tasaidert*, and *ull*. As Adem explains, "The Path helps a Tuareg stay on course. If someone starts to veer off course, the Path helps him get back on."

Ashek embodies the essences of both honor and dignity. To be ashek means that one comports oneself with the knowledge that he or she bears the responsibility of living out the highest, most honorable expectations of the culture, right up to the point of death. Ashék is the mantle on which all the details of Tuareg life are embroidered. It is an attitude, a bearing. A nobility that, ideally, is so highly developed within a person that he or she exudes it naturally, ashek encompasses honesty, the honoring of women, and the ability to make choices that will align oneself with beauty, strength, and integrity rather than some more immediate pleasure. Tasaidert is courage, with the added element of patience woven into it. This quality is crucial to a people who must

travel long hours in the heat without respite; one not only keeps walking, but walks with grace, uncomplaining, simply accepting the difficulty and moving through it. Ull is a fierce determination to live, but a determination that is inseparable from love.² Ull is heart and will. "Without heart," Adem says, "you have nothing."

Given the importance of *le chemin*, it is not surprising that the Tuareg are more likely to tell stories that illustrate those honored principles than they are to boast about their adventures in the desert. Many of the stories have a timeless, mythic cast. Often they relate some event in which a person behaved honorably when he was, or assumed himself to be, completely alone, and hence acting solely out of fidelity to the Path, not because he wanted to impress someone else. When the older people begin to tell one of these stories around the fire, the younger ones suddenly fall silent and listen intently.

One night Adem tells a story that illustrates *tasaidert*. A certain Tuareg man was among the guests invited one evening to visit the tent of the woman he was in love with. Entering the tent he sat down on the ground next to the door. A few minutes later his rival for the woman's affections arrived. As politeness demanded, the second man thrust his sword into the ground at the entrance before making his way farther into the tent. Unfortunately, it was not sand that the blade penetrated, but the hand of the first man. Throughout the evening, as the assembled company played music, sang songs, drank tea, and told stories, the injured Tuareg sat quietly, never once complaining or calling attention to his predicament. In the morning, when the woman saw the blood in the sand



and remembered who had been sitting there, she figured out what had happened. Of course she chose the dignified exemplar of the Path as her beloved.

After Adem finishes speaking, everyone sits quietly for a few moments, reflecting, measuring their own behavior against that of this principled man who might have been one of their own ancestors.

OUR CARAVAN WEAVES among sweeping dunes and then begins to descend into Youf Ahakit, a valley in which fantastical black rocks balance against and atop one another like immense icons carefully placed on the bare surface of the land. Ouhetta sweeps his arm out broadly. “A long time ago, all of this land was covered with flowers,” he says. “There were elephants and—” He makes a gesture to indicate an elongated neck. Giraffes and elephants in the desert? At first it seems a preposterous claim, but when the cara-



van reaches the valley, we dismount, and Ouhetta leads us among a cluster of rocks propped against one another like gigantic plates, with a hollow space in the middle. On them are carved petroglyphs that archeologists date back to 3500-2500 BC. They show that rhinoceros, elephants, giraffes, and ostrich did indeed roam here. The desert present tells stories about the desert past.

Ouhetta points out the rock etchings with a quiet modesty, as if they had been done by people he knew, then steps back.

Ouhetta commands the caravan with little fuss and full attention to all details at all times. Around the fire, he loves telling funny stories. Often he himself is so entertained by what he relates that he laughs uproariously and grabs the hands of the people sitting near him, as if to physically sweep them along in the amusement. Some of the stories that are funniest to the Tuareg seem incomprehensible to us Westerners. Adem explains that many of these call attention to behavior that runs completely contrary to the Path. Laughing, for example, at a man who shoots his chicken, his horse, and then his wife is a kind of release. By articulating and laughing at the profane, one finds both a relief from and utter confirmation of the strictness of the sacred.

Some kinds of behavior deviate in severe and obvious ways from the Path, while other missteps are milder. Disrespecting a woman, failing to give someone a message you've been entrusted with, or stealing water tarnish a person's honor irrevocably. Other serious breaches include both failing to offer food to someone who comes to your home, and brazenly asking for food—or even water—if you yourself are the guest. Like the wounded man in the tent, a

Tuareg does not call attention to personal discomfort. A minor infraction, like yelping and hopping around dramatically on one foot after stepping on a thorn, is regarded as childish yet correctable. When you have lost the Path, Adem says, you have lost it forever. You can't get it back.

MOST OF THE TUAREG PLACE NAMES in the desert refer not to specific landmarks like mountains or rock formations, as they might in a temperate climate, but to the nearest source of water. When the Tuareg plan their route from one place to another, they plan according to the location of the water, which means that the journey takes longer than one would assume by considering a map alone. For example, instead of starting at point A and heading directly to point B, a good madagu makes sure that the caravan veers off along the way to a third point C. There the group replenishes the water supplies before triangulating back to point B. Like the routes to water, the direction of *ashek* is clear: you go where the source feeds you as a Tuareg; you do not choose the easier path. A favorite story tells of a man who was starving. He had the choice of going through one of two doors. Behind one door was all the delicious food he could eat. Behind the other was a woman playing the *imzad*, a one-stringed instrument played only by highly esteemed Tuareg women. The man chose the second door, even though it would mean certain death.

It is easy to lose track of contemporary world events when one is following the ancient paths of the desert. Sun, rock, camels, sand, stars, fire, stories, sun, rock—these are the mileposts of a day. Yet among the members of our caravan everyone has friends or family who have

been adversely affected by the ongoing rebellion in Niger, to the south, where bands of Tuareg have been fighting the military since February 2007 to protest both government harassment of the nomads and French-operated uranium mines that encroach on Tuareg land, deplete water sources, and poison the soil. Not surprisingly, the Tuareg we travel with do not talk much about the rebellion except to murmur, eyes lowered, that conditions are very difficult. However, the principles of the Path surface once again in a story they occasionally tell about the previous rebellion, waged in Mali and Niger from 1990-95 as a struggle for autonomy.

It is said that a band of Tuareg rebels were encamped on a peak in the Air Mountains when Nigerian military troops surrounded them, blocking access to food, water, and supplies. After several days, assuming that the Tuareg could not possibly have survived, two members of the army, including an officer, set out for the mountaintop to seize the rebels' weapons. En route they made camp for the night and began to cook a meal. The Tuareg, of course, being accustomed to deprivation and living through it with dignity, were still very much alive. When the scent of meat wafted up to their depleted camp, they sent a couple of men down to surprise the soldiers, whom they took as hostages. Back in the Tuareg camp, the rebels finished preparing the half-cooked meal. When it was done, they shared it, offering the first portions to their hostages, since *ashek* demands that one feed guests first, and even enemy hostages are guests. For several days the Tuareg held the hostages, unflinchingly treating them well. Finally, the officer asked to be set free, assuring his captors that he intended to drive to

the capital in Niamey and negotiate with the government. The Tuareg agreed. The officer kept his word and, in a meeting with leading government officials, attested to the honor and dignity of the Tuareg. His testimony led to the cessation of hostilities.

The full, factual details of this story, if they are recorded at all, are known to but few. As told, the account has the legendary quality of other Tuareg tales: an influential officer who happens to be doing the job of an ordinary scout, soldiers in enemy territory who foolishly call attention to themselves by pausing to cook a fragrant dinner, conflict suddenly transformed to peace because honor—even the testimony of honor—ultimately commands respect. Yet what is relevant about the story is the solemnity with which it is related and received. The point, as usual, is that the Tuareg, even in the most desperate of circumstances, behaved with *ashek*, *tasaidert*, and *ull*. They lived by the principles that guide them as unflinchingly to integrity and nobility now, in the twenty-first century, as they have since people and camels first blazed a Path in the harsh land of the Sahara.¶

1 For a beautiful and informative photo essay about the Tuareg salt caravans, see F. Paolinelli, <http://www.tuaregcaravans.com/about.php>.

2 Marianne Roth and Wigbert Winkler, "Die Tugend der Tuareg," http://muenchen.neueakropolis.de/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=400&Itemid=53.