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GLIMPSES OF MOROCCO - PART I.

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Dear Peter,

My next three reports contain fragments from travel notes on Morocco. They follow in a more or less chronological order my route through the country, roughly a clockwise circle starting in Ceuta and ending in Tangiers. In between were five thousand miles and almost two months of traveling. The reports contain rather rough drafts, often yet without much historical or general background. Since the narrative often jumps forward to different towns and locations without seeming connection I have included a map with the names of cities inscribed. The captions underneath the pictures are also fragments from my notes. "Omar" is a Tunisian friend who joined me for part of the trip.

* * *

There's already a slight smell and taste of Morocco that starts west of Marseilles. Vans with enormous bundles on the roof are heading south. Moroccan migrant laborers are returning home for their summer vacations. At night the parking lots along the highways fill up, blankets are rolled out on the hard tarmac and tired children are laid to rest among big loaves of tabouna bread, jars of harissa and thermos bottles with tea that has long gone cold. Women with a cascade of skirts under long woolen kaftans hover at the edge. The men, with big mustaches and harsh guttural berber accents direct the affairs of these temporary caravanserai; gentle toward the children, commanding toward their women.

In the morning the parking lot's toilets are crowded. A young man wanders by accident into the women's bathroom. I follow the ensuing conversation while filling the gastanks. An angry woman yells at her daughter as the man stumbles out:

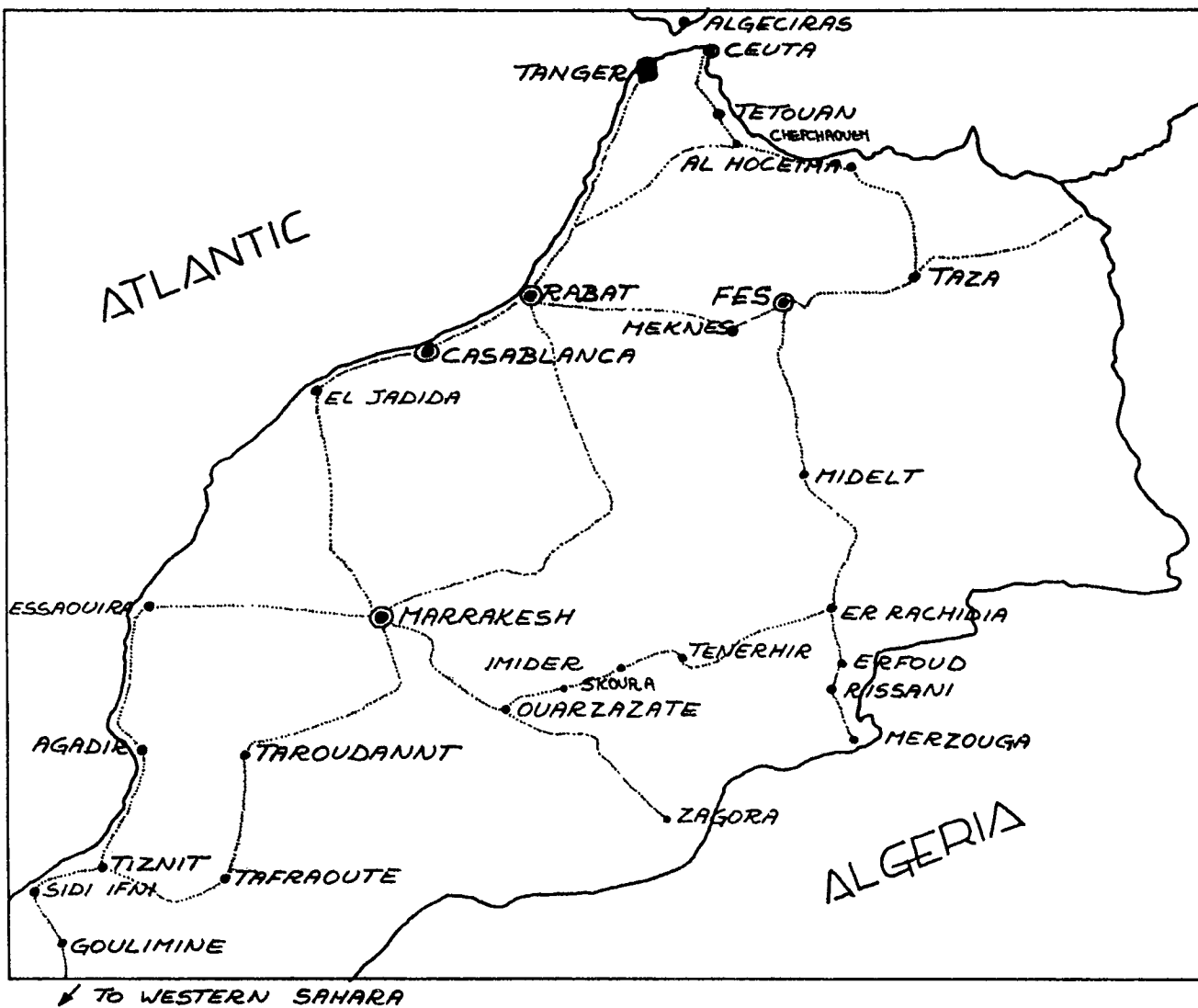
"You have no business taking your dress off in a public place."

"This is our bathroom, isn't it?" the young woman retorts, "What is he doing here? Why don't you yell at him instead?"

"You should know these things can happen."

"Is everything that happens to me my fault?"

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Near Algeciras the flavor of Morocco picks up. Restaurants are selling tajines (Moroccan stews) and couscous. More berber dialect, guttural and raw, rattles on around me. The vans increase in number near the harbor, the loading docks are full of garbage and dust and unwashed people; "Sabra and Shatila" the custom official calls it as he guides the Land Rover onto the ship. The families look tired; they have been on the road for days. The children are exhausted, asleep in rear windows, leaning into each other in the back seat, rolled up in women's arms. Outside one window, on a pillowcase yellow with dust, I notice a little girl's head: a swirl of tortured hair, with cookie crumbs encrusted, spilling from a plastic hairbow.

* * *

It's a very quiet morning on the camping just above the mountain town of Chefchaouen. A shepherd is guiding his flock through the scrubbery below me. Shariff, the owner's little son, has clambered over to watch with wondrous eyes the stranger with the typewriter. Chefchaouen is only sixty miles from the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, but until seventy years ago only a couple of Westerners had ever visited the sacred city. One of them was Walter Harris, a British journalist who almost lost his life when the rumor spread that a christian had entered the city walls.

News seemingly still travels as fast as ever. While buying bread near the city gate the baker approaches me;

"Are you the man with the typewriter?"

"Yes."

"Please come into my house."

Another invitation. You must quickly make up your mind about invitations here. Either yes or no. A moment's hesitation brings a tightly clasped hand on your forearm and minutes worth of persuasion. Once the hand is in place it is impolite to walk away, more difficult to refuse. I hesitate; he waves me past the baskets of bread into a bright lightblue courtyard. Behind a curtain some women are chattering away, unaware of the visitor. The baker stills their conversation and brings out tea a few minutes later.

There are thirty-eight bakers in Chefchaouen and Omar is one of them. "The best, I can assure you" he says as he cracks a smile into a bellowing laugh; "Cookies and bread in the morning, tajines in the afternoon." The heat of the oven penetrates the wall and warms my back. A few baguettes, almost too hot to handle, are put before me. Omar is indeed a very good baker.

"Could you type a letter for me? I will pay you. My son lives near Arles and I haven't heard from him in months. He's been there for several years; he barely reads arabic now, my grandson only speaks French."

The letter is a litany of paternal devotion and implied filial irresponsibility. The baker searches for words that convey a stern message without wanting to alienate his faraway son. It is the emotional blackmail of an old man: "Your mother is well but nearly blind. She would like to see you and the children."

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There are three thousand Chefchaouens in perhaps a hundred European towns; ten percent of the town's population, about the national average figure. Many don't return. Omar clings to straws: "Perhaps they will come back once they have enough money. I will take my little grandson to the Quranic school every day."

* * *

When I got up this morning a young boy was singing out loud in the field just beyond the turn of the road; a raucous song, yelled out with abandon, thinking he was alone in the valley. From a hundred yards above the valley floor I watched him walk near the dry riverbed where for hours last night farmers ran their horses back and forth across a pile of wheat. Women had scooped the grain into large round sieves, throwing the pile up in the air to remove excess chaff.

I was still a few miles from Taza on the only road that runs from the Rif into the Middle Atlas. From El Hoceima on the landscape was of seeming solitude, burned to a soft brown. The solitude was misleading. At every stop children scrambled up the steep approach to the road, pleading for toys, a dirham, a pen or candy. They looked ragged, barefoot and thin, the boys shaved bald for the summer; their hands were rough and calloused. A young man brought up his younger brother, dying from an enormous and hardened infection near the left ankle; already the eyes shone bright with fever, the mouth with its trail of spittle a grimace of pain.

The turn-off for Taza was near Casita where, in the shade of a cluster of acacia, an impromptu little market had been organized. Each little foodstand had its own tarpaulin strung above the food and vegetables. The soup smelled of mutton and tomatoes. We felt ourselves scrutinized by a group of veiled women. The tables, near the spring, were covered with bright dropcloths; below them the ground had been trampled to dust.

At the edge of the road a policeman asked for our papers. On most other occasions Omar's passport produced suspicious looks and prolonged questioning. Such is the urge and psychological bent to travel to the West that Arabs cannot conceive of other Arabs as tourists in their own countries. What interest could a man, an ustaz (professor) of all men, with the money and the opportunity to visit Paris and London, have in looking over Taza?

Luckily the officer in Taza held no such grudges. He greeted Omar warmly and called him "my Arab brother". Some male banter followed:

"What brings you to Morocco, ustaz?"

"Tourism, I've never seen your country."

The officer flips through the pages of the passport:

"You're not married?"

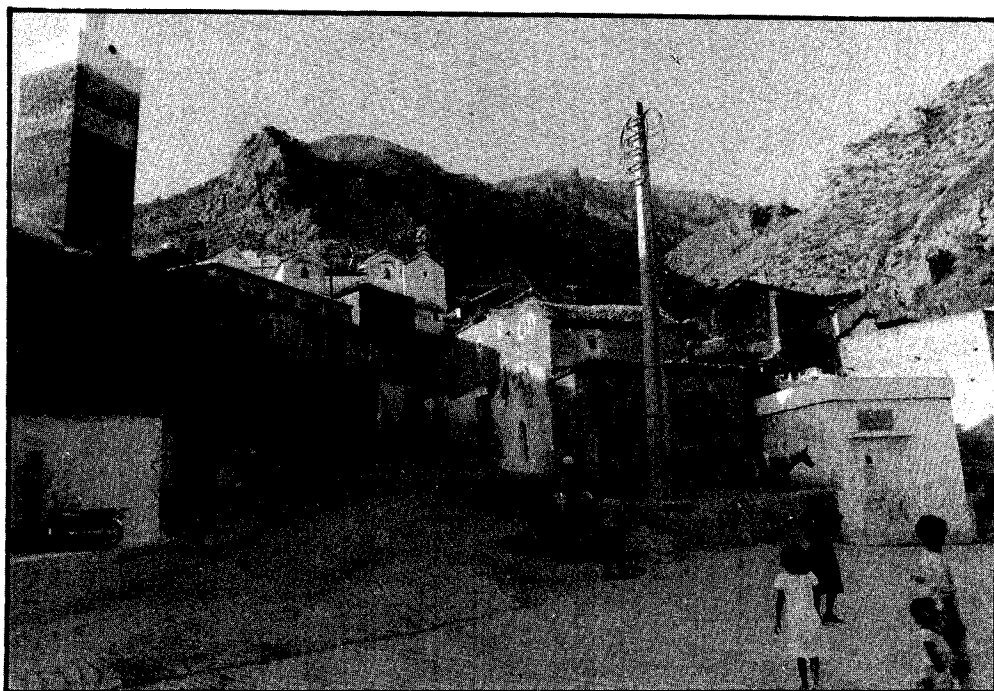
"I'm still looking for a beauty to settle down with."

On the grass near the spring the women loll and laugh. The young policeman senses a ready audience and smiles in their direction:

"There are some nice ones around here."

The women are shrieking; a few of the men selling food pretend indignation.

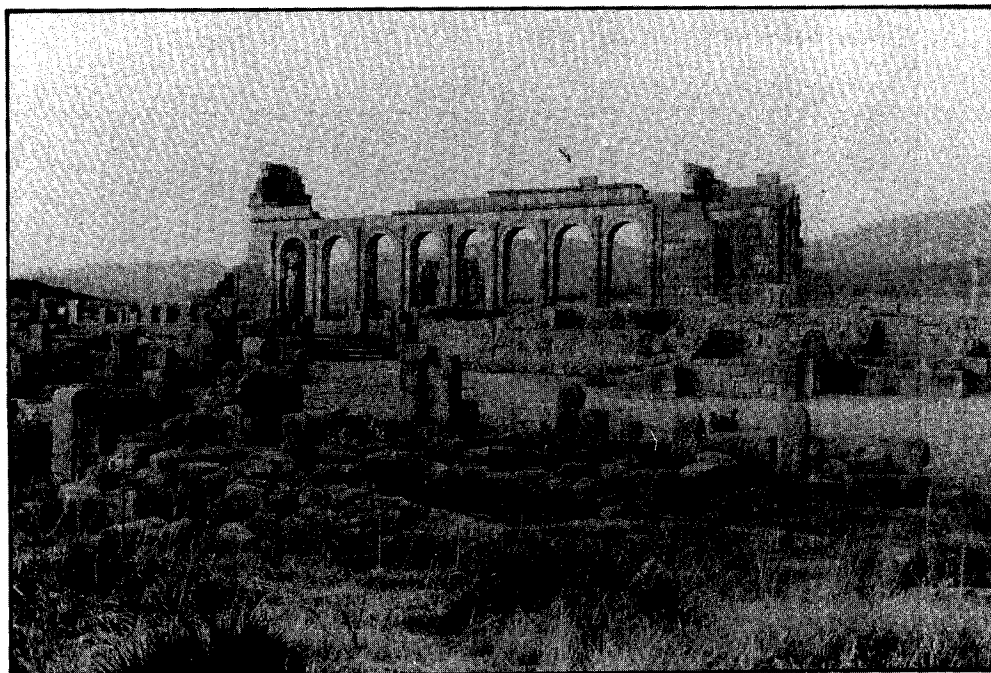
"Maybe I'd better stick to a Tunisian one; at least those I know."



CHEFCHAOUEN

There is a tiny prison in the Chefchaouen kasbah, set at the edge of a little grove of palm trees and magnolia bushes, where Abd el Krim once languished for a couple of years. This was before he organized the great Riffian revolt, and before he became a hero to Morocco's nationalists. Krim was by all accounts an impressive figure; handsome, intelligent and courageous. Sayid ben Ayad, our corpulent and rather outspoken guide in Chefchaouen, pronounced himself unimpressed with Mr. Krim's credentials. Perhaps this was due in part to lack of historical knowledge about his own country: a few minutes before this rather startling opinion he had called General Lyautey - who arrived in Morocco in 1903 - "a great eighteenth century statesman." Sayid nevertheless considered himself an authority on Moroccan history; much of this authority derived from a shiny brass medallion around his neck. "This" he said "is proof that I have a university diploma in history."

In the course of my trip I observed at close hand many more of these 'official' medallions. They are thrust at you whenever you park your car, whenever you're about to enter a town or museum. In Fes enterprising little boys can become official guides at the tender age of seven or eight, with or without university degree; the difference, presumably, a few dirhams. A particularly amusing one was brought out for my scrutiny in Rachidiya where the bearer, according to the crudely stamped lettering, was a "GUID OFFICIAL" and "GARDIEN DES VOITUES." He indignantly refused to sell me the delightful forgery.



VOLUBILIS

The Roman ruins at Volubilis were disappointing. But its setting was magnificent: a shallow, deserted mile-long bowl at the edge of a grain-filled plateau that runs down into the valley. The sun had already started to set as we drove in across the dusty plain from Moulay Idris; in the darkening evening a fine crimson filigree of light hung around the pillars of the Forum. The gatekeeper was grudgy; it was near closing time, he didn't have the right change. In return for a promise to drive him down to Moulay Idris afterwards he produced the tickets. But it was already too late to wander around so I walked over to the Forum and watched the sun set, my travel companion off in a hurried search for mosaics and other guidebook-indicated treasures.

The stone around me was warm; warm against the cold wind that rose from the valley below and where, in the distance, fields were being burned down. Small figures were running back and forth, cutting firebreaks across the fields. Above them hawks were riding the wind, watching rabbits run out from the fields, until their wings folded suddenly and in a graceful loop they plunged toward the land.

I've always believed in a minimalist approach to traveling; sometimes there is more pleasure in what you don't see than in seeing too much. Once on a late night visit to the church in Cordoba's mosque, the priest intoning mass behind me, I slipped behind a curtain to look out at the darkened mosque. It was only a partial view, but so exquisite in the moonlight that I vowed never to return to see the mosque in its entirety. And here at Volubilis the setting was perfect again; the softening crimson of the sun and of the fires in the fields, the deserted lichen-stained ruins almost mauve and grenadine now, the shadow of the cypress infinitely long across the plain.



DYERS' PITS IN FES

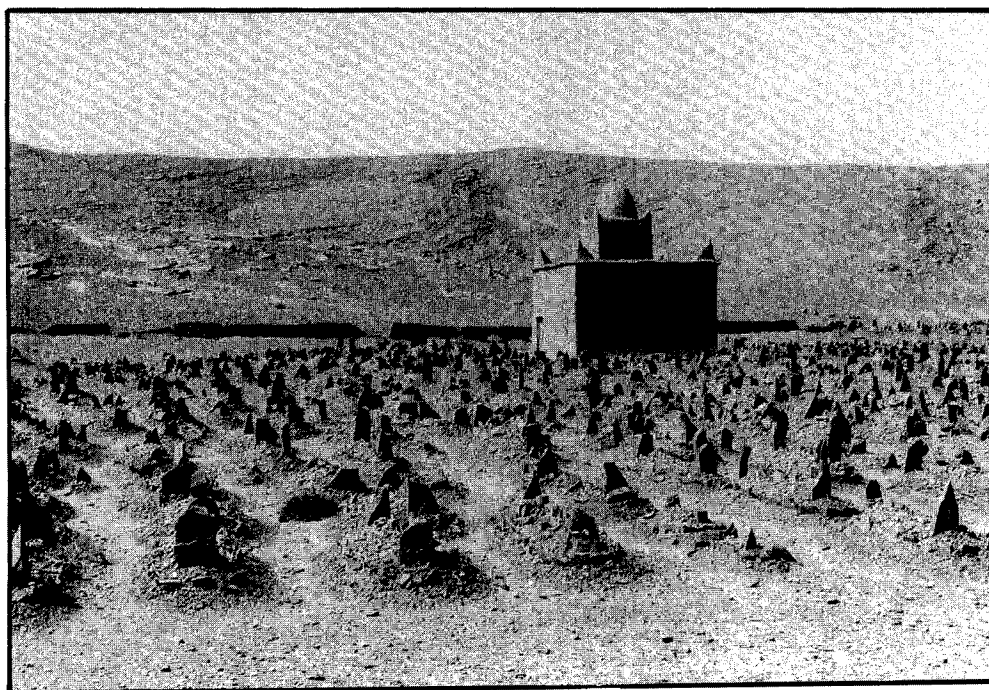
The stench of the leather tanning and dyeing pits in Fes is such that tourist guides buy sprigs of mint for their customers who pass through these infernal places. Little processions, everyone dutifully sniffing the bright green leaves, wind their way amid heaps of animal horns, discarded pieces of skin, vats of cow urine (for the tanning) and clouds of biting flies. The spectacle is truly medieval. In the heat and dust, amid crumbling walls covered with drying hides, little boys stand kneedeep in the cauldrons. The little brick walkways on which they must walk are covered with a nauseating grayish slime, slippery and wet. Their legs and arms are already permanently colored indigo or red. In summer their backs are covered with flies; in winter they can tolerate the cold water only a few minutes at a time.



WATERSELLERS IN MEKNES

I had only seen old men selling water in the large cities and thought this was fin-de-carrière employment, a job to earn a few extra dirhams. Until, in a little village far off the beaten track, I encountered young men walking the weekly market. They all carry the same assortment of copper cups, silver bangles on their wrists, a bronze bell and an outrageous circular and peaked hat about whose origin no one could tell me anything. A slight forward bend of the left shoulder makes the water flow forward from a goatskin bag carried high between the shoulders.

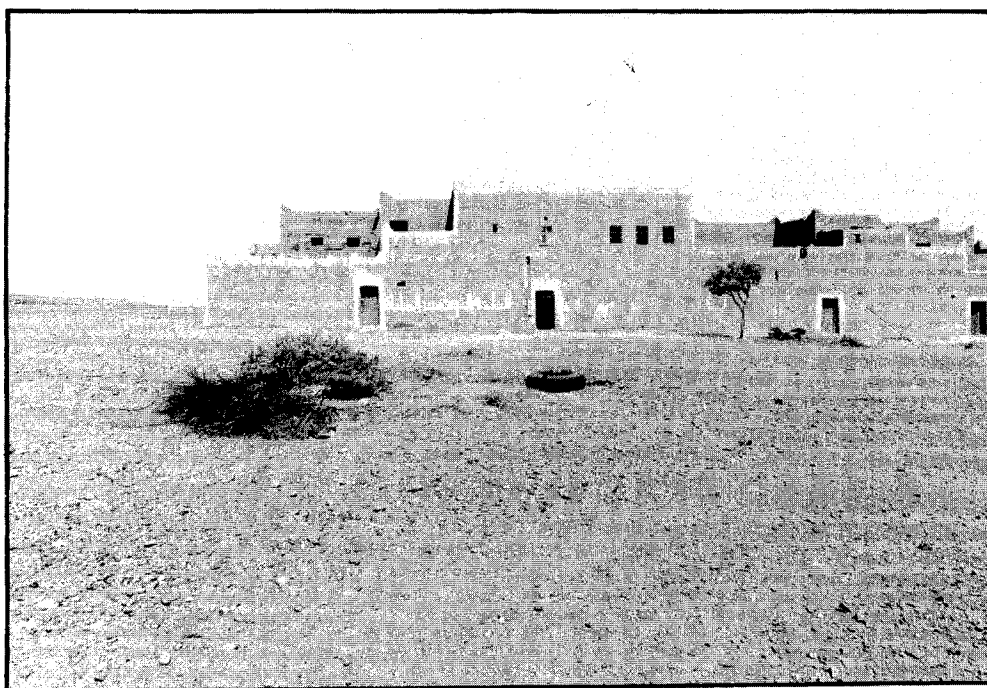
In the cities, with refrigerators and shiny Coke machines, the watersellers now earn money chiefly by posing for tourists. They are part of what one friend calls "Morocco's in-between economy", no longer of use in their traditional role and not yet - almost certainly never - employable in the new Moroccan economy. Tourists become their last source of income. The standard fee for a photograph is two dirhams. When supply outlasts demand the price becomes one dirham. In hard times half a dirham will do; and for that miniscule amount (about six cents) they will argue among themselves, and push and shove.



CEMETERY NEAR TINEJDAD

For Morocco's rural population Islam is a simple and austere religion that continues to dominate daily life. Older people still measure time by the voice of the muadhin reciting the Quran from the minaret. Out of Tinejdad, at a tiny hamlet near the juncture of High Atlas and sub-Sahara, his voice woke me up at three o'clock in the morning. The village laid in the deep darkness of the desert. Only the harsh glow from an unshielded lightbulb inside the mosque provided some light. Inside, a dozen men had lined up in the cold nightair. Here, a few hours' drive by Land Rover from the nearest town, Islam continued in all its simplicity and timelessness.

In the morning I saw some of the men again, carrying the body of a villager into the cemetery. Austerity prevails in death as it did in life. Burials take place within twenty-four hours. The dead are wrapped in a simple white shroud. A flat piece of rock is propped upright at the head and the foot of each grave in line with the direction of Mecca. There is no name carved into the stone; all are equal before Allah. Sometimes cemeteries are located around the tomb of a local marabout (saint). More often they are in plain desert, a few miles out of town. After a sandstorm only the villagers know where to look for the graves.



HOUSE NEAR GORGE DU tODRA

In a region often known for shrewd (if often ruthless) rulers, Hassan II takes a special place. The most skillful and difficult task he must perform concerns religion. In rural Morocco he is often called God's deputy on earth (Khalifat Allah fil-Ard); the country's constitution considers him Amir al-Mu'minin, the Commander of the Faithful. Between the two lies the difference of popular Islam and Islam of the educated elite. Popular Islam venerates marabouts (the pious ones, or salihun) and hints at the possibility of human intervention in the form of blessings. The Islam of the educated elite finds this unacceptable.

The king must carefully walk the rather murky zone between the popular and the formal designations and their implications. Popular Islam provides him with a crucial base of support. It is essentially a rural phenomenon. It makes little distinction between Islam, the state and political authority. The countryside is littered with three words that hint at this unity in the popular conception: "Allah, Al-Watan, Al-Malik; God, Country, King." The words are painted on the crumbling pisé walls of berber homes (see picture), scratched into traffic signs, laid out in white pebbles on mountainsides. The king's formal arabic, another important aspect of a popular perception of him as a religious authority, is by most accounts the best of any living Arab ruler. But you will not find the three words on official stationery; even the king's formal statements are scrupulously consistent with the tenets of Islam held by his educated elite.

How people want to be photographed tells a lot about the way they think of themselves. I always look for photography shops; the one near Taza's medina was no disappointment. The young men all looked macho, hands nonchalantly stuffed in denim jackets, open shirts and tennis shoes. The little girls were made up with kohl, blue patches of mascara and the photographer's standard blond wig with its hint of Western beauty. The boys all resembled miniature King Faisals, photographed against cheaply exotic backdrops of palms and camels; or Saddam Husseins with filled-in mustaches, red berets and tiny plastic decorations pinned to their uniforms. There were the unavoidable pictures of young men in karate outfits. Here and there a family portrait: the father looking stern and unapproachable, his hand on one of the children's shoulders; his wife seated at the side, a few inches away from the rest of the family.

* * *

Fes, eternal Fes with its tumble of houses and medieval walls running across the landscape, laid dark and dusty in the setting sun. It arrived unannounced, without the usual collection of grease-stained carshops or flocks of old American cars converted into taxis waiting at the city's edge. Nothing until, like an apparition, the three parts of the city came into view, curved around the mountainsides in a seemingly endless chain.

There was still plenty of light when we arrived but everything had been shaded or covered against the summer heat. In the mornings the alleys buzzed with activity; in the afternoon shops were closed until evening. In the few open squares people gathered under tarpaulins held by long sticks, or lined up along shaded walls. The squares were blindingly white against the darkness of the alleys; a group of children occasionally ventured out for a few minutes of soccer beside the Nejarine fountain, a young girl ran up to fill a few plastic jugs.

Whatever wasn't white was duncolored, a dull brown that engulfed all and everything within the city, except where it gave way to the black of the shaded alleys. And in the drabness of this monochrome cityscape scraps of color stood out like jewels: the silver of miniature kohl bottles and filigrained amulet containers with their splotches of enamel crudely worked into the surface; the bright reds and blues of irregular berber rugs; the small octagonal brass-lined mirrors little boys sold for a dirham, often for half a dirham or even a cigarette as nighttime approached; the glow of the ceramic tiles on the fountains; the silky red of freshly dyed cotton hanging from bamboo poles in dust-encrusted alleys or piled high and dripping from donkeys' sidebaskets.

In Morocco poverty is endemic, deformed bodies a common occurrence. In Fes (and later, to a nauseating extent, in Marrakesh) both are turned into an asset to exploit, to play upon the tourist's sympathy. And for the tourist sympathizing with poverty becomes a warm comforting emotion, cheap sentimentality. At times parts of the town only seem to live for that one moment when the tourist bus rolls into the dusty market square. Human activity is suspended until its arrival; then there is a rush of bodies toward the vehicles, the baring of withered limbs and bleeding sores, the little tin cup held out to receive the money, the exclamations of the

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tourists and the curses of the guides. Soon the square returns to normalcy awaiting the next bus.

Amid all this squalor and splendor stood the souvenirs of development aid: recycled grainbags from all over the world. Cumin or red peppers in a cotton bag from Roumania; rice in a plastic bag "From the People of the United States"; henna or chickpeas in burlap from the People's Republic of China. "Morocco accepts food with equanimity" said the ambassador of a small country over lunch.

* * *

We passed from the anti-Atlas onto the edge of the desert. Near the ridge of the first valley past Midelt the wind ran clouds the color of old pewter over the mountaintops. They lingered among the boulders near the Col de Talghamt; our sense of isolation increased. Then the mountains receded, we passed through one of the tunnels hewn by the French Foreign Legion half a century ago. Swiftfooted young boys ran beside the car with little trays of fossils and minerals. The valleys widened up into large open spaces, eroded purple buttes laying low against the horizon.

We were in a different world. There was a soft but persistent wind that wouldn't leave us for nearly a month; sometimes at a moment's notice it swelled into a storm, marooning us near the edge of the road. It carried sand so fine that each step in it left an imprint as detailed as a plaster casting. Before each meal utensils had to be dusted. Each hour the color of the sand changed, from a deep burgundy to burned orange and ochre. After each storm we drove for hours in a sepia landscape. A rich but subdued light fell in patterns of dark and light on the valleyfloor. Wherever the wind had blown the dustclouds away sunshine sliced across the landscape, shredding deep into the valleys.

We were in a different world. The atmosphere was vaguely African. The architecture was that of the desert; there were hints of Agades and Timbuktu. Beyond the magnolias drooped on the banks of the Ziz riverbed stood multistory houses with crenellated pisé walls and wooden gutters, walls shuttered against the sun, geometric decorations painted in the mud around the windows. Only the minarets were truly North African, whitewashed and square, with goldplated crescents. Islam here was still too orthodox, too conforming to allow for the adaptations found in sub-Saharan vernacular architecture. But even amid this strict and austere code of desert Islam we found at least one hint of divided loyalty. Perhaps more accurately, we came across the universal human trait of not putting all one's eggs in one basket: a few days later, in Rissani, we ran into a wonder doctor.

All the best,

Dan R. Wane

Received in Hanover 9/24/87