

Synopsis :

« MUNYAL » (patience) You can't eat culture

By

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My friend, my brother, it pains me to see you here, in town, sitting on that filthy mat, amongst the wrecked cars which you use for shelter. I still think of the bush, where we rested our tired bodies, with your family and your herd. No more wide open spaces, no more freedom, no more of the traditional life. Guided by the necessity of survival, your slow migration towards progress would appear to have stopped right here.

Dawn breaks over the capital with the call of the Muezzin. As he kneels down, I note the cracks on the soles of his feet. Small crevasses, just like the parched earth of the Sahel. It is too early for those who have lost faith.

The first rays of sunshine start to burn my skin, and force me to open my eyes. The air has changed, the scenery as well. The only barrier to be seen is the horizon itself. The long silhouette of Hamidou comes into view, a turban on his head, the hard features of his face, softened by his warm and proud eyes. He sits down near me, places his mobile phone on the mat and asks his son to bring the last embers of the fire which protected his cattle all night from evil spirits. Far off, herdsman noisily round up their animals. A woman brings us some fresh milk. The bitterness of the first tea of the day comes as a shock to my system, but it wears off gradually, just like days in the Sahel. I put on my turban and lift the five-litre drum onto my shoulder. The women load their tents onto their donkeys and we set off, a long column of men and beasts. After only a few minutes our mouths are dry and the game of patience starts.

Patience and suffering. That's what they teach their children even before they know how to walk. You don't survive for long in the desert without those arms. The kilometers go by as the temperature rises. From time to time a thorn goes through my sandal and into my foot. I stop to take it out; beside me, a child vomits. I offer him some medication but he refuses and sits down in the shade of a tree. Courageously, he fights the bout of malaria, gets up and takes his place in the convoy again. You have to stay concentrated, to hold out until the next well and hope that it won't be dry. Time seems to draw out to infinity, we have been walking for hours. You can read the suffering on the faces, nature gains the upper hand and everyone feels its brute force. For over fifty years, waves of drought and famine have carried lives away and poured the survivors into the towns. These nomads' world is shrinking slowly, driven by agriculture and private property, more suited to economical development.

Having finally reached the well, tired bodies try to counter the heat with bursts of perspiration. When our turn comes, Hamidou rolls up his sleeves, takes the rope and attaches a drum to it which he drops into the bottom of the well. A little movement forwards and backwards and he pulls with all his might to bring it back up. Having repeated the operation over and over, he comes to join me in the shade of a sole acacia, taking off his turban to place it under his head as he lies down.

« Life is hard. Before, you just had to dig a little to get some water ; today, sometimes you have to fight to get some. Before, the herders helped each other and during the rainy season, there was so much milk that we gave it away; now, the udders are as dry as people's hearts, nowhere is safe and no-one wants to live here anymore. Every year our families straggle out of the bush to move to the towns of West Africa. They stay there a few months to sell tea, turbans, and to mind houses. Some come back and buy a few animals, some stay, but you know : as long as there are cows, there will be Wodaabe ».

He closes his eyes and falls asleep. When he wakes up, the prayers are over, but the wrecked cars are still there, the tea is ready. He takes his leave and moves off towards the centre of town.

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In total I spent much more than a year in the Sahel looking for different branches of the Peuls Wodaabe people. With the help of a young Wodaabe of my age, nomad in the heart but living on the street in Niamey, we travelled around the country on foot.

A bag for my gear and two five-litre water drums, a ground mat and a pair of sandals. This journey started out naive, carefree, even innocent. But it allowed me to make close contact with those whose lives I wanted to share, whose suffering I wanted to experience, in order to portray it better without romanticising it nor exaggerating the misery they endure. Yes, those people suffer, yet they don't frown, they don't complain, they don't attack anyone. They have chosen their way of life and accept it with the greatest of dignity. And when it becomes too hard to bear, they walk on, showing disconcerting patience and adapting as they go along. Those who have become settled highlight these qualities. At the end of my four-year trip, I noticed that some of the Wodaabe I had met had taken up various business activities, some even coming as far as Europe to export high-value-added goods once they had made it to Niger. Some had formed an association hoping to get some little international aid with a view to develop access to education and to healthcare. And then the most desperate had become radical, taking to arms to defend themselves, tired of having their cattle stolen and being forced to move to poorer land.

It is difficult for humanitarian aid to make its way to this very unstable zone, and even more so for it to reach a population that is constantly moving.

In the coming years, if nothing is done to make this zone safer and to encourage the return of the nomads to the Sahel, the ecology of the region could well be thrown off balance. Because it is in this region that we are witnessing one of the most serious climatic catastrophes of the last fifty years, the unprecedented drop in rainfall during the African monsoon season.

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