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‘A brave, unusual and ambitious journey, in the old style of travel that I (of course) welcome. I’ve never been to any part of the Sahel. But this made me want to go.’ **Colin Thubron**

‘A remarkable and tenacious adventure in the finest tradition of British travel writing. Alistair Carr sheds light on a troubled and long-neglected part of the world that will occupy policymakers for years to come.’ **Justin Marozzi**

‘Carr’s prose can be wonderfully evocative’. *TLS*

THE NOMAD'S PATH

TRAVELS IN THE SAHEL

ALISTAIR CARR

I.B. TAURIS

LONDON · NEW YORK

Published in 2014 by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010
www.ibtauris.com

Distributed in the United States and Canada Exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

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ISBN: 978 1 78076 689 8

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library
A full CIP record is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: available

Typeset by 4word Ltd, Bristol

Printed and bound in Sweden by ScandBook AB

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my guides: Omar and Ahmet. My life was in their hands for the duration of our journey across the Manga. I am also immensely grateful for the hospitality given to us by all the Tubu we stayed with along the way. Thank you to Leslie Clark, Charlene Pidgeon and Peroji for the travels with the Wodaaabe, and to Richard Grail for letting me stay in his Agades home. Thanks also to Carol Beckwith, Professor Jeremy Keenan, Professor Harry Norris and Dr Amira Bennison; to the late Paul Marsh, my agent, for being so supportive of this project and to Geraldine Cooke, Stephen Davies and Janice Brent. Thank you, also, to Colin Thubron for helpful manuscript observations.

And, of course, thanks to Sarah for being so wonderfully loving, patient and understanding.

For Sarah

In memory of Ray, Mark and Ross Hanna

INTRODUCTION

Almost three years had passed since I last heard the tones of a camel growl, when I sat under a leafy trellis in Agades sipping a refrigerated drink of ginger, spices and lemon juice. The muezzin's chant glided across the Saharan town and I listened with contained excitement as Eva Macher, an Austrian in her early fifties, described how there was a vast region to the north-east of Zinder that was untouched by the modern world: few, if any Caucasians, had ever penetrated the place.

'Where you'll be going, and living with the nomads who are there – they're true nomads,' Eva ruminated, as a breeze ruffled the overhead canopy. 'No outside contact at all – you'll never get ill with them.'

'Like the Aborigines,' I replied.

'Exactly,' she remarked, as sunlight splintered into a fistful of diamonds around us. 'But,' she continued, 'I think in three years, even there, that way of life would have disappeared.'

I had not forgotten Niger or its nomads, but this conversation, recorded in my journal during the trip's closing week, had been mislaid among the pages of life's intervening chapters. I had travelled there for the Air's rock art. Scientists make copies of petroglyphs in the manner of a brass rubbing, but they mostly use charcoal; I planned to work with colour – oil and soft pastels – with a view to then selling the prehistoric images at a London gallery. The two months I spent in Agades, the Ténéré desert and the Air Mountains, with its memories of half-mile-high dust devils, xanthic shades, robed Tuaregs and prickling heat, all seemed a long time ago – but I sensed

that I would have to return, because there was a feeling of an incomplete journey.

In my subsequent enquiries into the history of Agades and the role it played in the Old Salt Road, I forgot my own journey and became more interested in those that others had undertaken over the centuries either by choice or unhappy fate. By the time I decided to return to Niger, I had lost sight of north-east Zinder entirely and, instead, hoped to accompany one of the Tuareg salt caravans on the final annual leg of their return journey south from Agades to Katsina – an ancient salt road entrepot in northern Nigeria.

Then I read, with mounting frustration, of the burgeoning Tuareg rebellion that flared up in the Aïr Mountains during February 2007 and, over the next few months, from the safe confines of my Suffolk home, I followed the rebels' progress with a muted sense of dismay. With each new attack – as in June, when the Tuaregs shot up Agades airport, then defeated two columns of government troops in the desert – the likelihood of my return to Niger diminished. Aghaly ag Alambo led the rebels, who called themselves the *Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice* (Niger Movement for Justice), or MNJ, and they claimed the government had failed to honour the 1995 peace agreement that ended the first Tuareg rebellion (1990–5). The new rebellion had started, as one source put it, because of 'the culmination of widespread disaffection amongst Tuareg ex-combatants with the slow progress of promised benefits, lack of functioning democratic institutions, and a perceived special status given to foreign mining interests and political leaders.'

The MNJ attacks were making an impact but, for Agades, it was bad news, as the already fickle tourist trade would disappear entirely until the conflict was resolved. Agades, as I remembered – with its lively collage of desert peoples attired in robes, turbans and swords – smelt of baked dust and its back streets had all the disorientating traits of the desert; the narrow alleys, medieval in character, twisted and meandered like a trickle of water pushing its way through a carpet of dust: one alley filtered into another, a left turn, then a right and it

all looked the same. There were few trees and little shade in the town, and the September heat sucked the moisture from both the animate and the inanimate; baguettes baked at 6 o'clock in the morning became crusty and brittle by midday and, if squeezed in the hand, would disintegrate into crumbs as temperatures rose to over 100°F in the shade.

By the middle of December, there were ugly stories of summary executions and roadside land mine explosions around Agades. The small Air towns of Ifrouane and Ingal had been deserted, an embargo had been imposed on the Air Mountains and the Ténéré desert, and there was a rumour that the rebels were digging in for a long war and even threatening to cut off Agades. In addition, two French journalists had been arrested in the surrounding desert for trying to make contact with the rebels; they had been given permission by the authorities to be in the south of the country on a bird flu related project, but were discovered in a jeep in the north. Both they and their two guides were subsequently incarcerated in a notorious prison outside Niamey and were being held as a warning to the West and its journalists not to interfere. Yet, despite all this (and my muffled anxieties), I felt it was a case of either going then or never at all; the urge to return was powerful. Somehow, not to do so would have been a failing on my part.

The night before I was due to fly to Niamey, on 9 January 2008, I received a phone call from someone I had met by chance the previous day. He had visited Agades on a few occasions: 'Are you all packed?' he asked.

'Yes,' I replied. 'I'm leaving tomorrow.'

'I've got Céline staying here,' he said. 'She has some views on Niger at this time. I'll pass you over to her.'

Céline and her husband Akly owned the *Auberge d'Azal*, where they spent half the year with their two children and, when I lived in Agades, I often dined in their elegant bougainvillea- and vine-trellised courtyard. 'Salut, Alistair,' she exclaimed, barely able to disguise her anxiety. 'Ça va?'

'Ça va bien. Merci,' I answered.

'Look,' she said, continuing in French. 'A mine exploded in Niamey last night.'

I paused briefly, absorbing her sentence. ‘*Les Touareg?*’

‘No one knows,’ Céline responded. ‘The situation is very unstable. The country is basically at war.’

‘Can you still get to Agades?’

‘Only by military escort, but there are no tourists there... Akly has been based in Niamey since June.’

I told her about my plans to join a Tuareg caravan heading south. ‘You should be all right as long as you don’t have any hidden agendas,’ she warned, in implied reference to the imprisonment of the French journalists.

‘I don’t.’

‘*Alors... Bonne chance.*’

1

The swollen Niger seemed to throb as an amber sun disappeared behind a distant ridge of silhouetted undulations. The bridge across the river was dotted with pedestrians and fleeting traffic and, on the bank's lip at the far side, the shadow of a man stood beside two camels that craned their necks towards the sturdy current.

I sat on *Le Grand Hotel's* expansive terrace, stirring an ice-filled glass of Coca-Cola with a yellow straw, while listening to Akly talk about the rebellion. Between his animated sentences, I became aware that the white plastic tables around us were slowly being occupied by French expats, mostly men in jackets, as local waiters threaded silently amongst their former colonial masters. There was an agitated sizzling from somewhere behind us, and the air was fragrancd with spicy kebabs as dusky shades settled over Niamey and beyond.

The *Institut Géographique National* map of Niger I had bought in London was spread out in front of us, like an unfolded, starched tablecloth, and I watched Akly's index finger skirt along the fringes of the Aïr before circling specific mountainous areas that, from the topography, appeared to resemble vast fortresses.

'There may be,' he observed, 'as many as a thousand rebels equipped with up to forty 4x4s. Most expats with commercial interests in Agades have moved to Niamey,' he continued. '*L'Auberge d'Azel* is open, but I am advising clients not to go. The only customers we've had in the last few months are from either the Red Cross or *Médecins Sans Frontières*.'

‘What do you think about travelling south from Agades to Katsina with a Tuareg caravan?’ I asked.

‘I don’t think you should go to Agades,’ he advised in rapid French. ‘Even if you do get permission you will only arouse suspicion and, if you travel with Tuaregs, you’ll be endangering not only your own life but, because you are a white man, theirs too.’

I could not think of an appropriate response, but my glum expression did not require translation. As my eyes roamed over the map, and the areas free of rebel activity beneath Agades, I saw Zinder and, from there, glanced east to a town called Nguigmi on the border with Chad.

‘What about here?’ I tendered, pointing to the geography north-east of Zinder.

‘There has been no reported trouble there, so you should be all right,’ Akly replied, peering into the region I had outlined.

‘Good,’ I murmured. And I remembered a conversation about a forgotten nomadic land that had no contact with the modern world.

Akly, in his early fifties, explained that, as a boy, he spent two years in Nguigmi when the shores of Lake Chad lapped up to the small conurbation at the foot of the Old Salt Road. He remembered fishing its waters, and hunting duck and other game along its lush green banks; today, in one of nature’s more recent statements, Lake Chad has receded to such an extent it is now one hundred and fifty kilometres from the town. Akly’s French father was a cartographer, who mapped the region to the east of the Aïr Mountains, and his mother was a Tuareg. This genealogical composition was elegantly blended in him: mahogany-coloured eyes and subtly hawkish contours complemented a golden complexion.

We discussed the mine that had exploded two days earlier, the first in the city’s history, and I learnt that one person, a journalist, had been killed. Nobody had claimed responsibility, and the Tuareg rebels had sent a missive to the authorities disclaiming any part in it.

‘There is such an atmosphere of suspicion with the rebellion and the arrest of the French journalists’, Akly observed, ‘that

mobile phone calls, particularly international ones, are being tapped.'

'I noticed an odd distortion when I rang home earlier – I wondered if that was the reason. Someone must have been listening in.'

I had been aware, before I arrived, that Niamey would probably be smouldering with mistrust and fear, and that was why I had decided to visit the Ministry of Tourism to obtain permission for my travel plans. It seemed the most logical path to make myself transparent with the authorities. In this way, I hoped to defuse any suspicion that might surround a white man travelling in Niger during troubled times. I explained this concept to Akly, as the darkening light conjured its deceptions on the surroundings beyond the illuminated terrace.

'It's a good idea,' he said. 'I know the Director there – Ibrahim. He's a friend of mine. When you go, just tell him that I suggested you speak to him.'

I studied the map and noticed the region to the west of Nguigmi was marked: M A N G A. 'If you do get permission to travel through there,' Akly said following my gaze, 'I think you will discover things.'

2

The television screen, mounted in the corner of *Les Roniers'* small hotel bar, transmitted a French news channel that was dominated by the imprisonment of the two journalists outside Niamey. It seemed that ambassadorial intervention, however graceful, pressured or vociferous, was achieving very little, for the broadcaster announced there was no immediate prospect of their release. I walked through to the restaurant, where tables were set up as if in a Provençal café, and out onto the gravel veranda. A hoopoe was perched on the apex of a wrought iron chair, its head feathers unfurling like a fan in a lady's nimble hand. As I sat down at a garden table in the mottled shade, a couple of native pigeons, invisible in the wandering branches, murmured uninterrupted solos, as if each was deciphering the other's purring notes for the possibility of a hidden invitation.

The grounds surrounding the hotel were testament that the property had once been a private home: the bright lime plumage of long-tailed parakeets could be glimpsed amongst the leaves of the many gnarled acacias, like clownfish hiding in the tentacles of sea anemones, and two white egrets stood motionless beside the swimming pool, their snowy reflections reduced to ghostly forms by a cluster of rogue ripples. Bougainvillea tumbled over a rusting pergola beneath a leafless baobab and the spiky, verdant foliage of palm trees.

The house itself was quite small, and the owners, Annie and Pierre Colas, lived in the rooms above the restaurant, bar and kitchen, while guests were lodged in one of the dozen round huts named after African wildlife. A once-cherished tennis

court had been warped by the sun's relentless attention, its surface buckled and cracked. Behind the disintegrating netting, a Wahlberg eagle lifted clumsily into the sky from the tangled canopy of an ageing acacia, and a boy hung a sheet on a taut clothes line outside a sepia-coloured hut.

Apart from the tiny manicured patch of lawn between the restaurant and the swimming pool, there was very little grass and the ground was a carpet of chalky, brown dust inhabited in places by theatres of insect activity. Ants marched in line or scrambled amongst the parched detritus in search of bounty, while olive-green lizards scurried past. A dung beetle pushed a small ball of dirt, its hind legs moving robot-like, while its front tibias worked skilfully to maintain the ball's momentum; and a long-tailed glossy starling settled on an overhanging eucalyptus sprig, as if surveying the scene. A scrawny hedge ran around the perimeter of the grounds and, beneath it, a kindling fence had been erected to separate *Les Roniers*, oasis-like, from its bedraggled surroundings. And you could spot the Niger, glistening like mercury, as it snaked its way through the shimmering landscape.

* * *

I wanted to get a second opinion on the rebellion and called Liman, a Tuareg who lived in Agades, but, I knew, was temporarily in Niamey. A few hours later, he arrived at *Les Roniers* and climbed out of a Subaru jeep dressed in a bright green robe and a bulbous white turban. I recognised him from when he had collected me from the bus terminal in Agades. As we sat at a table on the dappled gravel terrace and I listened to him chatter about the rebellion, I became aware of the suspicious glances being cast in our direction by some of the hotel staff. '*C'est pas bon*,' Liman exclaimed, as if on cue, 'for a Tuareg and a European to be seen travelling together at this time.' His eyes seemed to well up with increasing anxiety as he talked about the current troubles in Agades and of the mines that had recently exploded in the region. 'I counsel you,' he advised, 'not to go to Agades.'

From the contorted position in which he was seated, it was obvious Liman was in significant physical discomfort and, in a pause during his assessment of Agades, he described how he had a weak disc and was hoping to have an operation in Mali when he could afford it. Because of problems with my own back, I kept a chiropractic chart, indicating the effects of spinal misalignments, in the pouch of my notebook and, remembering it was there, I removed the sheet and unfolded it.

‘Dinosaur!’ he exclaimed, as he gazed over the column of vertebrae, in reference to the Cretaceous skeletons and bones he would have seen in the Ténéré desert.

I explained that it was not a dinosaur, but a chart showing how the body’s controlling nerves can be disturbed by vertebral misalignments, and that if 6C (the sixth cervical vertebra), for example, was out – which affects neck muscles, shoulders and tonsils – a person might have a stiff neck, pains in the upper arm or tonsillitis. Or if it was the atlas – which affects blood supply to the head – headaches, high blood pressure or chronic tiredness might be experienced. After we tried to correlate some of his pain with our map of the spine, the conversation returned to Agades, and I learned how, even today, salt caravans band together in the Air Mountains before crossing the Ténéré as a precaution against bandits.

I told him my thoughts on travelling between Zinder and the Chad border and, like Akly, he observed that there had been no trouble reported there, but he pointed out that the road between Zinder and Agades was mined.

‘I know someone in Zinder who might be able to help,’ Liman suggested, as he tapped a number into his mobile.

‘*C’est Liman,*’ he announced into the phone. ‘I have *un client* who’s thinking of travelling between Zinder and Nguigmi. Can you help?’ There was a pause – and he replaced the mobile on the table.

‘What happened?’ I asked.

‘He said,’ Liman replied with a confused grin, ‘that it was too dangerous and he didn’t want to know anything about it. Then he hung up.’

I smiled and thanked him for his advice, whereupon he enquired if I needed a lift into Niamey.

‘He didn’t want to know,’ Liman repeated, as if bewildered, still struggling to make sense of it. ‘He didn’t want to know.’

After negotiating a potholed road past squalid buildings, scummy kerbs and a meandering rubbish dump that seemed to be an informal marker of the city’s periphery, we drove along a leafy avenue that was bordered by the vast defensive gates of the American Embassy on one side and the Presidential Palace’s fortress-like boundary walls on the other.

‘That is,’ Liman said, peering into the pothole in front of us as his face rumped with concern, ‘exactly the type of place where *they* plant the mines.’

I was not quite sure which ‘*they*’ he was referring to, but I nodded in polite agreement as he steered around the subject of his concern; and, in truth, I had not planned on making a risk assessment on every pothole I saw. Nonetheless I marked it and can still see the depth of the hollow: its shape, form, colour, contours and size – indeed every frayed and shaded detail in relation to its composition, situation in the road and connection to its surroundings.