

Trekking through the Sudan

Arita Baaijens

Desert Nomads

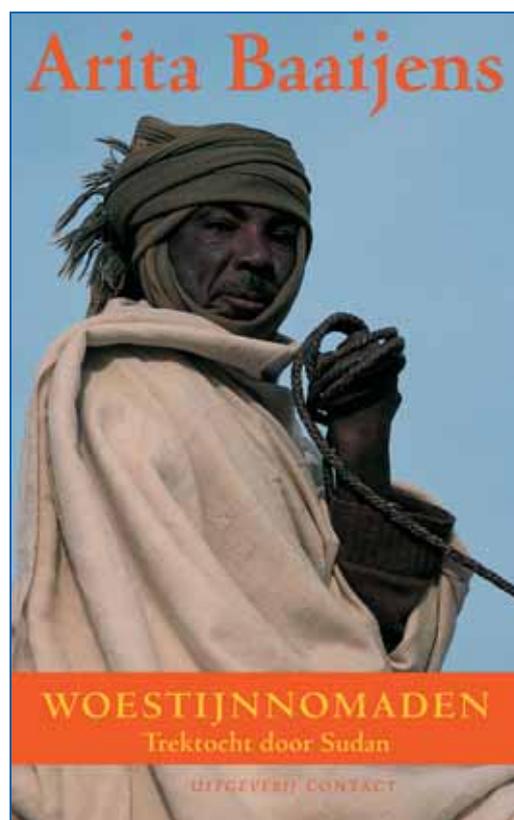
ARITA BAAIJENS FEELS most at home in the desert: the silence, the peace, the endless plains, the sobriety, the hardship, the scarce human contact – Baaijens finds it all far preferable to the noisy chaos of the West. In *Desert Nomads* she recounts the story of two spectacular treks through the inhospitable, deserted Northern Sudan, through the province of Darfur, which borders on Chad, Libya and Egypt.

One of her destinations was the Nukheila oasis, often referred to as the oasis of a thousand date palms. The Hungarian Duke Almásy – the model for the main character in the film *The English Patient* – visited this legendary oasis in 1935. It was partly the historical sensation of following in his footsteps seventy years on that prompted Baaijens to take this adventurous trip.

Baaijens' travel account makes fascinating and educational reading, as she does not limit herself to describing her travels, but also expands, *en passant*, on the history of the Sudan and its neighbouring countries, on the customs and habits of the areas she visits and the peoples she comes into contact with. She describes the detrimental colonial politics of the British Empire which to this day left the Sudan a torn country – north versus south – as well as describing a form of Islam according to which women are not punished for infidelity during the long months when their camel-driving husbands are away and women, too, may remarry after divorce.

Baaijens' travel companions are all men: her guide and armed protectors lead her in her voyage of discovery to virtually unrecorded ruins, hidden springs and lost cities. The contrast between the 'rich' westerner who can afford the luxury of travelling through the desert for pleasure, and the Arabs she employs is a rich source of lively and funny anecdotes. Suspicion becomes trust, hostile eyes turn kind and full of admiration and friendship.

Arita Baaijens is fascinated not only by the desert, but also by the life of desert nomads, who, despite drought and starvation, persist in the spartan, wandering existence they have been accustomed to for centuries. Travelling with camels and sheep is simply their way of life, regardless of the physical hardship, dangers and disease.



Arita Baaijens gave up her job as an environmental biologist more than ten years ago, since when she has trekked through the Egyptian and Sudanese desert every winter with her camels. As an author, photographer and radio producer, she regularly produces reports on her travels. She earlier published *A Rain of Eternal Fire* and *Farafra Oasis* and compiled the anthology *The Desert as a Passion*.

A fascinating and informative report... More than anything it reveals that the idealized image of the unconventional, adventurous nomad is definitely history – if it ever existed in the first place.

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Contact
Herengracht 481
NL - 1017 BT Amsterdam
TEL. +31 20 524 98 00
FAX +31 20 627 68 51
E-MAIL mnagtegaal@contact-bv.nl
<http://www.boekenwereld.com>

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Foundation for
the Production and
Translation of
Dutch Literature
Singel 464
NL - 1017 AW Amsterdam
TEL. 31 20 620 62 61
FAX +31 20 620 71 79
E-MAIL office@nlpvf.nl
WEBSITE www.nlpvf.nl

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Desert Nomads. A Trek through the Sudan

(Woestijnnomaden. Trektocht door Sudan)

by Arita Baaijens

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Translated by Sam Garrett

When I went in to look at saddles in the dilapidated building where the camel drivers slept, I was met with brazen stares. ‘When are you leaving?’ ‘Are you taking a video camera?’ The man wiping down his Kalashnikov with a dirty rag as he spoke was a Zaghawa who trailed along with the caravans, and – after a warning glance from Yussuf – I denied my plans.

It was clear from the reactions of the armed guards Yussuf had tried to recruit that the danger of attack was a real one. So far, Ibrahim was the only *haras* we’d persuaded to come along. His colleagues thought it was too dangerous to travel through an area where the tribes were at war among themselves.

Oddly enough, these disturbing reports didn’t bother me in the least. For years I’d been apprehensive about making a journey like this, but now that I’d decided to go I transferred my cares to the *haras*, and stopped thinking too much about the dangers.

‘*Ya walad*, boy, come here.’ The well-built black youth steered his wheelbarrow skillfully through the crowd at souk Mawashi, a market the size of a village. His forehead had been ritually scarred, fine dots of scar tissue decorating his dark skin in rows. The boy put down his wheelbarrow without a word, nodded

curtly when Yussuf named a price, and piled our purchases in the barrow. More porters with wheelbarrows began showing up, dressed in frayed trousers and threadbare shirts. All southerners, refugees of the civil war that had kept the Sudan divided since independence. The violence was concentrated in the southernmost tip of the Sudan, a fertile area where Arab traders took huge numbers of slaves in the nineteenth century. Slaves are still stolen today, and the roles are the same, only the trade has become illegal. The southerners are therefore none too fond of their northern compatriots, but directly after independence they were still willing to form a single government with them. That never happened, for the simple reason that the northerners look down on the black Sudanese, whom they see more as former slaves than serious and equal partners.

When the British ruled the country as their colony from 1898 to 1956, they did more to heighten the conflicts in the Sudan than to solve them. Until then they had considered the Sudan a worthless area; they only stepped in once Italy and France showed interest and they became fearful of losing their say over Egypt and the strategically important Suez Canal. The key to power in Egypt, after all, lies in the sources of the Nile, which are located in the far south of the country. There, somewhere in the steamy green jungle with its treacherous swamps, springs the mighty river on which Egypt depends. When the Italians and the French began covetously eyeing those sources, the scramble for Africa had just begun. The British wanted to possess Africa from the Cape to Cairo, and the sources of the Nile were part of that. An English military detachment descended along the curves of the great river to the Sudan, bristling with modern weaponry. After a bloody campaign, *bilad el Sudan*, the land of the blacks, was taken and danger was averted. But what were the colonizers to do then?

The region now held by the British was so vast and diverse that the colonial governor had to juggle skillfully in order to run it with the limited means at his disposal. From 1885 to 1898, the Sudan had been in the hands of a man referred to as 'Mahdi', the redeemer, who had waged a holy war against all things non-

Islamic, hoping to make of the Sudan a Moslem state. In 1898, the British had defeated the *mahdists* with automatic rifles, but were deathly afraid of new uprisings. They kept their distance from religious matters, so as not to needlessly provoke the Moslem population. At the same time, however, the colonialists obstructed the spread of Islam by hermetically sealing off the non-Moslem south. Peace returned to both parts of the Sudan, but only the civilized north was to receive schools, hospitals, railways and a telephone network.

Why did the British leave the south to its own devices? The government in Khartoum saw no advantage in developing a region so backward and hard to penetrate, preferring to apply their limited budget to the relatively civilized north. The British governor sent a handful of soldiers into the mosquito-ridden south, with orders to keep the peace. As long as they did that, and as long as the officers didn't spend too much money, the administration was content. An army of missionaries was also allowed to slip through the net and spread God's word throughout the south.

An initiation into the mysteries of British politics, culture and technology was reserved for a small northern elite. The few select young men who left to study in wet and gray England were taken by what they saw there.

A few years later they returned, brainwashed with the poetry of Blake and Shelley and brimming over with the enlightened views of Locke and Hume. And so in the Sudan there arose a privileged class of young men with little affinity with the old traditions, cast as they were in the colonial mold: kneaded, drilled and formed in accordance with values held true by the occupier. Once back in the Sudan, the new graduates were annoyed by the self-assurance of the British colonialists. Democratic ideals were, it seemed, reserved only for people in Europe; in the Sudan the British ruled with a velvet fist. Local administrators handed out weapons to those tribes who chose to side with them, and appointed tribal leaders who were loyal to the British administration.

Unlike the French, the English did not mingle much with the locals or get involved in local culture, and so they long failed to notice the growing Sudanese

impatience at how long they were taking to prepare the country for its promised independence.

The British had reserved approximately one hundred years for the grooming process, but after fifty the Sudanese had had enough. By the time the British recognized the inevitability of an independent Sudanese state, the southerners were already left holding the short end of the stick. The northern elite had a huge intellectual headstart that could not be caught up with easily. The British did, indeed, lift the geographical border between north and south, but to this day the mental border remains intact.

During the formation of the first independent Sudanese government, the northerners refused to make room for their southern brothers; not a single cabinet post or major function was reserved for them. The elite actually went so far as to make Arabic the official language, even though no one in the south spoke it.

By the mid-1950s, when the missionaries were thrown out of the country, the war between the Moslem north and the African south was in full swing. Whole villages went up in flames, herds were stolen and millions of people fled in all directions. With the exception of a period of eleven years, that war has lasted to the present day. Peace negotiations have proven fruitless. Men used to taking at gunpoint what they believe they have a right to are not likely to submit to a less profitable peace. Besides, neither party is strong enough to completely defeat the other. Whenever a break is needed to lick wounds and buy new weapons, one of the parties proposes a cease-fire. Negotiators talk about peace, but only outsiders take such talk seriously.

[...]

Abdallah and I lay listlessly on our cots in the cool clay hut. It was hot outside, and after the noon meal everyone had retired for the afternoon nap. I was content, the baggage was packed, the millet had been ground to flour, the onions, oil and

other comestibles were in their bags and the saddles were ready. All that remained for me to do was to sew an iron ring to my leather cinch. Yussuf had gone to the market to have a leaky *gerba*, a goatskin water bag, repaired. Outside the door, the five other sewed-up skins lay like steamrolled goats, soaking in a puddle of water. They had been rubbed with *gotran*, a tar made from roasted watermelon seeds that waterproofs the hides. Worried as I was about ruptured *gerbas*, and hating the taste of *gotran*, I had brought two big jerrycans with me. A waste of space, according to Yussuf, who also disapproved of my brand-new canvas saddlebags; they looked much too expensive, and would only attract thieves.

If Yussuf had ever heard of Alexandrine Tinne of The Hague, he would doubtlessly have drawn his comparisons. That gentlewoman had crossed the Sudan and the Sahara in the nineteenth century with an army of servants and helpers, dragging along with her crates full of money, books, mirrors, carpets, tents and an iron bedstead. Occasionally I envied her all that comfort. But now I was simply ashamed at how much I'd brought. Yussuf and the *haras* made do with only a change of clothes, a warm blanket and a whip. I was carrying a great deal more than that; before leaving for El Fasher I'd had no idea at all what to expect in the Darfur, so I'd brought clothes, shoes and books, in case I should spend some time in the city, a tent and presents in case I should lodge with nomads, and jerrycans, tools and big saddlebags in case I should travel alone.

When he picked up my bulging bags that morning, I saw Yussuf calculating. What could all this have cost? One hour later he took me aside. Would it be possible for me to give him a bigger advance? Irritated, I shook my head, no. After a while, Ibrahim came over to mediate; the *chabir* truly needed money, he had to pay tuition fees and leave food behind for his family. 'I'm not a bank,' I responded gruffly. Yussuf could borrow money more easily in El Fasher than I could, I told myself.

A little later, when I saw Yussuf's wife crossing the yard with her two-month-old baby, a shock ran through me. I'd been so caught up with the trip that I hadn't

stopped to realize what this venture meant for Miriam. She would be staying behind with nine children, and was undoubtedly worried about whether the trip would end well. The least I could do was to leave her behind well cared for. The *chabir* received the money he'd asked for.

The crackling of a radio woke me from my nap. Abdallah was lying relaxedly on his *angareb*, turning the dial of a transistor radio with his long, limber fingers.

'Are you taking that radio into the desert?'

'Sure.'

'Too bad.'

'Why's that?'

'Because I'm going there for some peace and quiet.' Even as the words crossed my lips, I knew I was going to lose the battle for silence. Peace and quiet in the desert is a Western notion, something for a woman with too much money and time on her hands. What I saw as romantic and adventurous was nothing but work to Abdallah. He would probably have preferred a job that didn't last quite as long, so that he could be with his wife and children in Nyala in two weeks' time. But he'd earn a bit more on this trip, which would be a big help to his family. It meant, however, that he would also be away from home for two months longer than planned, without any idea whether the child his wife had given birth to the week before was a boy or a girl.

He was addicted to radio, Abdallah said. Music didn't interest him, but news did. When he listened to the Arabic voice coming from London, he felt connected to the world, the same world I was so keen to shut out.

It was a strange experience for me to try to place myself in Abdallah's shoes. We could see and hear each other, we shared the same hut, but in our minds we lived on separate planets.

Lying on the rickety *angareb*, I stared at the straw roof bound with twine and twigs and thought about how much time and energy I'd put into my preparations in the last few months. All my savings had gone into buying a plane ticket,

camels, tools, supplies, and to paying my traveling companions. What would someone like Abdallah think about such extravagance? And what would the trip be like, with him and the other men? On earlier journeys I had always acted as my own guide and caravan leader. Now it was Yussuf who bore the responsibility, and as newcomer I had to adapt to his ways. That wouldn't be easy. Yussuf was used to traveling as quickly as possible; I wanted to get off the beaten track to see rock drawings and antiquities, and talk to people. Delays like that might irritate Yussuf. Of course, he had nodded benevolently when I told him about my plans, but by now I knew that the Mahria were not particularly welcome among the Berti and the Meidob. Once underway, I feared, Yussuf might choose a different, safer route.

In a bout of rebellion at my role as underdog, I went to the market the next day to buy a box of sweets, as compensation for any dissatisfactions along the way. I hid the sweets among my clothing, for use in emergencies. Two small bags of expensive powdered milk also disappeared in there, on top of two packets of muesli, for just-in-case, and the over-aged, high-calorie Swedish army biscuits wrapped in silver paper. It was hard for me to adopt the kind of '*insha'allah*', God-willing, attitude the others had. I was used to thinking ahead, and leaving nothing to chance. You could tell that by my pills and powders, the spare batteries, the sun lotion, the zip-lock bags for cameras and the extra compass. Compared to the Sudanese, I was a deluxe nomad. Without travel or retirement insurance, to be sure, but with other securities to back me up.

[...]

SHEPHERDS AND SOCIAL WORKERS

Madu is a peculiar hamlet. Almost too small to be on the map, it still has two schools, two market squares and two mayors, each ruling over half the village. The invisible border bisecting Madu cuts straight across a sandy market square. The watermelons on one side of the line are no bigger or tastier than those on the other, and the bars of soap and the batteries are of the same quality. The difference lies in the merchants, who look alike but are of different origins, Berti on the one side, Meidob on the other. The tribes are rivals, and the border that divides them is an everlasting source of contention.

During times of surplus, there are few conflicts between the Berti and the Meidob. They don't interfere with each other, because there is an unwritten law that shepherds may graze their flocks wherever they like. But when the rains dry up and things get tight, they must all withdraw to their original tribal territory. If they fail to do so, dormant conflicts erupt.

Sheik Ali greeted acquaintances on the Berti market, then drove on into the Meidob precinct. He spoke to two men. They nodded: the mayor was at home, we could wait for him in the *wadi*.

'Toss a blanket over your baggage,' Abdallah advised.

'Isn't that a bit rash?' It seemed rude to me to suspect the people of Madu of theft before the fact, but Abdallah said it was quite normal to camouflage baggage; it helped avoid curious glances and uncomfortable situations. With a nod towards the others, he proved his point: their saddles were all that could be seen, the rest was muffled away beneath blankets and cloths.

Yussuf was pottering about at the fireside again, the first – as always – to have finished unpacking. How he could do it so quickly was a mystery to me. My own

bags had big straps that released them from the saddle horns in one swift motion, but Yussuf had to fiddle with the little cords with which his cooking pots, his oil flask, the *gerbas*, bags of flours and onions, little jerrycans and his bag were all tied to the saddle. When he rode, the wagging of Yussuf's made him look more like a tinker than an old desert hand, but when I joked about his chaotic accoutrements Yussuf merely shrugged. He didn't care what his equipment looked like, or whether the bottles of *gotran* and corn oil leaked and left grimy stains on his pannels and clothing. Nor did he give a second thought to the rips in his close-fitting, blue winter coat. The only repairs it had ever seen were the rude stitches with which he had reattached the torn-off sleeves. The coat served not only as windbreaker and saddle-cushion, but also as cleaning cloth. When Yussuf needed a rag to start a fire, he simply tore off a piece of his tattered coat.

Yussuf was chaotic, Abdallah was the exact opposite. He combed his hair, moistened his skin with glycerin, took care of his clothes and kept his shoes well-greased. With regard to grooming, Ibrahim was somewhere in between these two. His blue trousers, shirt and windbreaker had no holes, but they were bedraggled. He never looked in the mirror the way Abdallah did, and he was not overly careful of his things. He usually laid his rifle uncovered on a bag or blanket, so that sand blew into the barrel. I wondered whether the gun even worked; Ibrahim did not seem particularly serious about his job as *haras*. It was Abdallah who patrolled at night, and checked whether the camels had not wandered off.

I had once referred to Ibrahim jokingly as the 'guardian of the pot'; the job of cooking was one thing about which he was quite conscientious. The joke was not taken well. Perhaps I could try doing some of the cooking myself, was his angry retort.

I hung my shoulder bag on a branch beside the rifles, pulled out an enameled tea mug and plopped down next to Sheik Ali.

A little group of children sauntered up for a better look, and occasionally a passer-by turned his head in curiosity. Otherwise, no one in the village seemed interested in us. In Madu, as elsewhere, the Sudanese were accomplished in the

art of leaving travelers alone. They didn't ignore a stranger, they would nod, for example, or make brief eye contact, but after that they would maintain a pleasant distance until the other was in need of a chat.

The man who had led us to the spot in the *wadi* came back to announce that the Meidob mayor was on his way, with a delegation of villagers. A few minutes later a cloud of white djellabahs came billowing in our direction. The cleanest and whitest of these belonged to the mayor, who stood head and shoulders above the rest. Even Sheik Ali, who was no small man, paled – literally and figuratively – by comparison with this striking figure. The mayor was not only bigger and fatter, but also much blacker than Ali. He looked more like a well-fed southerner than a Meidob, most of whom are small, slender people with skin the color of dark-roasted coffee beans.

The mayor listened to my explanation about the city of ruins in the Tagabo Mountains. There were more cities there as well, he said, and they all lay within his district. His eyes were hidden by sunglasses dark as his skin; only the mayor's voice and gestures betrayed the arrogant gaze behind the mirrored spectacles.

'The place you want to visit is not listed in your permit.' He folded the paper stiffly and handed it back.

I had expressed reservations about the high daily fee of the guide he had recommended. Without a guide, who also served as escort, we would not be able to go to the old city, and for that reason the man was worth something to me. But I would be requiring more of these escorts during my journey through the Darfur, and if the price of such services kept rising the further we got from El Fasher, before long I wouldn't be able to pay anyone at all.

Sheik Ali looked on triumphantly as I sputtered in protest. Hadn't he warned me about the greed of the Meidob?

The mayor lifted the permit from the ground and unfolded it again. He was willing to overlook the omission, he said condescendingly, but then I would have to pay the price he was asking.

There was no use counting on Yussuf to come to my assistance; it was impossible for him to believe that I, a rich foreigner, could have any financial worries at all. The situation was new to me as well. I was accustomed to money machines that spit out banknotes, even when your account is overdrawn, if your credit limit was exceeded, friends were always willing to help. Now that there was no one I could turn to, I was forced to play the miser.

The mayor had no intention of negotiating. I could either pay the sum he was asking, or forget about the ruined city. Grumblingly, I agreed.

Leading a camel, rifle slung across his shoulders, the guide strolled into our camp a few hours later. Adam was leathery, in his fifties, with a slender, wiry frame and a shrewd look in his eye. On a leather cord around his upper arm hung a knife and amulets meant to ward off bullets and other dangers.

The tawny Meidob was of a very different caliber from the well-fed giant who had sent him. The mayor had told us that, as a guide, Adam was well worth his wages. He knew the mountains and, just like Ibrahim and Abdalah, he was a *haras* by profession. Adam kept the village safe, the mayor had said with a glance at Sheik Ali.

Ali ignored the innuendo; he hadn't come here to smooth ruffled feathers.

[...]

Shivering, I gathered my things and dragged them to a spot behind the main camp. By the light of my flashlight I swept aside the acacia twigs and donkey droppings, and stomped the churned-up sand to a smooth mattress. 'Don't go so far away,' Yussuf shouted. The *wadi* wasn't a good place, Adam agreed. It would be better for me to put my things down close to him.

Waveringly, I considered his proposition. Until now I had slept apart from the group each night, even though Yussuf would have preferred to have me lie closer to him, Ibrahim and Abdallah. That way they could protect me better.

But I was more concerned about my reputation than about unwanted visitors, and kept my distance.

‘Bring your stuff over here,’ Yussuf helped, having seen my indecision. With a flourish, he picked up my saddle and carried it to where he was going to sleep. I shouldn’t worry about friends, but about intruders, he whispered with a twinkle in his eye.

From then on I slept each night amid my traveling companions; Yussuf’s snoring became as familiar as the ticking of the alarm clock at home.

Abdallah unfolded his canvas tarp and pointed to the right half, which lay between him and Yussuf. ‘*Itfaddali,*’ make yourself comfortable.’

The fraternal intimacy that surrounded me reminded me of camping holidays with friends. While I wrote in my diary, Abdallah cleaned his rifle and Yussuf fussed with his torn shoe. He asked me for some stout thread and a pill for his headache. Occasionally he cleared his throat and spit the mucus past his feet onto the sand. He wasn’t disturbed by my presence, and my womanhood was something everyone seemed to have forgotten.

Wearing warm socks, heavy trousers and an extra sweater to ward off the chill, I moved up to the fire and picked *haskanit* burrs from my clothing. This thorny grass grew everywhere, and the wind blew the little seedpods all through the *wadi*. Whatever I touched or did, little claws would immediately prick my calves or hands.

Adam tossed some wood on the fire and moved his callused hands and bare feet luxuriously above the yellow flames. His nose, eyes and mouth were all you could see of his face; the rest was hidden behind a green fringed shawl.

Adam and Yussuf competed in telling tall tales. Thief, criminal, rifle, weapon, robbery, police, prison; the same words popped up again and again, spoken in sing-song Arabic.

If I hadn’t known that the somewhat hoarse voice belonged to Adam, I would have sworn that it was not he, but Sheik Ali, who was speaking. The stories told

by Ali the Berti and Adam the Meidob were like two peas in a pod. But tonight the Berti played the villains, while the Meidob, for a change, were the good guys.

The stories told by these desert veterans seemed otherworldly to me. I had no experience with violence, at least not in Egypt or the Sudan. The only time I'd been the victim of an armed robbery was when I was buying stamps at the post office around the corner from my house in Amsterdam. For three months that experience had caused my heart to palpitate, before I forgot it and imagined myself as invulnerable as ever.

The naive sense of safety that surrounded me like a shield was not something Yussuf and the others knew. In the Darfur, shootouts were a daily occurrence, the police rarely intervened, and people took the law into their own hands. If the culprit was not shot down right away, the rival parties called in a clan elder or tribal chief to discuss the matter. The deliberations went on until a satisfying solution was found, usually in the form of compensation for damages incurred.

Yussuf had looked puzzled when I told him how thefts were dealt with in the Netherlands. There, insurance companies handled the claims. Storm damage, theft, funeral expenses, a failed harvest or a traffic accident, the Dutch were insured against the strangest things, I said. What a marvelous country, Yussuf exclaimed with a mixture of disbelief and envy.

In the Darfur, no one could cover themselves against life's risks. No insurance company would be foolish enough to issue policies against bombs, locusts, the scorching sun, drought, epidemics or military coups. A man with a herd of camels could lose all his possessions just like that, and parents lost their children to the simplest of illnesses.

A person in trouble could turn to his family, or to God, and that was it.

How different my own life was. My background and my views were as unlike Yussuf's as day and night. He had grown up in the desert, and as a boy had been sent out on his own to search for lost camels. He knew what hunger was, he had worked all his life and knew no social safeguards.

Yussuf and I were polar opposites. Where he met limitations in the form of food, water, money and employment, I lived in largesse. He lived according to tradition and in line with the directives of his faith. To me, it was an absolute challenge to go beyond my limits. Yet despite all the differences, I felt more of a bond with Yussuf than with the young people glued to their cell phones, or the neatly dressed businesspeople of my own country. Yussuf's and Adam's stories of banditry seemed more real to me than stock-market reports and infighting about tax deductions on mortgages. And as far as danger went, I considered the risk of a shootout along the way no more pressing than a traffic accident in Amsterdam.

[...]

Sheik Osman had known Thesiger and his boss, Mr. Moore. Those were the days, he said. Every five minutes the teacher interrupted the flow of words, so that I could follow the conversation better. I found out that Thesiger was known as an indefatigable lion-killer, who showed up in villages where the hungry predators were attacking people. The Englishman had dispatched dozens of lions, skillfully and cold-bloodedly, Osman said admiringly.

Suddenly, the anecdote Yussuf's cousin had told came to mind. The story was too delightful to keep from Sheik Osman, and the teacher translated my words with care.

One day, close to Kutum, Thesiger was summoned to a village where an old lion had killed a toddler. He took a few native soldiers with him, including the uncle of the man who had told me the story.

The lion was hard to locate, but a soldier – the storyteller's uncle – saw it lying beneath a bush and drew the young Englishman's attention to the animal, which was moving nothing but its tail. Thesiger took his time aiming, but before he could shoot, the soldier tapped him on the shoulder: 'Don't shake your leg.'

Thesiger looked down at his right leg, which was indeed trembling, then pulled up his trouser leg and pounded the butt of his rifle against the trembling shin until blood ran into his boot. He aimed again, and shot the lion dead with the first bullet. The overjoyed marksman removed his cap, cheered loudly and then turned to the soldier: ‘What was it you said to me just then?’ The soldier had to repeat it three times, before Thesiger asked why he had made that comment. ‘Any one of us here would have attacked that lion with his bare hands if necessary, even if it had meant our death,’ the soldier explained. ‘You are our commander, and it is unseemly for someone in your position to exhibit fear.’

But, before starting to speak, the soldier had quietly released the safety catch on his rifle. He knew that the British would sometimes strike out in anger when displeased, and if Thesiger had made one false move he would have shot him. The nephew who told me his uncle’s story had noted here that the Mahria were known as brave warriors, and were not pleased with the English oppressors. They may have resigned themselves to the situation, but an insult from some young snot was not something a Mahria would take.

‘You are a courageous man,’ Thesiger praised the soldier, then added that their conversation should remain ‘between us’. No one needed to know about his shaky leg.

The uncle kept his word, and it was not until two years before he died that he finally related the story to his nephew, when the boy was reading aloud passages from Thesiger’s autobiography and the uncle missed the part about the tremble.