

Mahmoud Trawri

Maimouna

ميمونة

Translated by Diqqa.net collective (English)

MAIMOUNA

pp25-32

2— Arrival

*The heart fluttered for Hijaz and marched
Thawed by longing for the beloved, it soared
And the enamored bodies followed in its tracks*

So you see their knees in the sand, approaching the spotlight, their hearts united, their disparate consciousnesses mixing with distinct tongues emitting diverse sounds that do not repel one another, but create something new; something that can only be created here.

My mother did not tell me about the moment of arrival to Hijaz, and so this juncture has remained vague; always completely absent from her stories. She found it sufficient to say (...and we arrived in Mecca), before her face would mellow and assume a cryptic stare no one really explained to me, except for my aunt, who curtly said that my father “got married in Sudan,” which I accepted as a justification for my mother’s reticence over the story of Mecca.

Filling in my mother’s silence, my aunt continues (we walked ahead, soaring in the wind, drenched in unbridled happiness, the wind roaring its anthem in my ears, which I repeated as though the jinn himself were leading it. We would never again be strangers, never, never. Brothers of ours on the right, and brothers on the left, everyone new to us, but none of them strangers; for in our happiness and longing we were one single body. The sand and the wind spoke for us, and the ocean’s waves listened to us, so the birds around us sang, and the scarecrows grew silent when Issa chanted: “O my Lord, let me enter through the gate of truth, and let me exit by the gate of truth; and grant me from Thy Presence an authority to assist me,” the world ahead of us was vast, and in our hearts blared the same spark of fire that had ignited in the hearts of the Prophet’s Companions on the day of Allah’s victory). Tears began to dampen my aunt’s words the minute she realized she was about to recount the story of arrival.

For a while I kept inquiring and investigating, until I held the threads of the story in my hands, from which I could weave the journey's spectra.

(...There was a famed road they called the Silk Road, its dust and dirt would smudge the faces of those who hailed from the Al-Bukhari countries, and those countries that kept Gog and Magog hidden in their soil, according to the vile stories narrated by jurist Safiyah Al-Sinari. Sheikh Al-Mashat had refuted her theories and asserted that Gog and Magog shared their origins with Musaylima, where the lands are overcome with nests of mud inhabited by hearts of flint, hostile to joy.

Near Sudan, the Suez and Aqaba roads interlaced with smuggling routes that led some pilgrims to arduous roads, their soft sands soiled by the camels, their wilderness mystifying the travelers. Their only guides were monuments of stone, built to guide travelers towards Al-Masjid Al-Haram. The convoys ascend at Aqaba, where they rest, and where pilgrims arrive from Egypt, and with them, pilgrims who had sifted through the gates of Sudan. In Aqaba, the Syrian pilgrim encounters the Egyptian and the Sudanese, and they all climb down to an old village on whose ruins Aqaba had been built. This is where the pilgrims begin to split up, between those travelling on the backs of camels, and those travelling by sea aboard sailboats, for their safety, for if they took the risk to travel by land, they would collide with a mob of lawless, wretched Arabs, who find in the pilgrims' convoys an opportunity to satiate their hunger.)

When the jurist Bent Al-Sinari told us in her Kuttab about such horrific attacks, we used to ask her: "Were they Muslims?"

She evaded the question, and just added (they looted everything, they killed men and took women captive; at the very least, the pilgrims were forced to pay a fee to the Bedouins, who would otherwise destroy the entire convoy).

With a sadness we comprehended even in our childhood, Bent Al-Sinari often said: Ignorance and hunger wreck oneself and one's religion. They were ferocious illiterates.

I encountered such ferocity, but I remember now that my mother had announced that the pilgrimage was complete, but my uncle and father insisted on staying with those who stayed behind to visit the remaining holy places, and to ponder their nearness to the House.

My uncle was complaining to my father that hunger had possessed him—but my father would shush him by saying (hunger is eased by closeness to the House).

In Madinah, we arrived at the fringes of orchards that had been acquired by one of our kings, Askia Muhammad, who became affiliated with Leon the African, a young Arab of Fassi origins, named Al-Hassan bin Muhammad Al-Wazzan, who was captured by Sicilian pirates and handed over

to Pope Leo X, who in turn converted him to Christianity, and gave him his Christian name Leo, and encouraged him to write about our country, and that's how he came to befriend Al-Askia.

Al-Askia was not convinced that a king's power hailed from his sword or talents; instead, he sought support for his rule by obtaining legal recognition from the Abbasid caliph. He completed his pilgrimage in 1494, after failing to extend his authority over the Hausa states. He wanted to erase Mansi Moussa's journey—as well as his ideas and his magnitude—from people's minds, so he exercised exceptional generosity, and donated one hundred thousand mithqals of gold to the Two Holy Mosques, and bought orchards in Medina, which he endowed to the people of Takrur.

My mother said that Askia was the first ruler in our country to force women to follow Islamic guidelines on wardrobe and mixing with men, and that he had appointed an Islamic sheikh in Timbuktu.

Here, on the fringes of these orchards, I gathered stories about the Mandingo Ahmed Samado, the Hausa, the Fulani, Othman Fodi, who descended from the Torodi clan, Ahmed Lobo, who claimed to share lineage with the Prophet's House, the Masna, the Goni, the Funj, the Emir of Kutsina and his strong relations with Galal-Adin El-Seyouti, who lived in Kutsina to teach before returning to Egypt. I heard about Sunghi, Kangaba, and Kubbi from the Hausa Empire, whose people originated from a Kushnawi mother and a father from Sunghi, with "Kantia" as their king, who ruled over Kishna, Kano, Jojar, and Zaria, and I also learned about Bruno's conquests, and his resistance to the forces of Askia Muhammad.

In this orchard, my mother narrated her encounters with Wankara's factions and clans, as well as the Burqo, the Moshi, the Zubrama, the Baranwa, the Wolof, and Futa. Everyone melted into everyone; they married and intermarried. The races intertwined, and they all united under one harmonious identity. They all belonged to Al-Haram, and together they nurtured an intimacy, its first letters washed with the waters of the Nile. At times their confidence in that (The believers are but brothers) was sincere, at others it was naïve and excessive. Faith is corrupted when it mixes with naivety; it becomes a burden on men, weighing down their feet with bags of sinister sand. Adamo's words would reverberate among us like words of the Qur'an.

My father met people from the Java and India, and people from Hadramout led by Al-Sakkaf—a descendant of the Zahra dynasty—who came from Java with a treasure of gold which he bestowed upon the people of the Two Holy Mosques to buy peace from the Arabs, who protected the convoys from starving A'rabs who ambushed the convoys.

My mother grows weary and sad as my aunt continues: Al-Sakkaf would gather his guests, and as they drank green tea in a divan adjacent to the Al-Baqi Cemetery's fence, he reminded them of the third of the Two Holy Mosques, and the duty of consecrating the Hajj.

My father was daydreaming when my uncle interrupted to ask:

Are you thinking of traveling to Jerusalem?

My uncle knows the extent of my father's attachment to the Holy Book, his passion for travelling in the footsteps of the Prophet's Companions, his fascination with them, his expansive desire to unearth their traces, and his love for this near-mythical history, and that it had all been sparked by his friendship with Al-Mansi.

My father nods his head in the affirmative.

Anxiety strikes my uncle and flows into my mother. I had not been born yet, but I shared their panic. Meanwhile, the Java sheikh reassures everyone that the war is dormant, and that Allah will protect them with pigeons that originate in Jerusalem, carrying traces of Al-Buraq, inhabited by angels, which will run in their veins to give them days of brocade and peace.

A wind of fear had blown across the group...the uncertainty of the Sublime Porte is rampant, but the pilgrims' longing for Jerusalem was deeper than fear.

They decided. The convoys assembled over the next few days. Al Sakkaf succeeded in convincing a large number of pilgrims—among them Altakarna, Indians, Al-Sulaymaniyah, Al-Shanaga, and Al-Bukhari—and he found no resistance in convincing Java's pilgrims, who consider obeying him a religious duty.

In the morning, a messenger called out to the wind:

Muslims, we will move in a few hours.

My father packed his small bag, bid my uncle farewell, and then said goodbye to my mother. And before he relaxed his hands, which he had raised to the sky, he said:

We don't know how long we'll stay there.

And I was hanging onto the last thread of the umbilical cord, and I could see the perilous expanses of Khaybar, Haql, and Aqaba. I hear bells in Nazareth and Bethlehem, as flocks of Al-Buraq's pigeons split, shedding their feathers in sadness.

The convoy went ahead, feasting on dates, as my father relates to Sheikh Al-Sakkaf the details he had missed from Al-Mansi's journey, and asserts that Ibn Batuta had stayed as a guest with my grandfather's brother, and crossed the great desert with him, until they reached Niger's borders, and entered the Mali kingdom, and spoke with its sultan, Mansi Mousa.

I was suspended in the placenta, fleeing the umbilical cord, fleeing my father's departure, as the figure of Mansi Mousa bred in my undeveloped memory. My legs were kicking around a pressing question: Who is this "Mansi" person?

Then I would calm down, and when the groaning of the camels multiplies, and the cries of the Bedouins scatter in the air and culminate in a layer of rot, where the tents mingle with the smells of fodder, dung, and siege, I become inundated...I become a forest that hurts my mother's womb with the chaos of its trees. And the forest, for my family, means something of majesty and mystery; it is flooded with animals and rivers, and reservoirs flowing lusciously—especially when the source is visible—towards blundering blood emanating from a distant mountain. Like a forest, I radiate with sounds, questions, and kicks: Who is Mansi?

My mother stands on the fringes of the air, recalling the murmurs of springs, the wonder of the river, the sounds of the forest, and the animals, the prey, the birds, and the reptiles. She latches on to me, then bellows, as though labor were drawing near.

The jungle had colored me with its rumble. The first man departed the forest, but he kept looking back nostalgically. My mother must have produced her eggs while in a rage in the forest...She must have had her first period as she fled a hippopotamus, after she broke the water tractor and took refuge in the forest's kindness. The forest has engineered the reactions of every member of my family. Everything can be found in the jungle...Colors, the scent of flowers, the soil that rain assaults only to sprout bright birds. They mimic its bloom in their clothes, their furniture, and their homes. The jungle gave them the secrets of dance and led them to the gates of drums, which they raise with a beat the sun can languish in when the pockets of life grow deep. With their chafed fingers, they part the eyes of dawn which blood had drawn shut. Their tall drums carry the meaning of life, and its joy, so they dance in celebration. With the music of drums, they commune with nature. My mother says that songs rise with the harvest. They sing all day, to relieve their despair and to transport their lush dreams, as though the branches would not extend their necks if not for sound of the drums. We have always believed that life resides in the throat.

When I joined the Kuttab with the jurist Safiyah Al-Sinari, I learned to express myself—but in the absence of drums. The palm was our drum, and the throat our Nay. Many years after Safiyah left, I heard Quds saying (that the black man is a man of nature; he lives with his land; he is a sensual man with rife senses; he refuses to accept mediation between subject and object, but rather opens himself up to all things: melodies, smells, rhythms, shapes, and colors; he feels things more than he sees them).

I didn't understand a single word she said, and when I lovingly screamed:
Are you calling us blind, you fool?

She laughed as she replied:

I don't know grandmother, this is just Sanjur manifesting.

I left it at that, so she would not keep mocking me with words I do not understand, and I did not even ask her who Sanjur was!

She inched closer to me, turned my right ear towards her, and asked me slyly:

You look so beautiful grandma Maimouna with just one earring.

I got angry, and thought she was mocking me. But she really was asking me about the secret of the single earring. I ignored her. So she started bribing me with stories; storytelling had long shaped the intimacy between us.

Listen, grandma, I will tell you a new story. Once upon a time, the people rose up, their revolutions mounted, then they rallied behind Bushiri bin Salmeen, an Arab with a black mother, who was courageous and cunning; he challenged the foreigners, attacked the squares, and exterminated them. So they launched a campaign against him, culminating in an arduous battle, until they captured Bushiri, and executed him...

I had fallen asleep and dropped the story in the "Quds" file, who touched my ears for a long time before she went away.

My uncle holds my mother in a panic as my father approaches him.

- They say that Jerusalem is far away. But I am intent on visiting it. My wife will give birth. If it's a boy, call him Muhammed. If it's a girl, Maimouna. And if I do not return, do not forget our history. Make it present for my child. We have a history, Omar.

He sealed his farewell with these words, and underlined them with his absence.