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The Sheep and the Saint

LAST summer I sacrificed a sheep to a tribal saint and communal ancestor. His full name is Sidi Said ou Brahim el Berrai, commonly known as Dadda Said. The word "dadda" does really have a meaning resembling that of the English "daddy." It means ultimate grandfather, and Dadda Said is indeed the common ancestor of a tribe hidden amongst the gorges of the High Atlas.

My piety in sacrificing a sheep to Dadda Said was not wholly free of ulterior motives. Yet it would be quite untrue to say that I am sceptical concerning Dadda Said. I doubt neither his existence nor his sanctity. Dadda Said is most probably a genuine historical figure, though he may have lived as early as 1300 or as late as 1500; what evidence there is concerning the time of his life is inconclusive. It is hard to tell. Berbers of the Atlas are illiterate folk; their language possesses no alphabet. What few Arabic documents exist are rare, jealously guarded, ambiguous, and unreliable. . . .

I said I did not doubt his existence. I do not doubt his sanctity either, provided it is clearly understood that Berber sanctity is meant. The Berber word "*agurram*" is only translated as "saint" for lack of a better term. "*Igurramen*"—that is the plural of "*agurram*"—are powerful, generally wealthy and generous, well informed about matters of this and the other world, and all this with the aid of supernatural agencies. There are good *igurramen* and bad *igurramen*. The good ones happily predominate, but you simply must face the fact that there are

wicked ones, whose supernatural contacts tend to be exclusively with the devil.

Now it follows from all this that Berber sanctity can be fairly easily spotted by external signs, and above all by material consequences. One is expected to judge and recognise them by their fruits; and Dadda Said, whose existence and sanctity I do not doubt, is so well remembered—not only by the tribe who are his descendants but also by all surrounding tribes—and he has left so deep a mark on the place-names, customs, and institutions for miles around, that surely he must have been an *agurram*.

No one could live in the region and not be aware of Dadda Said. I have met young Berbers who had forgotten the name of Mohammed; I do not believe one could find a young boy or girl in the region who was unaware of Dadda Said. As for myself—and this may in part account for my belief in him—I only had to look out of my window to see Dadda Said's tomb, a fine square, whitewashed little house with a shining dome and a knob on, overshadowing miserable, silent, anonymous Berber graves and a few ramshackle vaults of recent notables. Almost all my neighbours were men who could trace their ancestry back one by one right to Dadda Said; and indeed past him right on to Sidna Ali, Mohammed's son-in-law, though here my belief was no longer with them.

NEVERTHELESS, for all my belief, my motive for sacrificing a sheep to Dadda Said was desire for information rather than

piety. The local custom is to bring sacrifices, ranging from bulls to chicken, but most often sheep, to Dadda Said. To bring him a sacrifice means to slaughter the unfortunate animal in front of his tomb. The saint, being no longer of this world, cannot directly profit from the material consequences of the sacrifice. But someone must consume the meat, and indeed someone does. The question is—who? I had failed to get an accurate answer to this question by interrogation, mainly, I think, because it is not in the interests of those who know it to disclose what they know.

It had occurred to me that one way of getting around this would be to offer a donation oneself.

The best way of finding out what happens in given conditions is to bring those conditions about and observe the results; in other words, to experiment. Now experiments are often impossible in the social sciences, for practical and/or moral reasons. But there seemed no practical difficulties over and above the cost of a sheep—they were cheap at that time of year, and in any case the cost would in the end be borne by the research-financing body that had sent me to Morocco. As for moral objections—why, no one, except the poor sheep itself, would suffer, and some persons not yet identified would profit by consuming the mutton. To find out just who these persons were, was—from my viewpoint—the object of the exercise. I might as well confess now that I wasn't much wiser concerning this matter when it was all over, but I did learn a great number of other things in the process.

Now whilst there seemed no real moral objection to the experiment—perhaps I should say no moral objection from my viewpoint—there might, for all one knew, be one from the viewpoint of the Berbers. The first thing to do was to ascertain whether this was so.

I shall refer to the two dominant local families as the Montagues and the Capulets—not without cause—though their hostility does not exclude some social contact and the maintenance of superficial courtesies. The present tribal chief is a Montague; the pre-

vious chief was a Capulet, deposed three years ago when popular clamour against him coincided with the displeasure of the French administration. He resigned involuntarily and died not long after. The Montague who replaced him is still chief. More need hardly be said about the roots of the present hostility between the two families. The two families, one should add, are fairly close cousins; but, to paraphrase a remark of Bernard Shaw's, Berbers are often separated by bonds of common kinship.

It lay in the nature of our anthropological work that my wife and I tried to be on equally good terms with both the Montagues and the Capulets. The Montague who is present chief was friendly but cautious and nervous—as well he might be in the Morocco of 1955. He often had the bewildered air of a man who would dearly like to know which side his bread was buttered but had not quite succeeded in finding out. He did not quite know what to make of us, two Europeans who wanted to live with Berbers, as Berbers as far as we could, and ask a lot of questions; especially as we were not French and he did not know how much the French Administration approved.

THE Capulets were far more friendly and open. Being out of power they had less to lose, and being out of power they had far more time on their hands. It was to them that I first mentioned with assumed casualness the idea of donating a sheep to their general ancestor, Dadda Said. Their reaction was immediate, spontaneous, and enthusiastic. It was indeed an excellent idea, they thought. To confirm me in my intention they told us the story of a French sergeant-major in an outpost two-days' walking away, who had applied for a commission and had almost despaired of obtaining it, when in the end he decided to come over to Dadda Said's sanctuary and sacrifice a sheep. When he then returned to his outpost, the letter informing him of his promotion to Second-Lieutenant was awaiting him. (It promptly occurred to me that I might ask Dadda Said for promotion on the academic ladder, but I

abandoned this, not wishing to test the good saint too hard.)

So the Capulets were enthusiastic; but, they added with emphasis, not a word to anyone, not a word to the Montagues, not a word to the chief. We, the Capulets, shall arrange the whole affair far better, and he, the conceited little upstart, would only spoil it.

It was obvious that nothing would please the Capulets as much as to have a sheep sacrificed in a manner that constituted a slap in the face of the chief, who was the head of the Montagues. This was very interesting in itself, but I could not afford to antagonise the chief if I wanted to find out more. The chief fancied himself to be the principal guardian of Dadda Said's tomb; for a sacrifice to take place there out of his control or even without his knowledge would indeed be an affront. I might in the end have to sacrifice two sheep, it appeared. . . .

Disregarding the Capulets' instructions to keep quiet about my intentions, I mentioned the possibility of a sacrifice to the chief. His reaction was perhaps less demonstratively enthusiastic, but he made up for that by immediate practical co-operativeness. In fact he was more than co-operative; he rushed me on. He reinterpreted my tentative exploration as a definite wish. He only wanted to know when and how much; the rest to be left to him. He would provide the sheep; I'd buy it off him, and then hand it over to him again. He would then arrange the actual slaughter, the distribution, and the mediation of request and blessing between me and the great deceased saint, Dadda Said, his own ancestor.

At this stage I must—somewhat belatedly—introduce the central character in this episode; the central living character, anyway, more interesting than anyone else involved, apart from the long-dead saint. I shall refer to him simply as the Clergyman*—the *fquih* as the Berbers say. A scribe or cleric, a man

who can, and does, lead prayers, write and read letters in Arabic for the illiterate tribesmen, and teach their children a few snippets of the Koran. There are many such *foquaha*; our village, being a tribal capital, had no fewer than three. I have met many scribes. Often they are just simple, hardy peasants differing from others only in being literate, and not very literate at that. At the worst, they are a kind of Berber version of a free-floating intelligentsia at its most free-floating. They are seldom locals; scribes, like blacksmiths and acrobat-entertainers, are specialists whom our highland Berber tribes habitually import. Scribes co-exist with *igurramen*, that is with saints, in a way this episode will bring out.

Now the clergyman in our episode was quite unlike any other Berber scribe that I have ever met. He was not merely free-floating, he was also a genuine intellectual. He possessed a library of no fewer than five volumes, which is unheard of in the High Atlas; he was genuinely avid for more. He borrowed the few books in Arabic (with French translation) that I possessed.

We liked him and he seemed to like us. He was an excellent conversationalist and a willing supplier of information. At the time, he seemed to spend half his time with us. From our viewpoint he had but one snag; his intelligent interest in local affairs was inevitably also critical, and he interpreted everything in the light of what things *should* be like. We wanted facts, and ideals only *as* facts, as ideals held by locals. He gave us ideals that were ahead not merely of practice but equally ahead of local aspiration. He only gave us local facts contemptuously, as instances of the degradation and imperfection of man. Local facts, being to his mind just so many scandalous aberrations, did not interest him in their detail; for perfection might be absorbing, but error and sin surely do not merit an accurate record. At least, so it seemed to him. He was, so to speak, interested in man being born free; we were professionally interested in just what the local chains were, and how they functioned.

Now the central fact about Berber sanctity,

* Islam has no clergy. Nevertheless this is the term we used, and it conveys his social position better than other terms would.

about being an *agurram*, is its heredity. To initiate a line of saints you must have some merit—though Berbers, like others, confuse moral merit with material success. But once a line of saints is established not even merit is required. Offspring of saints in the male line are *ex officio* saints themselves. Hence both our Montagues and our Capulets were “saints.”

Vis-à-vis this cult of hereditary sanctity, our clergyman was a protestant. With the excited voice of one conveying a new, important, and dangerous truth he told us that sanctity depended not on ancestry but on merit; above all, on inner merit. He somewhat over-estimated the extent to which these ideas were novel to us; but in the context of this holy tribe, whose leading members made their living in part from their descent and sanctity, what he said was novel enough; it was dangerous, and it was exciting.

At the beginning of the drama we thought the clergyman was in the Capulet's pocket, so to speak. He and his family lived in a house owned by them. He was often seen with them; and when it was a matter of running down the chief, the Montague, they spoke with one voice. But, in fact, as it turned out, he was neither the Capulet's agent nor their protégé. He acted and spoke from conviction and not on commission; and they in turn were quite prepared to let him down.

He often and passionately explained to us his contempt for merely hereditary sanctity and its profits, with special reference to our sheep. It would go to the chief, and how little he deserved it! These speeches were overheard; by children, by the Berber woman who made our bread, by people whom the clergyman thought sympathetic to his sentiments. He suggested alternative ways in which we could donate our sheep to the dead saint without it passing through his living descendant, the present chief. All this was soon known about the village. We were passive and patient, observing what we could and trying to avoid a definite commitment on an issue that was showing us so much of local life. We also rather enjoyed the stir and

intrigues we had caused. Our moral sentiments were with the clergyman, but our research interests were above the battle and only concerned with its perpetuation. We had not yet decided between the two considerations, but we realised what the field-worker's motto should be: an alien society is not a spectacle but a predicament.

IT WOULD be tedious to go through all the details of the intrigue. Many visits were paid by many people, much tea was drunk, much was said and hinted. In the end the chief had his way. The Capulets had turned against the clergyman and in favour of the chief, the Montague. When they saw that the clergyman was not merely campaigning against the chief but using arguments that would undermine their, the Capulets', position as well, they switched over. They realised that a principle higher than just annoying the chief was involved.

The chief had his way. It was his sheep that we bought, and we handed it over again to him. It was consumed only by him and his household. This would not, incidentally, be the normal practice. On other occasions certain other descendants of Dadda Said would also profit. But on this occasion, his very position having been challenged, he had to demonstrate his power and safeguard his prestige. This question of prestige and principle explains why there had been so much fuss about a single miserable sheep. When utter strangers, and Europeans at that, made a sacrifice to Dadda Said, the event would be noticed and commented on; what happened and was allowed to happen would reflect on the chief's power. It would give some people food for thought and might even create a precedent.

The actual ceremonial was simple. Before the unfortunate sheep had its throat cut, the chief knocked on the door of Dadda Said's tomb to wake his spirit and introduce me to him. Then he told the spirit, without going into much unnecessary detail, that this stranger, monsieur Ernest, had a wish and in return for supernatural assistance was presenting—one sheep. I insisted on expressing

my wish aloud; the chief did not want this, being prepared to give me a kind of *carte blanche*, and to ask Dadda Said to grant whatever was just then on my mind. I persisted and got my way on this point. I did not know whether Dadda Said would hear me, but I wanted to make sure that the chief did. I acted like a man who puts something in a letter intended more for the censor than for the recipient. For my wish was "Let me be aided in finding out all that goes on in the tribe." Having helped to sacrifice the sheep in the interests of this wish, the chief might, now that he knew the nature of the wish, feel bound to assist me himself. Such at least was my naïve hope.

Soon after the sacrifice my wife became ill and we had to go off to an outpost where medicines were available. It was a few days before we got back. When we returned the clergyman was no longer there. Enquiries disclosed that he was now in prison at another French outpost; and after release he would not be allowed to return but be sent under escort to his home village, on the other side of the Atlas at the edge of the Sahara. Rumours soon reached us that it was his rôle in the affair of our sheep that was responsible for his misfortune.

CONTRARY to all our self-imposed rules which otherwise we always followed, we went to the French administration about this. The clergyman being in an official prison, presumably on the chief's initiative but necessarily with the administration's permission, there was nothing else to do. We saw an amiable young lieutenant, closer to us in age and outlook than the commandant in charge of the whole region; he was also physically closer to where we lived. He saw our point and promised to make enquiries. This he did, and their outcome was sad.

It transpired that the unfortunate clergyman had previous convictions against him, one for black magic and the other for forging

Arabic land-deeds; and for another thing, he had no permission to reside outside his own home tribe. This would not matter if he had kept on the right side of our chief. As long as there was no trouble, the administration which, especially in the summer of 1955, had other worries, would leave him alone. But now that he had displeased the local powers that be, his record, his lack of documents, and his being a stranger could be brought to bear against him in an irresistible way. There was nothing to be done. Nothing was done.

We shall never know the truth about his previous convictions. It may be that, like his present misfortune, it was due to his ethical originality and idealism rather than any misdeeds. But I prefer to think of him as actually having been guilty. I think no less well of him for that. A moral reformer is no less valuable or right for being morally mediocre himself. We do not blame a painter for being ugly or a novelist for leading a dull life. Moreover, it might be argued that a man fired by an ideal beyond the understanding of his environment, may be forced by an unregenerate society into evil courses through no fault of his own. If the clergyman did not remind one of Socrates, at least he was in his little way a kind of Berber tribal Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

I could do nothing for him. My only consolation for having been the unintentional instrument of his ruin, is that I shall never reclaim the two pounds and one Arabic book that I lent him and that are still in his possession. The two pounds will thus end a strange journey from being part of an oil-fortune, through an American Research Foundation and British University, through my pocket, to end in aiding a Berber moral reformer. I can also salute him as a moralist and minor martyr by telling this story. He will never hear this salute, but then, unlike our friendship, it will not do him any harm either.