

*In the desert, where the sun shines brighter and hotter, where sunlight is blinding, where shadows and water are expensive commodities, what begins as a seemingly typical telecommunications teaching assignment in Algeria, turns sinister.*

## **Algérie Mon Amour: For Michael ThreeHats**

By David Michael Litwick


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we are thrust into a new heart of darkness—and light.  
A rich, thrilling LeCarre-esque journey into the tribal and  
geopolitical wars of [post colonial] Africa."*

— Kenneth W. Davis, Professor Emeritus of English, Indiana University



Algérie  
Mon Amour  
(for Michael ThreeHats)



David Michael Litwack

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We arrived in Bou Sa'ada in the late afternoon. Our Rovers gasping a bit and puffing up the last half-mile. But the donkeys were doing well.

We were immediately struck by several unusual aspects of this town.

First, we were festooned with beautifully hand-colored paper-maché flowers and petals thrown all over our cars by giggling children. Covering all vestiges of the dust and sand from the treacherous mountain so-called freeway. We also encountered welcoming signs in French and Arabic, decorated with Berber symbols. Throughout the town. As if they had been notified of our imminent arrival and were anxiously expecting us.

Secondly, the inhabitants of this village could have been akin to the “body snatchers,” or an invasion of alien beings. Really. I was a faithful fan of those B movies. And this place, with its brick-a-brac and tent-like huts and shops, was very much akin.

It was most of all the huge growths many of them, maybe most of them, sported on their necks. Like gourds, protruding from them. So seemingly natural to them that they took no notice of the anomaly with each other. I did. I noticed and couldn't help but ask Bubba Musta. He made a motion, a motion indicating an extension at his neck.

“I know. But what causes it so?”

He gave a shrug and that other motion. The one that indicated that there was nothing he could do. Big help. We had come to realize that

his silence was physical. That he was not silent by choice. He could still grunt and growl. And did so from time to time.

“In plains Indian sign language, that would mean ‘it can’t be helped,’” Cyclo offered. Referring to Bubba Musta’s gesture.

“Maybe those Sioux, Crow, or Pawnee stopped by to give Plains sign language lessons.” Always the smart-ass, me.

“Yeah, maybe,” ThreeHats agreed. “Anyway, it’s lack of iodine. No fish, no iodine in the soil. These guys were probably relatively recent nomads. Bad place to stop off.”

“And I left all my iodine at home.”

“Yeah, me too!”

But Suit hadn’t. Which explained the bags of salt piled in the second Rover. Among the *khat*. I began to think more highly of Suit. Bitchin’!

\*\*\*\*

I was taken with the local artisan work and the blanket and prayer mat weaving, and decided to acquire some items to pass out to my maybe-still-friends in Dar es Sabir. Also, the brass cooking utensils. I thought the *Hamar* (donkey) that I named—named after the wonderful *hamar* of yesteryear, Omar, our houseboy Jean’s *hamar*—could manage these additions to his burden. With help from the camels we were attempting to buy in the *Gabal*, the Market of Beasts.

I looked for virgins, as I had promised, to add to the gift lot, but couldn’t determine which ladies were unmarried, etc. Omar looked for ladies too. There was a lot of braying going on between him and

the other male donkeys. Likely “keep off my turf.” No female takers there either.

ThreeHats had begun to look too. I wasn’t previously apprised of this requirement.

The decor was probably intended for the arriving militiamen who changed into their spiffy uniforms as soon as we arrived. Maybe we were seeing the beginnings of a celebration to welcome the militiamen. There go the virgins!

ThreeHats suggested stalking some women. He showed me how to appear nonchalant while stalking. I tried that and incurred many giggles. No offers. Or declarations of virgin love.

“You’re too obvious,” ThreeHats observed. With his western ten gallon hat and brown *jalaba*, he was truly obvious—but perhaps seen as debonair. He was in a bit of a manic state and I think he’d been awake now for two full days before our departure. Wandering the shore not too far from the campus. Second-thinking this gig, no doubt.

“Yeah? Then you show me!” I challenged. He did. In three days he had a female tent mate. Premarital congress apparently tolerated in this world. In another day, ThreeHats was wed to the lovely Fatima (with only a slight neck growth) by the local Imam. As obligatory, I must assume, after premarital congress. Other militiamen were likewise conjoined at the same time.

The marriage celebration was joyful. Lots of circle dances by the women. Neck gourds bouncing to the rhythms. The men mostly sat, drank strong coffee, and smoked. I demurred regarding the dancing. The men tried to be polite to me, but we passed very few words. Still, they were generous with the sugar.

ThreeHats reminded me. He had been keeper of the bag. Candy for the kids. Cigarettes for the adults—over age fourteen. For the younger, I distributed the candy like a Father Christmas. Then the cigarettes—filter-less *Gitans* from France. The kind that no one smoked any more except Algerian war veterans and period movie actors. With that, I was in.

Their new fast friend.

ThreeHats was taken away for an obligatory three-day “honeymoon.” And religious inculcation. “With mushrooms!” he noted. “Not far off from what we do on the rez. They cultivate in the caves. Grown like true fungi. It’s fascinating!” He was on a roll now. “I’m going to check out other similarities.”

“An academic honeymoon,” I threw in. Fatima should appreciate that.

A regular studymoon.

Unfortunately, they seemed to be waiting for the calm to return as well. Ten, I think. All veiled and with the requisite fierce and angry eyes. Eyes like pin-sized fireflies dancing about in the mud-yellow of their sciera. All mounted. I had just let Kalb and the ball out. The ball was losing air and one of the veiled ones made as if to shoot it. Or Kalb. Another one stopped him. The ball slowly rolled over the cliff. Kalb chased it to the edge, examined the trajectory, looked toward the guy with the raised rifle, and decided it was too dangerous to rescue it. He then wisely barked twice and laid flat. “Right Kalb,” I said. “This is no joke.”

The one who prevented an international incident took the lead. Perhaps the chief, the *amenokal* of this gang. I’ll try to capture the essence of our conversation here, although his voice was hollow and muffled by the veil. Little Ali did the translating when *Tamazight* was spoken. It came out as “Who ‘r you . . . What . . . you . . . dong . . . re?”

But I think I made it out. “Believe me, I am a man of no importance,” I said with exaggerated humility. “On adventure. Across your great land.” I thought I was doing well, imitating a naive, intellectually-challenged *Nasarah*.

“Whe . . . you . . . gong?” He also murmured something to his partner.

“He wonders if he should shoot you.” Little Ali got the words out quickly, probably wondering if I could say something to mollify them. Before possible mayhem. Wondering if we should hightail it



for the hills. “Because of the *tayr sarie* that follow you,” Little Ali added.

“South,” I answered. “Just south.”

“To whe . . . eh?” he insisted. Again, he murmured to his colleague.

“He says he thought Americans were smarter than this,” Little Ali translated. “But it’s OK now. Really, it’s OK. He said you just seem like all the other *pieds noirs* idiots.” Ali looked much relieved. ThreeHats smiled at that. Me too. My acting was better than I thought. I said so to ThreeHats.

“It didn’t seem like you were acting,” he shot back.

“We thought it would be good to go to Dar es Sabir. What do you recommend?” I asked. Forcing a grin all along.

“Aae . . . *Wahidi, Wahidi!* Lan . . . for rebels. But Janjaweed, our sworn enemy, are there. They will not respect our women.”

“Bad idea?” I thought I’d better solicit his opinion on our touring plans. Then he switched to French, fluent as could be.

“It is where some of our *Imohag* have gone.” I think *Imohag* meant free men—meaning *Tuareg*.

“Then perhaps you could give us an introduction to them. To other *Imohag* and even *Wahidi*. A letter or some symbol.”

“You’re crossing the land of our fathers,” he responded.

I sensed that passing through the land of their fathers was not a good thing. Nor an easy thing. “Yes, we were waiting to see you. To pay you.” And not a drop of Johnnie Walker to provide that inspiration.

“Ah . . . hah! I . . . [veil down] give you a discount.”

“Ah hah!” I answered. “We will be most grateful.”

“Three hund’d dinars for you.”

I tried to mimic anguish. OK, sorrow. “It is so much!”

Veil up ( He goes back into *Imohag*. meaning *pissed off*?) “. . . teen . . . thousand . . . say . . . ef . . . ah.” It amounted to the same thing but this CFA money was not considered to be as valuable as dinars. “. . . and wun . . . *hamar*.” He threw in the donkey as if to even things out—with regard to the dinars versus CFA.

“How about dollars. I have here one bill left; I couldn’ t produce more than a five and three ones. “Will that do? Instead of the *Hamar!*”

He lowered his veil again. His speech was clear now, though heavily accented in the west Tuareg, *the Tamasheq*, way, as Little Ali told me. “Ahee-ee Wah!” he said with veil down. “Twenty now and fifty when you come back. Give us one, only one *djemel*, to hold so that you will come back this way for it.”

While ThreeHats consulted his own wallet and found an American twenty, I answered, “We need the *djemel* to transport our foodstuffs and products for El Wahid and the other lords of Dar es Sabir. And then for packages on the return.”

“Ah hah!” he said, probably figuring out our true mission. ThreeHats handed him the twenty; then, a smart maneuver, another ten. (All together, equivalent of 7,500 CFA.)

“Here is payment of thirty dollars to guarantee we will come back. With the blessings of Lord Wahid.” I hoped the mention of Wahid would put a halt to their demands.

“Yes. You must be the *Emricani* they have spoken of. We did not expect such an entourage. So bring to my brother Wahid our blessings. And those of Allah. And fifty dollars to us.”

He consulted his gang and all agreed. He even handed me a short knife in a scabbard made of finely etched leather and jewels sown into the leather. As a token of our agreement. And as an introduction to the lords of Dar es Sabir. “Give this to Lord Wahid as a sign of our friendship. Tell him I am Moussa, son of *amenokal*, *kel* of *Tamrit*. We have told him to seek in the cliffs. He will know what I mean.”

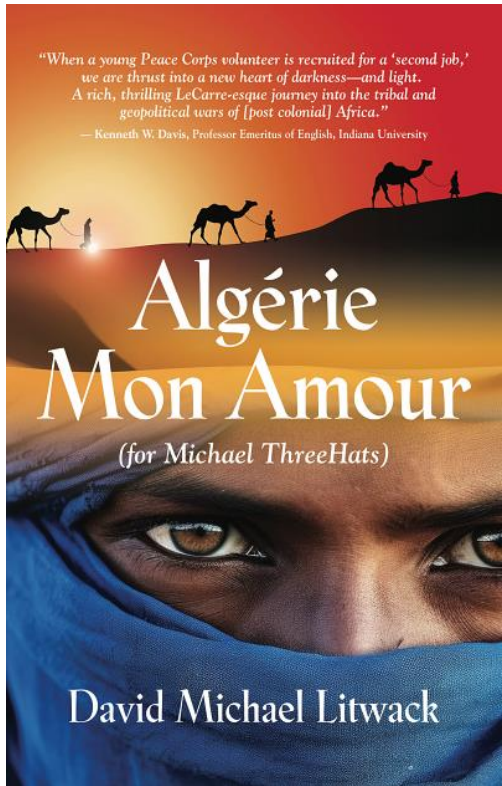
“I’ll take it,” Jean d’Argent said to the *Tuareg* as the *Tuareg* was handing me the scabbard. I slapped Jean’s hand away. Jean backtracked, pouting.

Moussa, son of *amenokal*, added, “We received a message to give this to the *Américain* only.” Again in perfect French. Veil down but eyebrows up, as if in reprimand. Eyes focusing on intrusive Jean d’Argent.

I sure didn’t know what he meant. And I wouldn’t get to keep the knife and scabbard. But I slipped it by its lanyard onto my upper arm, under my chemise, while Jean was nursing his hurt feelings and not

paying attention to me. Moussa, the son of the *amenokal*, thrust his veil to its traditional location.

The deal was done.



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