

THE MORROCAN COLONEL, MY FAVORITE ASSASSIN

by Adriaan Bronkhorst

It was 1973. I was an associate expert with a UN Development Administration project in Congo-Brazzaville and on a research mission to a few other African countries. I had just finished a visit with the National School of Administration in Tangier, Morocco and was on my way to Mauretania for a similar visit in the capital city, Nouakchott. We had two stopovers : In Casablanca, where the almost empty plane filled up with military and police officers, and in El-Aaiún (nowadays called Laayoune), where they would all get off, ready to fight the Sahrawi Polisario and secure this Spanish colony of the Western Sahara for the Moroccan king.



Map of the Western Sahara, south of Morocco and to the west of Algeria and Mauretania

I got this information about the troops from the Moroccan colonel who was seated to my right, on the aisle. As fate would have it, to my left, at the window, sat an old Sahrawi woman, big, barefooted, in a long black dress and the traditional kerchief with niqab.

After we'd been served couscous for lunch, the stewardess picked up the empty trays. The colonel spoke in Arabic to our fellow passenger at my left who hadn't touched her food and then addressed himself to me. 'Sir, please, could you help my mother to eat? She has never done it this way.' He pointed at the cutlery, the little trays, bowls, cup, and food, all neatly packed in cellophane. 'My pleasure' I replied. Not fully understanding the request, I unpacked everything and put it on the tray, just as I had done for myself. Then I looked at the lady, made an inviting gesture and said, '*Bon appétit*'. But my neighbor didn't move, and the colonel said, 'No sir, she has never eaten with a fork and knife, you have to feed her.' He made a gesture of bringing a fork to her mouth. Almost chuckling I said, 'Me, feed her?' But the colonel had already

explained to his mother how I was going to serve her and showed her how, each time I would approach her mouth with the fork, she should raise her niqab, open her mouth, shut her mouth the moment I had put the fork inside, and lower her niqab the moment I had pulled the fork from her mouth. I realized this wasn't a joke, but essential servicing to be executed efficiently and discreetly, in order to leave my fellow passenger with all her dignity.

So, I cut the sheep meat into pieces, mixed it with the bean sauce through the couscous, took the fork and brought a first portion to my neighbor's mouth. She raised her niqab and opened her mouth, just as the colonel had explained to her. I looked at her, ready to place the fork in her mouth but was taken aback. I tried to hide my discomfort, in vain, as the colonel had followed my every move. 'It isn't that bad; she won't bite you' he said. I imagined that he was laughing. The wide-open mouth under the niqab was a big toothless hole. It clapped shut with a smack after I had hesitantly put the fork on her enormous tongue. Gently I withdrew the fork and my neighbor lowered her niqab. Once she had emptied her mouth it would be raised again for the next bite. This ritual would be repeated until all the food was finished. By that time, we were nearly ready for landing. The folding tables had to be closed and the serving tray was taken away. The colonel started to thank me profusely. 'My brother! You don't mind I call you my brother, do you?' I nodded my approval and he continued 'Thank you so much for feeding our mother. Without your help she would have gone hungry into the desert. I am so pleased. At this moment the Sahrawi people – like her – are perhaps our enemies, but the Koran says that Allah will reward you when you feed your enemy.'



[Happy with her friends, Sahrawi women, by Saharauijak](#)

The colonel now looked at me expectantly. 'I'd like to ask you, do you smoke?' I pointed at the no-smoking sign right above our heads and shook my head to indicate 'no'. But the colonel said 'No, no, that's not what I mean. Not tobacco, but the sacred hashish of our country?' I was surprised and looked around me. The colonel had spoken in a pretty loud voice, all seats around us were occupied and anyone could have heard our discussion. But the colonel told me not to worry, that 'most people here smoke hashish,

its prohibition doesn't apply to the army. But you, my brother, do you smoke?' I smiled at him and nodded in the affirmative. Meanwhile our plane prepared for landing. Our safety belts were fastened, and we were supposed to remain seated. But the colonel snapped his fingers and ordered the stewardess who hurriedly arrived to take his briefcase out of the luggage rack and bring it to him as well as a sharp knife. Once he got both he opened his briefcase and took a pocketbook size parcel from it. Carefully he removed the packing and showed me a splendid slab of brown hashish which he cut into two equal parts. He put one part back into his briefcase and wrapped the other part neatly in the original paper and held it out to me.



Ketama Gold hashish, from the Moroccan Ketama region

'This is the best Ketama Gold I've got. As between brothers, one half for you, one half for me. I'll need it to fight the Sahrawi, so that I will not forget, even then, that they also are my brothers.'

Dumbfounded and without fully realizing what the colonel had said, I took the hashish. I thanked him and saw the joy in his eyes because we now shared this present. 'Now we too are forever brothers,' he said solemnly. A few minutes later the plane landed, and my Sahrawi neighbor and all the military disembarked. When he reached the end of the gangway the colonel turned around, looked at me and tipped his kepi for a final salute. Farewell, *mon frère*.

It took me years to fully appreciate what had happened. The colonel, a man of great sensitivity, was eager to meet "the other" with respect. He honored an unknown Sahrawi woman as his own mother and saw to it that she was taken care of – and the person who helped him do it became like his own brother. Every person who he met on his path he welcomed as his family. And even when in battle, instead of switching off his feelings and dehumanizing the enemy before he killed him, he chose to embrace him, as a brother. As a soldier the colonel had to fight, to kill was his duty, but in that fatal moment he wouldn't behave like a robot, but as a human, a brother, who, the moment he took the other's life, honored it. Even in killing he tried to express brotherhood, find unity and show humanity.

We all know the story of the Assassins, the Hashashins of the XIth century from Syria and Iran, who are said they went out to murder because they had used hashish. The contrary of course is true, because we don't search for the unity hashish provides, to destroy it, but to cherish it in the brokenness that life is forcing upon us. Hashish was for the Assassins a medicine that softened the wound of the killing, like it was for my brother, the colonel.