

About: protruding slabs, peculiar to the granaries of the Anti-Atlas, provide steps up to the higher cells. Right: the only way of gaining access to Morocco's many *igoudar* is via the appointed guardian, responsible for its up-keep

# Bolt-holes of the BERBERS

**Built by the Berbers to store and protect food reserves, Morocco's fortress granaries came to symbolise the independence of these proud nomadic people. Words and photographs by Amar Grover**

**T**he sublime scenery of sub-Saharan Morocco conceals a wealth of history. Weaving high above flat-roofed houses in the heart of the stunning Anti-Atlas Mountains stands Amtoudi *agadir* – one of the country's finest fortified granaries. Its turrets and crenellations appear to be grafted on to a steep ethereal promontory while its stone walls curve elegantly round the crown of the hill. Below lies an oasis of olive groves and almond trees together with lush plots of potato and barley. There is no obvious lock or keyhole in the course wooden door to Amtoudi. The only way of gaining access is via Amtoudi's appointed guardian. Like his father and grandfather before him, he must assume responsibility for the *agadir*'s upkeep and guard the elaborate key which resembles an elongated toothbrush with pins instead of bristles.

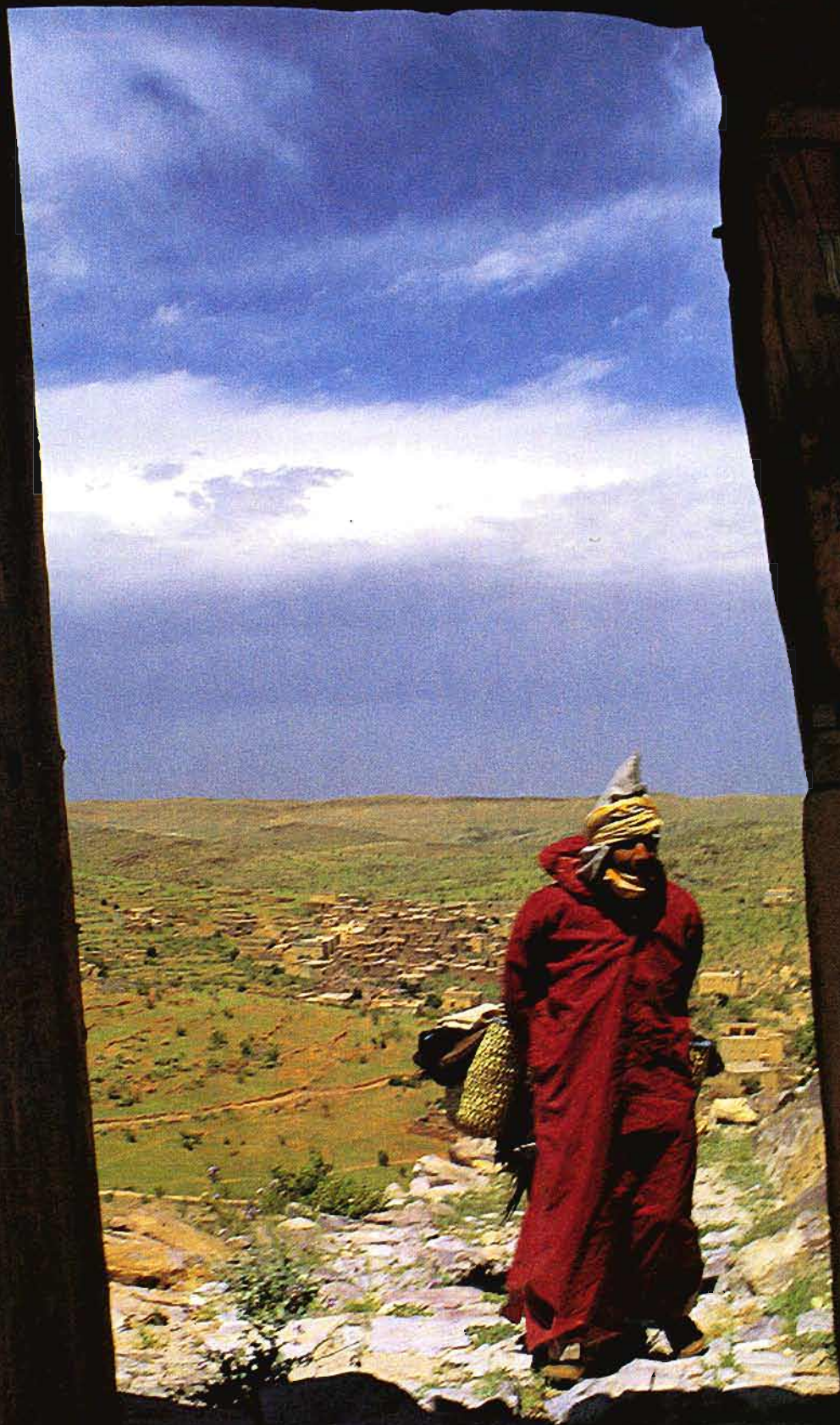
The *agadir* (plural *igoudar*), or fortress granary, is found across the Maghreb, but many of the most sophisticated ones are located in Morocco. They were built by the Berbers, Morocco's indigenous mountain inhabitants, to store and protect their food reserves, livestock, oil and other valuables. Granaries ensured a supply of staple produce when crops failed or supplies ran low, and afforded security against theft. In times of peace,

they also served as market places; in times of unrest, when tribal and clan conflicts might pitch one valley against another, they became bolt holes to which entire communities could take refuge. It was an age summed up by *The Times'* correspondent Walter Harris in 1921: "The whole life...was one of warfare and gloom. Every tribe had its enemies, every family had its blood-feuds, and every man his would-be murderer."

The *agadir* is a 1,000-year-old tradition, which began when the southern tribes were nomadic. From simple hiding places amid rocks developed chambers hollowed out of cliffs and caves. In turn came these great granaries with their villages huddled below. However, although these fortifications were, in many cases, a central feature of Berber life, today most are deserted.

For centuries, there was a distinct yet capricious division between *Bled es Makhzen*, or land of government, and *Bled es Siba*, land of "insolence" or "anarchy". This division was mirrored in the Arabised people of the plains and the Berber tribes of the mountains. Many granaries came to symbolise the Berbers' proud independence – their catchments were like little republics – so it was generally expedient for the government to suppress them whenever possible.





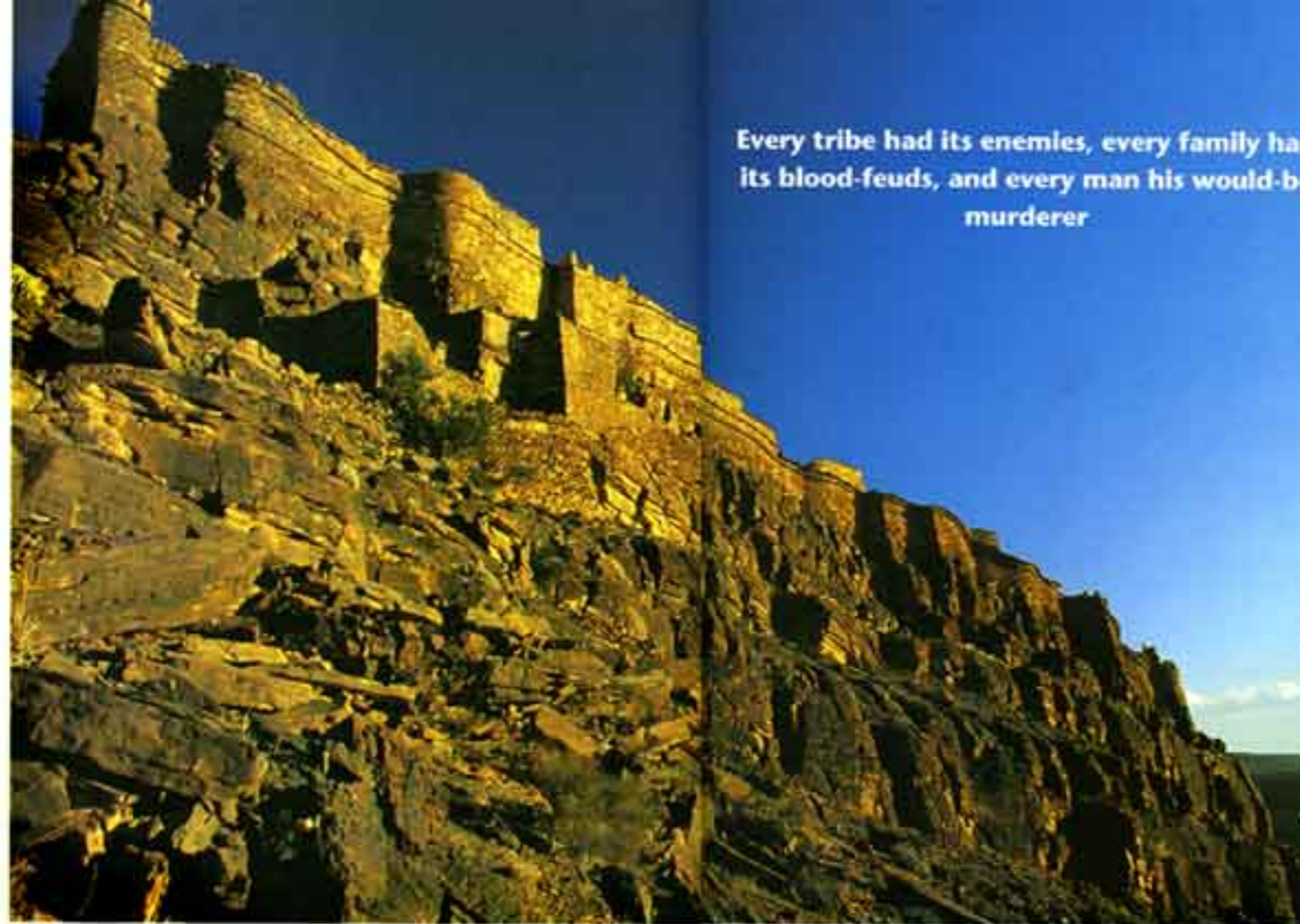


Following the treaty of Fès in 1912, Morocco became a French Protectorate, remaining one until 1956. Although in true tradition the Berbers strongly opposed colonial rule, by the 1930s their communities were living more harmoniously than ever before. Some traditions weakened as the economy developed, and as the need for the agadir diminished, so began their deterioration. Those few which remain, often in remote and spectacular locations, are compelling reminders of tougher times.

Inside Amtoudi agadir, you are led through a dark, inclined passageway. Emerging onto the open promontory, warrens of dilapidated chambers and cells thread past boulders and overhangs. Steps grooved out of single palm trunks provide access to about 70 cubicles. A walk along the compact summit reveals the remains of cisterns and water channels. Although Amtoudi ceased to be a working agadir approximately 50 years ago, its facade has survived largely intact. Its guardian estimates it is 1,000 years old, but its more likely age is a few hundred years.

Tucked further up the Boulgous Canyon about two kilometres away, lies Agalouil agadir. Approached through the palmerie, a meandering ribbon of palms and greenery twitching with tiny birds, it looms through a gap in the trees. Perched dramatically on a shaft of rock, it is a breathtaking spectacle. The local villagers warn that it is too dangerous to go inside and their warnings should be heeded. Crouching in the watchtower, peering through peepholes with dizzying views of the gorge below, it looks like the whole thing might readily slide off the precipice. Though its walls are unbreached, the passageways are filled with debris. Beams have collapsed along with parts of the roof. From its dense arrangement of cells hang broken doors amid shards of pottery and even the odd shoe.

Travelling north you follow a little-used dirt track through the Anti-Atlas towards the town of Tafraoute. The region boasts starkly beautiful landscapes: plateaux cut by gorges and skirted with scree, striated domes of rock, occasionally sprinkled with villages. Beyond Tarqa Khdayr, a telltale watchtower highlights one remote agadir hugging the cusp of a



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family, particularly in the Anti-Atlas where homes rarely kept more than a day's supply of food (sometimes this was an obligation) so that, as one French scholar was told, "...women do not waste the good of God". Here more than anywhere else, the cooperation and organisation that sustained these granaries is evident. For all the notorious chaos and anarchy of old Morocco, communal granaries were strictly regulated. The starting point was the *lah* (literally, "tablets"), a written constitution with typically 200 to 300 articles setting out the rights and duties of its users. This detailed everything from the use of weights and measures, to repairing the roof and even mortgaging cells.

Left: the chambers and hives of Amtoudi cling like swallows' nests to the sheer rock face. Below: Berbers call themselves *Imazighen* - "The free"

ridge. Chambers and hives cling like swallows' nests to its sheer face. Though tantalisingly close, the structure remains inaccessible to all but climbers now that many of the original walkways have crumbled away. The Atlas granaries assume a variety of forms, depending on the size of the community that used them. While the Anti-Atlas agadir played a formal role and may once have contained a miniature mosque, council chamber, reception room and blacksmith's workshop, as well as individual family storehouses, the much more simple structure of the High Atlas agadir might have served just a few

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families resident in a hamlet. They would not have necessarily resembled fortresses and may not even have had watchtowers. In regions where transhu-

mance was practised, space was allocated for enclosures for sheep and goats. The only characteristic they shared was their impregnable exterior.

In the Anti-Atlas, Morocco's southernmost range, the igoudar reached their apogee in capacity and sophistication. Families often had two or three cells at their disposal. Today, few remain intact and even fewer still function for their original purpose.

Tasguent, about 64 kilometres from Tafraoute, is exceptional. Its location and appearance are comparatively restrained, yet up close, its precise, mosaic-like stone walls take on a raw beauty. This agadir has long been known for its remarkable storage capacity and the complexity of its constitution. Beyond the rudimentary lubican and solid entrance, covered pas-

sages link a remarkable ensemble of three courtyards. One is long and narrow, another deep and shaft-like but all are open to the sky. Several hundred cubicles create a honeycomb effect in the granary. Secured by locked wooden doors, some are patterned with traditional symbols to ward off the evil eye. Projecting slabs (peculiar to the Anti-Atlas), act as steps to its higher cells.

Men from nearby villages still ride up on mules to deposit their sacks of provisions here. Cells would once have been opened almost daily by the head of each







Above: the granaries of the Anti-Atlas Mountains were the most sophisticated, but very few remain intact today

Matters not explicitly covered in the *lough* were decided in accordance with unwritten customary law. Decisions were backed by fines and sanctions.

There was a hierarchy too. Between four to seven trusted men of leading families formed a Council of Notables or Governors. Their oligarchic rule could verge on the tyrannical. Always above reproach, they often pocketed fines. Their meetings were secret and inviolable. Merely to inspect the *lough* required payment, the entire council's presence and the hospitality (a meal, for example) offered by the viewer. At the bottom of the hierarchy were the outsiders, such as travelling merchants, whose tenure was distinctly precarious.

*Tasguent* remains in use today but not with the feudal urgency of bygone times. When the old guardian shuffles onto the roof, he no longer scans the hills and valleys for brigands or marauding tribesmen, yet he still lives in a room deep within its walls, apparently reliant on water brought up by the villagers. There is just one engaging concession to modernity – a doorbell.

In 1932, Wyndham Lewis, the maverick artist and novelist, published a travelogue, *Filibusters in Barbary*. He visited

## FREEDOM FIGHTERS

The word "Berber" comes from an Arabic word – possibly derived from the Latin and before that ancient Greek – "barbari". It refers to the non-Latin speaking peoples of the Maghreb region of North Africa. Inhabiting the mountain regions and parts of the deserts, the Berbers are roughly divided into three groups according to dialect: those in the Rif region speak mainly Riffian; in the High-Atlas, they speak Chleuh; while the dominant group in the Middle Atlas speak Amazigh (also known as Tamazight or Braber). In the past, Berbers have incorporated pre-Islamic beliefs into their religion so creating a unique branch of Islam. It is no longer so easy to make a distinction between Berbers and Arabs and bilingualism has increased due to modern communications. Berbers call themselves "Imazigher" ("The free") and have long been renowned for fiercely protecting their freedom. The Berber women henna any man who reveals cowardice.

the *agadir* at Assads, making some pithy observations. For example, cats, it seems, were kept to control mice; of the *agadir*'s 100 or so cells, the middle ones were generally favoured; the lowest rows could be damp and the top ones likely to leak with the occupiers liable for repairs; and a hole in the ceiling could funnel grain through a neighbour's floor.

The tradition of building *igoudar* survived for 1,000 years. From simple hiding places amid rocks developed chambers hollowed out of cliffs, followed by the great granaries of the Anti-Atlas.

Tribal conquest saw the destruction of most of the granaries in the Djebel Sirwa area between the High and Anti-Atlas mountains. Just outside the village of Tizgui (10 kilometres south of Sirwa peak), a sheer, almost hollow cliff face is punctured with caves and cells that are still used for storage.

*Igoudar* are pertinent reminders of a harsh and precarious way of life. Thankfully for its inhabitants, things have now moved on from, to borrow Harris' words, "The Morocco that was".