

# INDEX ON CENSORSHIP

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# THE CLOAK

In the first chapter of his new novel, celebrated writer Ibrahim al Koni draws on the rich heritage of Arabic political allegory to explore totalitarianism

*Ibrahim al Koni (b 1948) is Libya's leading literary figure. A Tuareg from the south of the country, al Koni writes in a distinctly allegorical and classical Arabic style that draws heavily on the myths and folk traditions of the Sahara. The author of more than 70 titles – including novels, collections of short stories and aphorisms, and historical studies – al Koni has lived outside Libya for decades, first as a student at the Maxim Gorky Institute of Literature in Moscow, then as a journalist and diplomat in eastern Europe. For the past two decades, he has made Switzerland his home. His novels have won prizes across the world and his works have been translated into many languages.*

*'The Cloak' is the first chapter of al Koni's 2008 novel Al Waram (The Tumour). The work is a thinly-veiled allegory of the madness and tragedy of Muammar Gaddafi's rule. The central character of the novel, Asanay, refuses to relinquish the cloak of power that has been given to him by the chief – with bloody and disturbing results for all. Few novels have predicted the future as vividly as The Tumour. With his typical philosophical style, al Koni strips back the authoritarianism of his native land to show the fable and legend beneath.* Elliott Colla

Asanay awoke to find the leather cloak clinging to his body. He had fallen asleep on the mat while still wearing it. He was fastidious about removing the magnificent garment when sleep approached. He would fold it carefully before putting it away in its own sack. He would wipe off the specks of dust with a gentle brush of his hand. He would blow off the dirt with his mouth, or even lick it off with his tongue. He never stored it away without wrapping it first in a piece of woven silk. Never before today had his strength betrayed him like this. Never before had sleep conquered him while he still wore the cloak. Was it perspiration – relentless, sticky sweat – that poured out of his body when he surrendered to sleep? If sweat was the symptom, then water would be the antidote.

But could he use water to pry his body free without also ruining the splendid robe? Asanay shouted at his servants, raining insults on the bastard that desert tribes call 'sleep'.

A large man with thick features appeared in the doorway. The man bowed his naked head of black-and-white hair. 'Master,' he murmured.

Asanay wasted no time to lay into the man, 'How many times do I have to tell you? There is no master but our chief! If not for his generosity and beneficence, we would not even be here.'

The man's voice faded to a mumble, 'I beg your pardon, my...'. He caught himself before whispering the word. Asanay shouted, 'Bring me some water! Just look at what this nasty sweat has done to our master's robe!'

The slave made to leave, but Asanay stopped him, 'Wait! Do you think you can take it off without using water? Let's try.'

The man wheeled back. He grabbed the thick, furry collar and began to yank on it. He went on pulling until Asanay began to scream in pain, 'What are you doing, you wretch?! Are you trying to rip out my shoulder?'

The large man bent over until he was nearly laying across his master's shoulders. Asanay yelled again, 'Get away, you disgusting creature! Are you trying to suffocate me with your stench?'

The slave took a step back. His eyes spun around in their sockets like a chameleon's. He whispered, 'I'm afraid I can't do it, my lord!'

Asanay shot him a look of surprise, 'What are you saying, you dog?'

The man let out a loud breath, then stood erect. 'The robe has melted into your skin, my lord,' he muttered.

Asanay looked carefully at his arms. The leather patches had grafted themselves all the way to his wrist. The leather strips, braided with gold thread, had folded themselves into the flesh. Only the skin of his palms and fingers remained bare. With trembling fingers, he felt at his chest and discovered that there also the robe hugged at him. He tugged at the long leather tassels that

dangled from the collar and tore a cry of pain from his throat. The tassels, like the magnificent robe, had fused into the meat of his body. He called for witch doctors. There was no other choice if one hoped to escape such a wicked trap.

The witch doctor arrived. Wrapped from head to toe in black, his tall frame was grave and sombre. The man's skin was copper itself and his eyes like empty sockets.

Asanay put himself in the man's hands. The witch doctor circled around him again and again. He fondled and felt at the patched folds of living leather. He pulled at the fur collar around Asanay's throat. With long slender fingers, he traced the seams of the robe across Asanay's entire body. Then, at last, he exhaled with a loud breath and sat down cross-legged in front of the afflicted man. Even before the other man began to speak, Asanay could read the ruin in his eyes.

'I must confess,' the witch doctor finally sighed. 'It's a peculiar kind of magic.'

Asanay stared at his face for minutes, wrestling with his sense of desperation. 'How does this confession concern me?'

The man's vacant stare didn't budge. His body never moved. In an absent tone, he merely commented, 'All I meant to say was that I've never seen such magic in the oases before.'

Asanay fell silent. From time to time, he stole glances at his companion while fiddling with the leather scraps of his skin. He finally opened his mouth. 'Did someone do this to me?' The emptiness in the witch doctor's eyes fell away to reveal a haze behind them. 'I can say with confidence that this was done to you deliberately. But what I cannot tell you is whether the hand behind this was human.'

Asanay studied the witch doctor for minutes. At last, he smiled. 'What do you mean?'

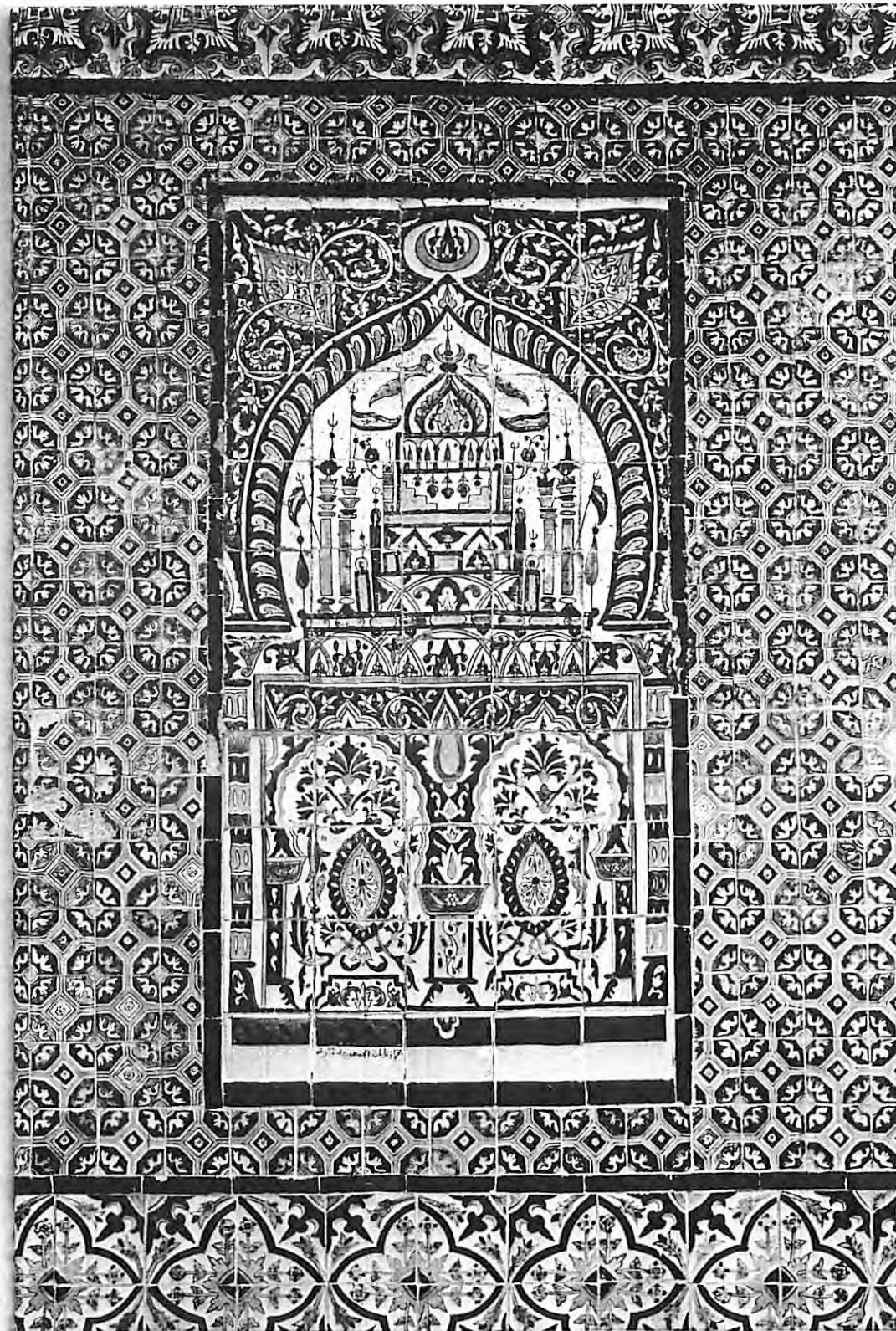
The witch doctor did not hesitate. 'There are many different kinds of schemes and spells. Those hatched by men are the least of them.'

Curiosity twinkled in Asanay's eye. 'What are you saying?'

This time the witch doctor took his time before answering. 'The schemes of the creator are a thousand times worse than those of his creations.'

Asanay fell silent. Aloud, the witch doctor asked, 'Have you ever done something to anger the jinn?'

Puzzled, Asanay studied the man. Then he lowered his head and answered, 'I don't remember doing anything to them on purpose. But when the fates make a man a leader of the people, he will eventually make a mistake. He will inevitably cross the jinn, whether he does so deliberately or not.'



*Tiled wall outside a mosque in Tripoli, Libya  
Credit: Liquid Light/Alamy*

The witch doctor muttered, 'True. But you should try to remember something specific.'

Asanay looked for compassion from the man, like someone awaiting punishment. 'I committed no sin.'

But the witch doctor was unrelenting. 'All of us sin. Not just once, but time and again. We sin every time we take a step.'

Asanay smiled painfully without raising his eyes from the mat. 'I told you that I don't remember committing any sin against the heavens. As God is my witness – I've done no wrong. Unless you call pleasing women in bed a sin.' He laughed, 'Am I being punished for that?'

The witch doctor didn't laugh at the joke. The sockets of his eyes filled again with emptiness. 'Don't talk about your sleeping with women. Tell me about love. Have you been in love?'

A laugh escaped from Asanay's lips. 'According to desert customs, what's the difference? Aren't they the same thing?'

The witch doctor's reply was icy. 'Not at all. To sleep with women is not to love. Not by our customs, at least.'

Asanay looked at him in disbelief. 'Ah, yes. Now I remember. Your type calls this sort of thing "appetite".'

'Very good. Now, have you ever been in love?'

Asanay's nervous silence dragged on until a nasty whisper came out of his mouth, 'Never. No, that's not right. I have love. I have loved the chief's cloak more than anything else in the world.' He snickered, then began to laugh so hard that the servants came running from around the house. With a flick of his hand, he told them to go away. As Asanay's fingers wiped the tears from his eyes, the other man began to speak with the voice of an oracle who could only pronounce the truth. 'Whoever truly loves a thing becomes part of it.'

Asanay raised his head. Daunted, he looked at the man sitting across from him. The witch doctor repeated the phrase again, then corrected himself. 'I mean, he who loves a thing more than he should becomes part of that thing.'

Asanay stared at the man for minutes. He began to notice how emaciated the old copper-brown man was. Bones protruded from every joint in his body. Then he finally glimpsed the milky whiteness of the man's eyes. They were the eyes of a man whose companions think he can see, but never realise he only ever looks out onto the void.

Asanay said, 'I don't want my enemies to take pleasure in my trouble.'

The witch doctor's empty eyes fixed on him as he mumbled, 'If you don't want to give your enemies reason to rejoice, you must make a sacrifice. You must give up something valuable. The most valuable thing you can offer.'

Afraid to hear what that would be, Asanay asked, 'Offer up something valuable?'

A slight smile glimmered on the lips of the witch doctor. He cleared his throat. 'My lord, we will never be free as long as we have neglected to give up those things we hold most dear. Those things we love more than we ought to.'

Asanay muttered, 'What do you mean?'

The witch doctor answered with a question, 'Why not take off the cloak?' 'Take it off?'

When the witch doctor spoke again, all human warmth had quit his voice. 'It is far easier for us to willingly give up a possession than to have it snatched away by force.'

A look of disdain sketched itself on Asanay's lips. 'Am I listening to a witch doctor, or a soothsayer?'

'When it suits him, a witch doctor may borrow a soothsayer's tongue. And vice versa, my lord. Don't they say that we are both moulded from the same desert soil?'

'And don't they also say that it is never right to trade one's tongue for another?'

The witch doctor sat quietly for minutes. When he spoke, his question shocked his companion. 'Does my lord love the cloak too much?' Asanay repressed a wicked laugh and thought he might as well answer questions with questions. 'Is there a creature in this great desert who does not love this cloak with all his heart?'

The witch doctor smiled enigmatically before responding, 'The danger is not that we might love a gift. It is that we might love the gift more than the giver.'

'What do you mean?'

'Our downfall resides not in loving the cloak you wear. But in loving it more than the person to whom it belongs – the person who gave it to you.'

Worry spread across Asanay's face. He now began to speak like someone defending himself before a crowd of accusers. 'We express our gratitude to the giver by loving his gift.'

'Gratitude for a gift is one thing, my lord, but love is something else.'

'How do wise men expect us to love someone while holding back our appreciation for his beneficence?'

A look of severity flashed across the witch doctor's face, and the bones of his brow began to protrude a little more. 'We express our love for the giver by our indifference toward the gift.' His voice was defiant.

'Bullshit!' Asanay laughed. He choked back more laughter and murmured, 'Are you telling me I should give away my cloak to one of the local oasis layabouts? Is that really the best way for me to thank the chief for his gift?'

The witch doctor stubbornly continued. 'The only way to express our love is to relinquish the dearest thing we hold in our hand.'

Asanay looked at the man with fury in his eyes. 'Do you love the chief?'  
'Of course.'

'Would you offer him your son as token of your love?'

For a moment, the witch doctor said nothing. He closed eyes already hidden behind pale clouds. 'Children are not things that can be held in the hand. We do not have the right to sacrifice them as tokens of love.'

Asanay exhaled with relief. Intoxicated by the victory he sensed was near, he asked, 'Really?'

The witch doctor stopped him with a wave of his hand. 'In spite of this, I would not hold back anything, not even children, if I was sure that the chief required such a sacrifice.'

'What? Are you saying the chief requires a sacrifice?'

The witch doctor hesitated for a moment. 'I only said that I would not hold anything back if I were certain ...'

'What does that mean?'

'Only what I said, my lord. Children are the one kind of creature in this desert that should never be sacrificed. It is we who should sacrifice ourselves for their sake. Only if we were certain that the chief required it would we be justified in making such a horrible sacrifice.'

Asanay held his tongue. He thought it over for a while before he finally spoke. 'I never thought that the chief needed my love. If I were certain ...'

His voice disappeared. The witch doctor sighed. 'I'm not talking about an exchange of this for that. We are obliged to love the chief, not because he loves us, but because it's our duty to love him.'

Asanay mumbled absently, 'I may not have always known how to show my gratitude, but I've never once been ungrateful toward him.'

'To be grateful is to show respect in exchange for a gift. It's never the same as love.'

A silence fell over the two men. Then Asanay shouted, like he'd just made a precious discovery, 'Very well. Do you want the truth? The truth is I was never once certain whether the chief's cloak was a sign of love at all.'

The witch doctor held his tongue. He bowed forward until his veil touched the mat. 'The cloak is merely a jacket. An empty piece of clothing

to put on and take off. It is not the giver of the clothing who fills it, but the one to whom it has been given.'

Asanay leaned forward and whispered, 'Explain.'

'The jacket is nothing but a garment made of leather. It is neither good nor bad. Whatever power it has comes solely from wearing it. And what matters is how you wear it.'

Asanay turned his face away. 'I have only used its power to do what had to be done.'

The witch doctor looked sceptically at his companion. 'That's what you say.'

Asanay glared at him and shouted, 'Explain yourself!'

The witch doctor hesitated for a moment. He kept his head bowed low as he spoke. 'I cannot do so, my lord, until you grant me permission to speak freely and without fear of reprisal.'

Asanay looked curiously at the man. 'Since when do witch doctors in the desert go asking for permission to speak?'

'My lord, do not forget that we are not in the desert.'

'Isn't this oasis an integral part of the great desert?'

'Not at all, my lord. Not at all. Ever since this oasis was surrounded by a wall, it became something by itself. It used to be part of the desert, but now it's become detached.'

Asanay's voice was puffed up when he spoke, 'Walls? Since when were squat piles of mud brick the same as mountain ranges of stone?'

'Just because the walls are made of mud does not mean they fail to perform their function.'

Enraged, Asanay rose. 'Are you insinuating it was wrong to build it?'

The witch doctor held his tongue for a minute before daring to answer. 'Of course. It is always a mistake to create obstacles and barriers.'

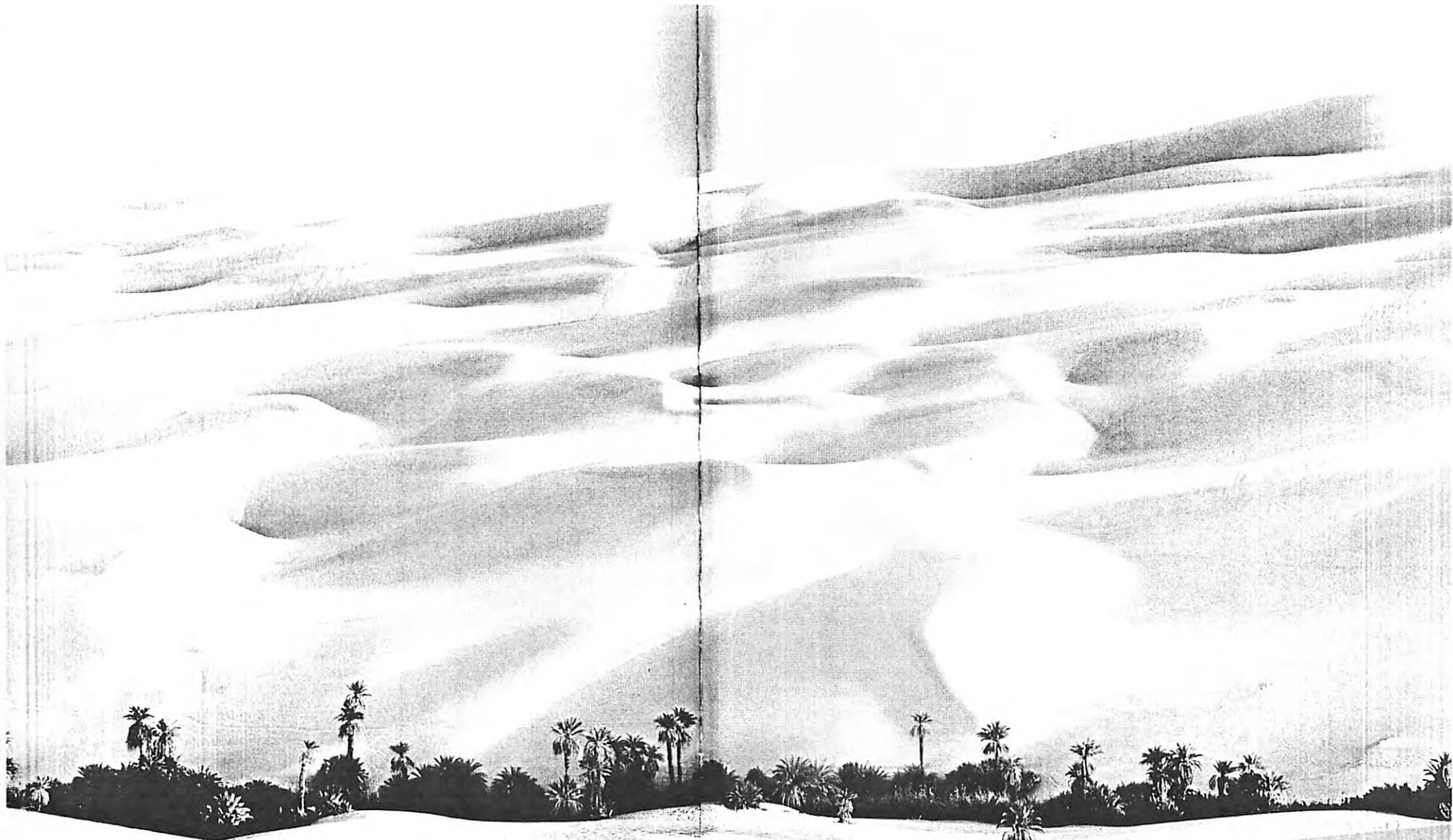
'My God. Are you being serious?'

'Were it not for this sin, the cloak would not have led my Lord astray, nor would it have become the topic that sits on every tongue.'

Asanay grumbled in his seat. He looked at his companion as if he now saw him for the first time. 'What are you referring to?'

The witch doctor's eyes were emptier than ever. 'I thought you'd given me permission to speak freely.'

A silence fell over them again. Asanay finally spoke. 'Of course. I gave you freedom to speak, but not so you would fill my ears with the slander that sits on the tongues of my enemies.'



*Um el Ma oasis and sand dunes, Libya*

*Credit: Konrad Wotho/LOOK Die Bildagentur der Fotografen GmbH/Alamy*

The witch doctor curled himself up tight. Not knowing what to do with his hands, he began to rub them together. He let out a moan, then spoke. 'The truth is I don't know where to begin.'

Asanay said nothing – perhaps so as to rise above the level of chitchat, perhaps to snatch some insight from the mouth of a wise man.

The witch doctor finally spoke. 'I do not need to remind you, my lord, about the wicked qualities of the robe, for its story is known by every tongue in the desert. It was for this reason that our ancestors shunned it and abstained from using it. The most powerful weapon they had against its effect was to show it indifference.'

Asanay clung to his silence. The witch doctor went on. 'Those who shunned it likened it to a special kind of passion which, if sated, would consume you and if held in restraint, would protect you. So, my lord, which of these things have you done with your treasure?'

Asanay stared at the witch doctor with a terrifying sort of curiosity. The man had suddenly turned into a beast of fables and legends before Asanay's eyes. The witch doctor finally spoke again. 'You should have taken the jacket and put it to good use. Instead, the jacket took possession of you and used you in the worst possible way.'

Asanay began to get up, his face trembling. The witch doctor noticed the malice in his eyes and blurted out, 'Have I overstepped your indulgence?'

Asanay roared, 'I did not give you permission to speak because I wanted to listen to you pour the whispers and lies of enemies into my ears. Watch yourself.'

Asanay now leapt to his feet, his body shaking with rage. The witch doctor stood as well. The two men stood facing one another in silence. The witch doctor made to leave, but the robe's owner caught him before he could get away. 'You are deluded to think I would give up what I hold in my hand.'

Asanay tugged fitfully at the hem of the cloak to conceal his anger – but the pain was too much. He turned pale and began to moan uncontrollably. □

*Translated by Elliott Colla*

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