

Ancient Wisdom meets Modern Leadership
to Inspire a Fresh Path Forward

THE **nomadic** MINDSET

NEVER SETTLE...for TOO LONG

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Tea Ceremony**

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Indulge in the Tea Ceremony

Gathering, sharing, and clarifying information about your journey is vital to safeguard the road ahead, and that comes from developing rapport and relationships with others, all accomplished over a good old cup of tea or (coffee).

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***“Tea and sugar are more
important than food”***

– AISSA DERHEM



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It's chilly, by Moroccan standards (around 5°C), as our group sets off in the early morning from Brahim Tahero's Maison d'hôtes Nomades in an old, rickety 4×4 Jeep. We're driving through the Stony Sahara towards the Atlas Mountains. Our group consists of Hicham (my photographer), Salem (my guide and translator), Mohamed (our driver), and me. We look a little like the Indiana Jones team, dressed in traditional Saharan nomadic clothes of long, flowing blue, white, or black kaftans and turbans, setting off to find the mysterious golden nugget of information that will lead us to the next nugget and then the next till we find the qualities of the nomadic mindset.

Our first stop is the grocery store to purchase welcome gifts: a box of solid, individual, cone-shaped sugar and boxes of green tea. These are the staples of life, Aissa Derhem, a Berber mathematician and social activist (President of the Dar Si Hmad NGO), would tell me later, "Tea and sugar are more important than food."

The Stony Sahara, as the nomads call it, is a grand, open space full of stones, vegetation, and desert that divides the vast, expansive golden sand-duned Sahara Desert we normally see in pictures and movies. Our mission today is to search for nomads and their tents or stone houses.

Our rocky, bumpy experience through this rich landscape reminds me of something I heard on the way to the Maasai Mara in Kenya, "you are having a free African massage." Truly, that is what it is like.

Mohamed hunches over the wheel, driving madly like a Formula 1 driver on a mission, twisting and turning to avoid rocks or to turn onto what may or may not be a road. At the same time, his eyes scan the horizon for nomads and tents. These nomads are true multitaskers with the Eyes of a Hawk, searching the horizon.

“I can see much clearer in the desert

Suddenly, the skies open up and we get a downpour, but it isn't long before it dries up and the clouds separate gracefully, allowing the sunshine to appear. This is my first time in the

Sahara and a dream come true. The light is brilliantly clear here without pollution, which allows you, literally, to see much clearer with less stress and strain. The nomads say, "I can see much clearer in the desert." I now understand why.

After travelling for two hours, the team approaches the stone, two-room house of Ali Bellini, a herder, and part of his family, in the middle of the Stony Sahara. He has three wives who live in separate locations with their respective five children.

Traditionally, when you arrive at a nomad's tent, whether the visit is expected or not, you are automatically welcomed. Ali greets us as the nomads do, with

a handshake and then a lean in to the side of the head, touching heads lightly and switching to the other side. Generally, in traditional Arab cultures, and in this case the nomadic culture, the women are not seen, and only men do the greeting. You do not touch or interact with female nomads in Muslim Morocco, especially in the Sahara, unless there is another male relative with you or them. However, if you go further southwest in Morocco, women are freer and will greet you. Following the initial greeting, the gift giving transaction of green tea and sugar takes place.

Ali leads us into a room where Ali and his family entertain, eat, and sleep. We sit on the floor on colourful, handwoven ethnic carpets and pillows that line the edge of the tent. An open space in the middle allows a few low tables for the food and making of tea.

Now the tea ceremony begins. In many nomadic cultures, and also western cultures, the drinking of tea, coffee, or another drink is an important organisational or cultural tradition. Think of the British, Japanese, and Chinese tea-drinking traditions. This is how the Berbers have conducted business for centuries. My Berber friend, Aissa Derhem, explained that “green tea was a revolution” that began during the Crimean War of 1856 by the English traders who brought tea to Essaouira, and the caravans of Berbers/nomads transported and traded it across the Sahara and sub-Saharan countries. Before that, he believed the Berbers drank camel milk.

green tea was a revolution ”

The Tea Ceremony: The Formula for Business and Social Meetings

The way to “good business transactions is through tea,” Aissa once told me. The tea ceremony is all about gaining clarity, gathering information, and getting to know each other. It is about building confidence, gaining respect leading to trust, and getting a sense of direction. This is why the Berbers say, “social or business transactions can be dangerous without tea.” Tea builds bonds. The choice of Tea Master is very important as he modulates the ceremony (like a leader, host, facilitator, or mediator) to prolong the drinking as long as possible.

Interestingly, I was told that here, often you start with the bad news and end with the good news. In western society, it’s more common to use the “sandwich technique” (good news, bad news, good news). The nomadic process starts with the pain/problem of the client, customer, or internal organisational challenge, then follows with a negotiation and positive solution. Rushing the informational gathering process is not a good sign, and the nomads love to take time. Taking

time is vital. There's a Berber proverb that says, "you can't put the whole camel in the pot at one time, only one piece at a time" (*Yat s yat urd yat fyat*: one by one not one on the other). Salem once shared this with me, and it means one step at a time, or in this case, one cup of tea at a time.

Modern meetings, especially in the west, are often transactional: too fast and straight to the point, without taking the time to create nuance and build rapport, the relationship, and trust. The getting-to-know-you phase of negotiation is important not only for nomads, but also for constructive business practices and building alliances.

We sit on the floor, without tables, in an open, informal, circular environment so we can observe each other. This is an old tradition and is still done in some parts of the world; however, today, business meetings are more traditionally western-designed with a table and chairs and the leader sitting at the head of the table or in the centre.

Making the Tea

In Morocco, the tea ceremony consists of the following components:

- talking
- brewing the tea
- drinking and eating

I watch in delight as Ali prepares one cup at a time. As Aissa says,

Not everyone can make tea. You need a good tea master and one who will make the quality last and adapt to the people who are drinking fast or slow. That is why you have to make the first one and then the next and the next.

For the nomads in Morocco, making the tea is an art form, and you want to savour the experience. You need to be practiced and proficient at making sure the foam on the top of the tea is light and frothy and the colour of the tea in the cups is not murky but clear. Many people think of Moroccan tea as the mint tea served globally. That only happens in northern Morocco. In the south, they drink green tea.

While the tea is being made, overflowing plates of fresh dates, almonds, and other nuts are placed on another small table.

The tea tray traditionally has three legs, and each person is given three glasses, not cups, of tea in small glasses that look a bit bigger than a shot glass. (There is significance to the number three, which I'll explain in a bit.)

Ali lines the tea glasses up on the tray. A kettle sits next to him on a burner, and he pours water into a small tea pot. I watch him break off a chunk of sugar from the cone of sugar and stuff it into the little pot. Just watching this makes my sugar level shoot up. Interestingly, in the west, you cater to individual preferences; here, everyone is the same or equal. You wouldn't interfere with the tea master by saying you don't like sugar or please put less sugar in the pot—unless you were diabetic, and then you tell the tea master. That would be a big social faux pas. Don't mess with the tea master.

Then begins the dance of pouring the tea in up and down motions, like a wave, from different heights above the cup. Ali has a great eye for the distance and doesn't spill the tea. The first cup is the darkest, so he pours that into another tea glass, and he keeps “cleaning” and “clearing” by transferring the tea from one cup to the next. This apparently cleans the tea so you can see through it. This process goes on for some time until he feels happy with the clarity of the tea. “Light foam on top and clear tea,” Mohamed Billa says, is the perfect tea.

This cleaning, clearing, and getting it just right happens while the tea master chats away. It can take a few minutes to get the first cup of tea right, depending on the proficiency of the tea master. This tea-making process is a good metaphor for a good negotiation or conversation, using what Mohamed Billa told me, “light at the end and clarity fulfilled.” It is about cleaning, clearing, and cutting away the extraneous information and slowly getting to the core of the solution. Once the first cup of tea is complete, the whole process starts again.

*light at the
end and clarity
fulfilled* ””

As I watch this ceremony, I can't help but think of these cups of tea, symbolically. Each cup of tea can be likened to an individual conversation with one person, or a separate idea in a shareholder meeting or speech to your employees. Each cup, thought, or idea must be clean, clear, and have a light froth. That is why you are the tea master . . . a leader.

Drinking the Tea

The first cup is bitter as death, the second is mild as life, and the third is sweet as love.

—Saharan proverb

Ali explains the significance of the three cups. Cup one is strong, cup two is mild, and cup three is light.

As the tea master artfully prepares the tea, I find myself reflecting on how these three cups of tea relate to negotiation. The first cup sets the direction of

the negotiation—the big picture or the reason why you are there (the problem or a positive outcome you want to reach). The second cup, after you have developed more rapport and respect, brings you closer to a solution by removing or solving more of the obstacles standing in the way. The third cup can represent the final decision or the few obstacles or hanging issues that might be solved at another sitting.

Regardless of what the meeting is about, developing respect, solidarity, and the relationship is vital to the process. This has been a tradition for hundreds of years with nomads and is still alive today.

The Pivotal Point of Asking Questions

Before our arrival at Ali’s tent, Salem told me he would indicate when I could ask my questions. As I sit and observe the body language and listen to the conversations in Arabic, I can see the context is being established between all parties in a relaxed social gathering. It is highly doubtful this conversation would have happened if Salem and the team were not there.

“You can ask
your questions
now

After a while, Salem motions to me and says, “You can ask your questions now.”

Now is my moment. Comfortably, I sit with my notebook and pen in hand and turn to Ali and begin to ask him questions about leadership, change, building trust, what is important to a nomad, and more. At one point, he asks me, “What similarities did I find with the different nomadic cultures I had visited for my research?” I smile for a moment and then answer (I ask you, reader, to suspend your curiosity until Part 3: Discovery, when those similarities will be revealed as the qualities of the nomadic mindset.).

Sharing a Meal

Now it was nearing lunchtime. Earlier, Brahim had his cook prepare a picnic lunch for us to take along on our trip. Salem says we will stay and share our lunch with Ali and his three-year-old son. Our offer is gratefully accepted, and one of Ali’s wives prepares a delicious camel-maize couscous.

After spending a fruitful few hours with Ali, we say our goodbyes with meaningful smiles. We shake hands, touch heads, and climb back into the 4×4 Jeep. Mohamed, the mad Formula 1 driver, takes off, scanning the horizon for another nomad’s tent. The same, but different, process starts all over again with another nomadic family.

The Building Blocks (Qualities) of Relationships

All this sharing, respect, trust, developing rapport, reaching clarity, and gathering information is important, not only in organisations, but in life in general. These are the primary building blocks or qualities of forming strong and impactful relationships and developing partnerships—or not. Sadly, it's easy to lose these building blocks, and it happens so often in cultures today. When we allow ourselves to indulge deeply in gossip, hearsay, the news, political debates, or fake news, we often lose sight of these qualities and our direction—our moral compass. If an entire organisation has lost some, if not all, these qualities, it will most certainly lead to malfunction and poor performance.

Have you ever entered an important meeting where the chairperson—someone you did not know—immediately launched into the business of the day? What did you previously know about them? How did this affect your desire to do business? Now, compare this to a meeting that starts more casually or is led by someone you've already established a trust connection or relationship with. How are the two meetings different? How are you different? *But Kevin*, you say, *I have no time for that nonsense in this fast world of today*. I ask you to seriously think about that statement. What might you be missing, and what could you possibly gain?

There is a better way! I recommend you take a page out of the nomadic book and pour some tea (or your drink of choice). Even when time is in short supply, spend some time (a long time) gathering information, reaching clarity, and developing rapport. I guarantee it'll strengthen your ties, relationships, and partnerships, which will strengthen you, your teams/tribes/clans, client meetings, and organisation overall.



LEADERSHIP RETHINK

Essential nomadic leadership qualities to embody:

Rapport

Relationships

Taking time

Information

Cleaning

Clarity

Precision

Respect

Trust

Transference

Culture

Qualities

Building blocks

Partnerships

FINAL QUESTIONS

1. In most western cultures, it is typical practice to launch directly into business after minor pleasantries. How do you go about reaching clarity? How powerful might it be if you spent time building the relationship first? What might be the advantages and disadvantages for you?
2. Think about the way you gather information or do business. How might you do this differently in the future?
3. How important or useful to you is the concept of the power of three in your leadership and organisation?

“Having the right mindset is one of the most important success factors of great and inspiring leaders. The Nomadic Mindset is a necessary read for leaders of all levels traversing today’s disruptive environments.”

Marshall Goldsmith – Thinkers 50 Ranking: #1 executive coach and the only two-time #1 leadership thinker in the world

Kevin Cottam believes the mindsets of the world and leadership is becoming increasingly narrow and inward focused; if we are to survive, thrive, and flourish in Industry 4.0, we need to expand our mindsets. He proposes the path towards an expanded mindset can be found through embracing the qualities of ancient nomadic wisdom that have changed, adapted, and survived through the test of time and, in many cases, may have been forgotten.

“100% of executives interviewed said they needed more people with a Nomadic Mindset.”

The Nomadic Mindset, a metaphor for “the movement of the mind,” takes you on a journey by drawing upon and vividly sharing a wide range of exhilarating real-life stories and experiences of the nomads in Mongolia, the Maasai in Kenya, the Berbers in Southern Morocco as well as executive conversations and case studies.

This rare, fresh back-to-the-future leadership book will incite you to rethink your mindset and raise your awareness of two other mindsets: the builder and settler. All three mindsets will give you insights on how you can better lead an interconnected, innovative, and engaged organisation. Look inside to discover why you should learn about the nomadic mindset and what the nomads know that you don’t.

“A tour de force of wisdom: alive, insightful, inspirational, intriguing, timely”