

Aisha's household

Scholarly sources:

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Meet Aisha

Aisha was a fifteen-year-old girl living in a Berber village in 2007. She lived in a household that was her entire world. However, something in that household was about to change.

We'll get to that in a minute, but first let's learn a little bit about her world before the news of the possible change took place.



Aisha's world

Aisha and her Berber tribe lived in the Atlas Mountains in the North African country of Morocco. The tribe lived there since 3,000 BC, and some say even earlier.

The name "Berber" was given to them by the Romans when they ruled that part of the world. The Berbers actually call themselves "Imazighen," meaning "the free."



Aisha's household, like most households among the Berbers, was Sunni Muslim. Morocco was considered a moderate Islamic country in the twenty-first century, and their king was more in favor of women's rights than Islamic rulers in other countries. The king also began a long period of reforms in 1999 to ensure that Moroccan children could get an education.

However, Aisha's Berber tribe was not quite ready for all the reforms. Aisha left school when she was twelve to help her large household.



Aisha's village was located along a steep mountainside. She was related to most people in her village.

To get along in Morocco, the villagers had to know a number of languages. They had their own Berber language, but the official written language was Classical Arabic, which was used in government documents and business. They also spoke a dialect called Moroccan Arabic. And to further confuse the matter, the Berbers spoke French when they went to cities. French had been the official language when Morocco was under the partial control of France during the early twentieth century. French was still the language used in higher education in Morocco.



Aisha lived in a large, three-story house made of adobe clay in her mountain village. The house included a stable in the back for their many animals such as cows, sheep, goats, and donkeys.



Aisha lived with her extended family. The household included her four brothers, two sisters, her father's mother and father, and four uncles with their wives and children.

The household was the most important thing in her Berber village. The saying that everyone recited was, "I'm going to work for my family and make it possible for everyone to live better." It was all about putting one's own interests aside for the good of the whole household.



It was for this reason that some of the young men were sent away. See, the rocky, mountainous land that the villagers lived on did not produce enough crops to meet all the needs of the people. So some of the young men were sent to cities in Morocco or Spain or France to work for wages and send most of these wages home.

This had been the case with Aisha's oldest and favorite brother Belaid.

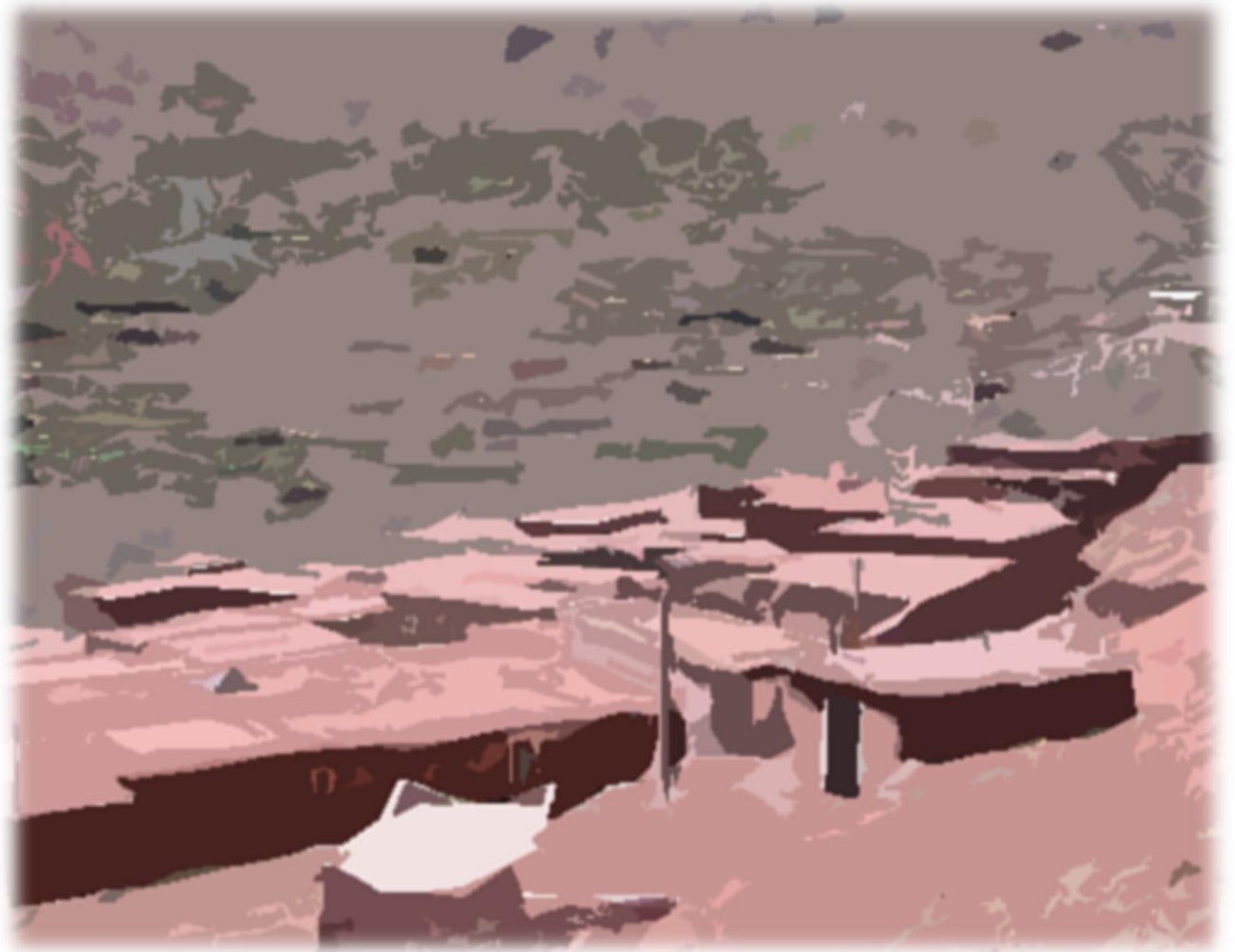


Belaid had been sent to the Spanish city of Algeciras to work for nine months each year in a hotel kitchen. He'd done this now for four years and always sent most of his paycheck home so the household could live somewhat comfortably.



The household always waited until Belaid got home from Spain to begin the summer tradition of eating the evening meal on the rooftop. It was such an exciting event to look out at the mountains and down on the village.

Tomorrow was the day he would return. Aisha and her sisters went to the rooftop that afternoon to prepare it for Belaid's homecoming.



The homecoming

The next day, Aisha woke up at the first signs of sunrise through her window. She could hear the sounds of a crackling radio and hushed voices of the household members getting up below. She also heard the sounds of the village—the cattle lowing, chickens clucking, dogs barking, and the distant call to prayer from the canyon mosque.

She looked out at her beautiful village and couldn't help but think how grateful her brother would be to see home again.



Aisha got dressed and as she came down the stairs she could smell the spiced coffee, henna, mint tea, and smoke from her kitchen oven.



As she entered the kitchen,
Grandfather Mohammed and the men
were just finishing a breakfast of
boiled eggs and couscous.



As in most Berber households, the oldest male organized the outdoor work. Grandfather was giving the daily orders—who would care for the sheep and goats, who would check the irrigation ditches, who would work in the fields, and who would carry up fodder for the cattle.



Also as in most Berber families, the oldest female organized the work inside. Grandmother Fatima was measuring out ingredients from her storage jars on the loft and giving the women instructions on who would get what servings for breakfast.



When breakfast was over, Aisha followed the other women outside to the mountain path. They sang songs that echoed through the valley as they carried fodder and water and collected wood for the oven.

She felt so content, so happy. Tonight would be a great feast!



In the afternoon, the women sat down to gossip as they mashed argan seeds to extract the oil. Argan oil was used as a medicine and a cooking ingredient where people drizzled it on salads or used it as a dip for bread.

"You've heard that Gwafa is visiting in the village," said Izza, one of Aisha's cousins.

Aisha had not heard.

"Is he still trying to come back home?" asked another cousin.

See, Gwafa had left the village to live in the Moroccan city of Marrakech some years ago, and was unhappy there.



When Aisha finished her work with the argan seeds, she went to join two of her aunts who were pounding dirt out of clothes on the banks of a creek. She asked them if they'd heard about *Gwafa*.

"He always wants to come back home," responded one aunt, "but he made the poor decision years ago to leave. Now he has a wife and four kids in Marrakech and there's nothing he can do about it."

The second aunt said it might be nice if they at least invited him to dinner while he was visiting.



Aisha looked out into the valley. She remembered Gwafa, the kind shepherd, from her childhood. He had been such a happy young man—that is until he was sent away to Marrakech to earn wage labor for his household.

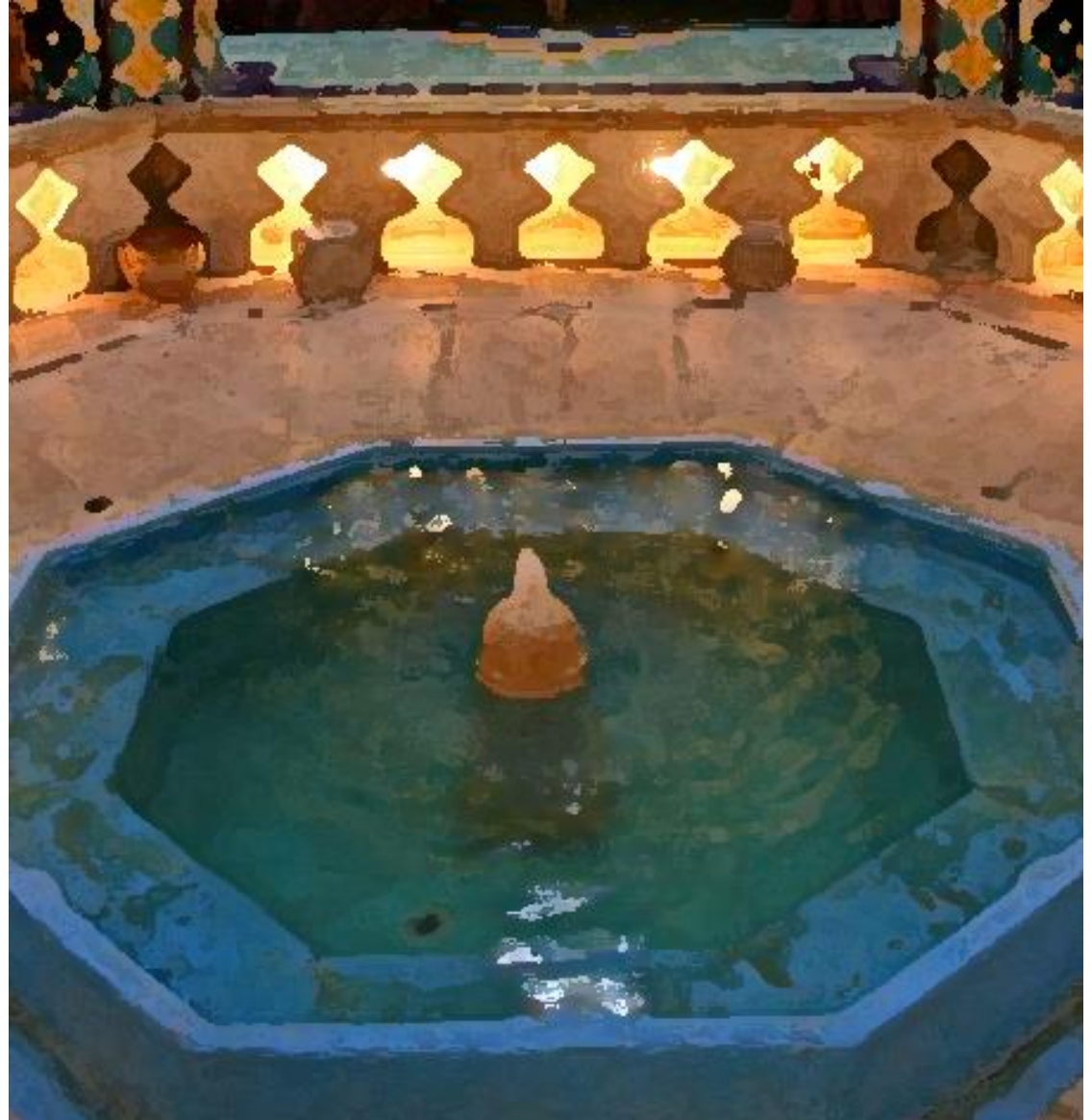


Aisha had been to Marrakech many times. It was not far from her home. But she didn't know what could have lured Gwafa away permanently from his home village.



The women returned home before sunset. They were told that Belaid had arrived, but that he was getting prepared to attend Mosque with the men.

The women took a steam bath inside their compound and then went to help prepare the dinner.



At sunset Aisha heard the call to prayer echoing from the roof of the mosque deep in the canyon: "Come to pray. God is great. There is no god but God. Come to pray."



She watched Grandmother Fatima supervise the final touches for the dinner. Aisha was assigned to prepare the argan oil they had just extracted from the seeds today. This would be made into a dip for the bread.



In an hour Grandfather Mohammed announced that the men had returned from prayer and they were all to meet for the meal on the rooftop. He also said that they had brought back *Gwafa* with them.

Aisha rushed up the stairs to greet her favorite brother.



After the greetings, everyone sat on carpets around the low table. Aisha noticed that Belaid and Gwafa were in the middle of a quiet, but intense, discussion.



A rooftop fire was lit. The women put out the
couscous, meat, tea, vegetables and bread.

Prayers were said.



Grandmother Fatima gave the loaf of bread to Grandfather Mohammed. He broke it into smaller pieces and handed them around the table. All dipped their bread in the argan oil mixture.



When everyone was full and had chatted about their daily activities, Belaid announced that he needed to discuss something with the family.

Grandfather gave him the floor.



"I realize," began Belaid, "that some of you will think what I am about to say is disrespectful to Grandfather and to the household, but I feel it must be said."

All listened intently.

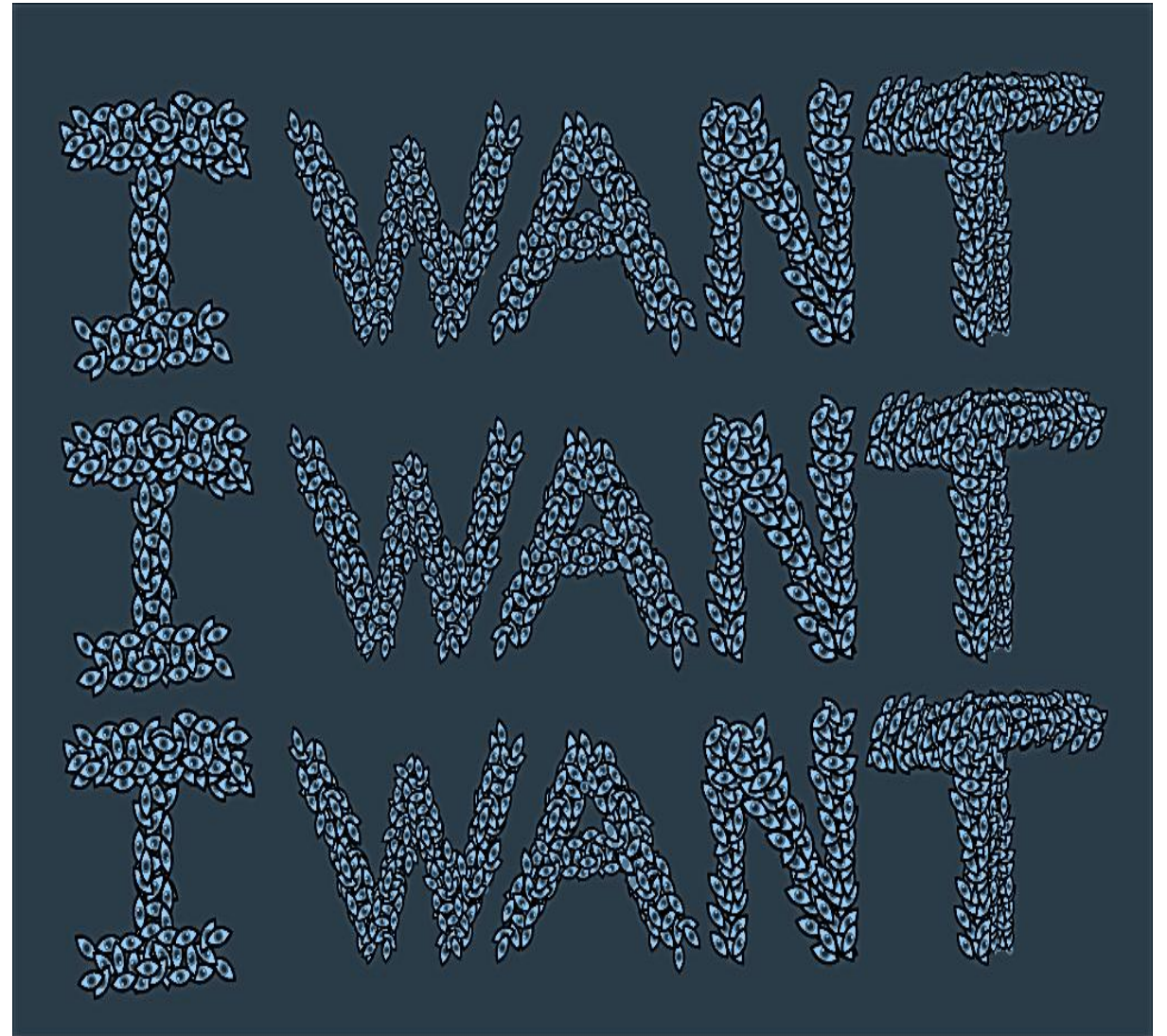
"For four years now I have been sent out to earn wages. For these years I have sent the wages home, keeping only a few pennies for myself to buy daily bread. My wages have made it possible for all of you to continue the traditions you love. But for me, there is nothing but sadness and sacrifice. And I feel there has been very little appreciation for what I have done."



"When I work in Algeciras, all around me is luxury. People eat meat every day plus pies and ice cream. They have televisions and computers and cars. They attend sporting events and concerts.

"But I have nothing but my one room and my bread with no dipping sauce. I want to help our family, but I feel if I am to help, I must live there permanently. I feel I have to live there year-round to get a good job like the one Gwafa has. With a good job I could still send money home but have a little bit of a life myself."

Everyone on the rooftop gasped.



Gwafa gasped the loudest. "No, you cannot make this choice!" he exclaimed. "I made this choice ten years ago and have had nothing but regrets."

Grandfather Mohammed told him to explain.

Gwafa did. "It was all because I wanted to surf the internet. I was working for wages to help my family and I had a friend with a computer. I decided to start taking the money that was supposed to go to the family and spend it on a cell phone, a TV, and a computer. Once I got used to all this I wanted more and more. Pretty soon I just gave up my home and stayed in Marrakech."



"I gave up everything I loved—the family, the household, the mountains, our animals. I knew the name of every goat and every cow in our village. I knew the name of every rock!

"When I took on a permanent job, I worked all by myself. It wasn't the same as being with the family, stopping to chat, singing, being part of something important. It was only me.

"Even now, with a wife and children of my own, I have no aunts or uncles or parents or cousins or grandparents to talk to every day."



Aisha had to bite her tongue to keep from crying. "Belaid, you can't leave us! You can't. Listen to what Gwafa is telling you."

Belaid just shook his head.

"My brother," continued Aisha, "we know this has been unfair to you. Let us find a way to make this fair."

Grandfather Mohammed and Grandmother Fatima nodded.

Aisha continued. "Please let the household discuss this. Please let us come up with a solution that is good for you and good for us. Please."

Eventually Belaid agreed.

Now is the time for the household to think this through. Turn the page.



You are now the household

Discuss this. What plan can you come up with that will still bring money to the household but will allow Belaid to (a) get more appreciation for his sacrifice, and (b) provide a better situation for his efforts.

Did you do it?

The end