

# The World of the Juki

by

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## Preface

Through my father's family, I am connected to a people of Gypsy origin, called the Juki, whose itinerary encompasses Iran, Turkey, parts of Central Asia and Syria. The Juki clans (*witse*) differ somewhat from the Rom Gypsies so familiar to the West. They represent the fusion of an ancient tribal culture with the civilization which now surrounds and nourishes them, the Islamic world of the Near and Middle East. The Juki resemble those Gypsies known generically as *Kowli*, *Korbati* and *Nuri* in the Middle East, but may also be sharply distinguished from them.

A sub-clan of the Juki, travelling with a larger *ordu* (horde; travelling mass), long ago entered the Nur Mountains of Anatolia. They are called the *Aspasheshti*. As this sub-clan expanded, some of its own off-shoots moved further south, into Latakia Province in Syria. The tradition which they represent has flowered and flowered. Its beauty, however, remains very distant from any "outside appreciation." The Juki are turned inward, into the setting and atmosphere most conducive to a narrative tradition. The rich harmony of their song-makers is given freely, like the singing of wild birds, and without affectation or hope of public acclaim.

When I was a boy, living behind the "invisible walls" of this world, my first teacher was Uncle Noah. He became my *palalikanina* (my patron or sponsor) who, through the strength of a distant family bond, guaranteed my character and opened doors into this special and unheralded tribal universe. Later in life, Noah became a kind of spiritual mentor, the spring from which ancestral wisdom flowed.

When I informed Uncle Noah of my desire to commit to writing a remembrance of those days, he refrained from giving his permission for a long time. But, in a certain setting, at a certain propitious moment, Uncle recanted and even offered his blessings for my work.

"My boy," he said, sighing deeply, "you must aspire to write a work of such great beauty that it makes men swoon and grow dizzy just to read it. Anything less will leave you with an inner thirst that even love cannot sate. Remember that in every generation of men, beauty is cast over the world in abundance. Find beauty, drink it in, absorb from it the deepest desires and the most worthy longings. And when your whole soul is drunk on great beauty, your work will begin

to blossom. For all great prosody and every song of the poets owes its first stirrings to the presence of incomparable beauty.”

And then I remembered that an old friend, Suleyman an-Nuri, had said to us, “All the raptures of the grand poets, even the richest medieval melodies, were coaxed into being by beauty. When your need for beauty is so great that you feel damaged without it, you will always summon it forth.”

When I asked Noah about literary sources, he said, “The withered flower cannot be the measure of the flower in full bloom. All those books about Gypsies are only withered, pale flowers. They were written to amuse people who never saw a beautiful rose-garden and don’t believe it could exist.”

No definitive modern history can be written about the Juki. They exist within the compass of the swift-perishing, never-to-be-repeated moment. Yet in each of these fleeting instants, they sense the presence of the eternal. Thus life assumes the character of a dazzling array of impressions, all seen as portents of a deeper harmony. Collective memory extends no more than five generations into the past, with certain exceptions, e.g., the legendary characters forever extolled and re-animated in the narratives of the *bakshy*, or “singer of tales.”

All legends pertaining to Juki origins have a meaning and a validity which places them beyond historical reductionism—beyond all belief in “historical progress.” These tales are outside history and bear more affinity with the themes of Ismaili or Mazdean theosophy than with historical impressions.

It is said by the Juki that “to understand a people you must know and taste its desires, feel its burning tears, rejoice in its fulfillment and become like a broken mirror through its failings.”

The social organization of the Juki is complex, based on both patriarchal and matriarchal forces. In addition to family clusters, clans, sub-tribes and tribes, Juki are often unified on the basis of an *Urdu*, or “travelling horde.” The members of the horde may or may not be from the same family cluster. Further divisions exist, based on ancestral occupations. All of this corresponds, to a certain extent, with the social structure of the Rom communities in the West. There are, however, some Rom who travel the whole earth, and others who have been almost totally absorbed by the culture of a given host-country. (*Sinti* or *Manush* in Germany, *Gitanos* in Spain, *Boyash* in Romania.)

There are a small number of Juki who work as fruit-pickers in the citrus groves of Lebanon and Syria, like those other Gypsies called *Nawari* or *Nuri*. And some who still exist in a wholly nomadic state, living in defiance of the frontiers dividing Iran or Turkey and the Soviet Union. It is said that many who “remained behind” continue to work as blacksmiths and metalsmiths attached to certain tribes of pastoral Iranian nomads. But of these, so distantly connected to my own experience, I have no knowledge.

Both Christianity and Islam, in different conditions, have formally “triumphed” over the whole Juki world by absorbing its members into the religious heritage of the surrounding world. But, in being absorbed in this formal and official manner, the Juki imposed on the religion the inner meaning corresponding to the old tribal point of view. This is not to say that the Juki relate to Islam, for example, as mere opportunists and hypocrites, but rather that they accept its gifts in the only way possible for them, as men permeated with the culture which is their heritage.

Among the Juki, religion never possesses the soberness and severity of theological peroration. It appears to border on heresy in the eyes of certain people, including some Moslem *ulama* and Christian clergymen. And it always shuns implacable fanaticism, remaining forever free, resilient, open to living impression. Ideas, among the Juki, are never tepid concepts but fiery billows, forever heated and in motion. The bloom of religion is like a flower that blossoms and fades without warning. But the garden is filled with flowers and the earth with seeds. Just as no one planting can fully express and exhaust the living vitality of the earth herself, so no one moment of religious history can negate the beautiful moments which will blossom tomorrow. “For Life herself, is an eternal splendor, and a witnessing to the Source of all Beauty.”

Speaking in the refrains which are only too familiar to all the Juki, the singer, Magrupi, once cried, “Our religion is in the tall green grass, and in the birch tree spreading its silver leaves. Deep song resonates in the fir forest, mystery dwells in the crests of the trees. A rain of fine honey is forever falling on us from the midnight sky. The stars can forever feed our thirst to become more, to ripen still more fully. Poetry drips from the falling leaves, and God has created our eyes to savor the beauty cast over the hills. The wheeling lake at Sulemish is as much a summons to worship as the Mosque of Omar and the tomb of Rumi. Learn to play well your *kobuz*. Accompany yourself on the *dorma*, and let your voice resound with the splendor of great Beauty. Let this be your measure, young man: to sing until you burst from so much warbling, like a song-bird gone mad. This madness, for us, is the most spiritual *hal* (inner state) of all.”

*Bater* (“may it be so”).

### **The Testament of Uncle Noah and Others**

Ascending the sun-spattered slopes of Duldul Ridge, a single rider moved toward the village. In the glistening foliage near the ridge’s summit, the rider halted. His horse’s flanks, the color of golden sunflowers, shimmered like a polished mirror and appeared to dazzle the passing mountaineers. On those shining flanks you could see reflected, as in a still pool, the hillsides, the clumps of olive trees and the tall grass. A single butterfly settled on the horse’s left ear and appeared frozen in place. My kind old Uncle sat lazily in the saddle, gazing at the sun with tenderness and solicitude. His white beard was sodden with perspiration, his horse’s nostrils flecked with foam. He drank in the morning sun with more sweetness than some men drink in pure honey.

Standing in the tall grass that day, pelted with brightness from the scalding sun, I poured out my soul to Uncle Noah, and asked permission to press my tears onto paper, unwinding and re-fashioning our ancestral traditions. And I felt that surely, as always, Uncle would not give his blessings to such an ambition.

But, mounted on his golden horse, lingering in the grass, my teacher said, “Every flower must blossom and adorn the world with its own beauty. The flower in your soul was planted firmly and it has blossomed and blossomed. And now you are prepared to answer our critics, who swarm on us like the bees of a thousand hives, stinging us wherever we may journey in the East and the West. We have learned together that the way to reply to stupidity is by making wisdom ferment. The way to fulfill our tradition is neither to quarrel nor to explain, as if we were being judged, but to make it sing with meaning.

“Cast the tradition before the world like the fever of a garden in early spring. Scatter the honey in drops, let nothing congeal forever in a single mould. Bear witness to the beauty of life, savor it, drink it in, let it be an adornment on every page of your work. Write a work of such beauty that our enemies will be powerless against us...”

Long ago, in the oak groves of old Anatolia, we began to partake of ancestral tradition. We grew dizzy before the song-making of our teacher, who not only “imparted instruction” but fed into us his own rich desires, his own deep thirst. And it was explained to us then that no matter how much we loved our tradition, and the ambience in which it blossomed, there were many who longed to see it wither away. My own great mentor, who became like a second father to me, appeared to us as a kind of “spiritual knight.” Yet, to some, he was only an anomaly from a remote age, with no authority vested in him by official sources. And all of us were deemed to be beings who belonged to another time, another spiritual universe.

“Our tradition is not in archives or documents,” Uncle Noah explained. “Tradition is like spring-water that wells forth from the ground, flowing on forever. It is no abstract doctrine; it is respect for the harmony woven into all things. And it is the thirst to surpass ourselves, and to honor the Cherished Ones who were our forefathers. Tradition is not in the butterfly you have killed and placed under glass; it is in the living voice of life itself, forever free to expand and develop. Tradition means to pursue fullness and let your eyes be glutted with honey.

“Wisdom is neither sour nor bitter, contrary to what fools always insist. Wisdom is like the taste of a honeycomb broken open and poured over your soul. If it does not seem so in the beginning, it is because wisdom never lowers itself for common consumption. Rather, wisdom beckons us to rise up to the plane where it can be made accessible. What appears sober and prosaic when seen from far away may often become superabundantly sweet when you know and taste it. A wedding ceremony is like a scene in a criminal court from a distance. But to the lovers, the wedding is not solemn, it is very sweet.

“The ancient wellsprings of the past have not died, but remain here, within us, and nourish our warm desires. The sapling which has only begun to grow asks the ancient cedar-trees to cease blooming, since for the sapling they ‘don’t count’ anymore. But we, we are the freshest leaves on these ancient trees. How can we part company with the sap and the roots of our tree? When the branch is severed from the tree, it is not the tree which dies. The flowers which have sprouted behind a walled garden cannot speak of the flowers blooming in the wilderness. But men have attempted to wall-up everything which lives, and to define away what escapes them as ‘insignificant.’ Perhaps you know the old tale, taken from the legendary song-master, Rumi, about the castle-dwellers who had never seen any birds except those in the king’s aviary. They only knew song-birds in cages. When a royal falcon appeared one day on a ledge of this castle, they snared it in a net and put it in the aviary. But, seeing how it differed from the other birds, they considered the falcon very ugly, clipped its wings and cut away its claws. They removed part of its beak. And then they commanded the falcon to sing. But, you see, such is not the nature of this royal bird. It didn’t learn to sing like a canary. It wasted away and died. Such is the fate which awaits us, too, if we accepted the definitions of life offered by the bearers of Grand Authority in our time. For like the castle-dwellers, they are blinded by a terrible ignorance and narrowness. So we must say to them, from time to time, that all birds are canaries, and that falcons don’t even exist. Yes, we must say these things,—but only so long as we remain in the castle ourselves.”

“We,” suggested Uncle’s companion, Nuri, “are like the reindeer and the untamed horse, creatures greatly imperiled by the imperatives of civilization. Nevertheless, we will endure, for though many branches are broken off a tree, it lives through the sap and the roots. And the roots are concealed beneath the soil.”

Every evening, we repaired to the same familiar grove, and slowly we came to see that he, and the other “old ones,” had needs no longer understood in modern society. Great beauty, for example, was as necessary to them as bread or sleep. Without beauty, they are deeply damaged; and so they summon forth myriad forms of beauty. The scene of traditional instruction was itself carefully chosen, with a deep awareness of the beauty of nature, and with acute sensitivity to the sense of freedom given by open space and the capacity of cool, green places to provoke serenity and contemplation. The whole ambience of the forest terrain—and the “laws” invoked to sustain its beauty—create in man needs and aspirations of a curious and recognizable quality. Contemplative intelligence flowers freely, like a singing bird locked away inside a man’s temples, and at last, in the nocturnal wilderness, unleashed from its tiny cage. And the bird soars and soars. This was the “bird” spoken of when someone said, “The most beautiful thing in life is the beauty of the birds when they have the whole sky to fly in.” In a cage, a bird’s great wings are not a gift, but a burden.

A man who has lived long in this realm of forest philosophers can be known by the way he lingers beside certain streams and springs, or by the way he makes coffee, investing even in such a minor activity deep repose and meaning.

All the sweetness of those days was, however, intertwined with seemingly harsh limitations. Custom was sometimes of an almost primeval harshness, in keeping with these limits. The flowering of spiritual sapience was often manifested in a world which appears archaic and primitive. The richest beauty, the most consummate craftsmanship and art co-existed with the sorrow of mire and mud. Man never exists in a paradisaal state on the earth. He always achieves something, and always precludes other possibilities.

“Tradition, as you call it, Uncle,” I said, “is something very pure and lofty. Can its beauty be preserved outside this environment? Isn’t the forest, itself a greenhouse where our chosen plants may blossom most fully? And isn’t it true that a flower which blooms in a greenhouse may wilt and perish in a desert?”

“Even the desert rose,” he replied, “grows better when it receives special attention. Yes, we are privileged to be here, where the tradition has fermented for many generations. But if you leave this place, you will find that it has not left you. You will discover that the trees and the foliage have passed into you, like fruit taken from a tree and eaten. What your soul eats here will change you and nourish you, as fruit nourishes the body. We have not just gazed at the fruit which exists on the Tree of Tradition; we have consumed it greedily. It has become part of us and we have become part of it. Thus, in youth, each of you has material parents but also a ‘spiritual father,’ who is the ‘father’ and provider for your soul. Or, as some have said, the ‘mother’ who nourishes your inner being.

“You bear inside of you all these green trees and rivers. The black lakes ringed with tulips have passed into you. The reed-beds and the marshes, the running sap in the forest—all of this has taken root in the wastelands you carry beneath your physical form. This wasteland exists in all of us. But it can only bear the seeds we have planted. These ancient groves will never die to you, unless you become dead to them. And the thirsting of our fathers may be pursued anywhere.

“It is best if the inner and outer worlds harmoniously flow into one another. But it may often happen that you live among people who reduce everything to surfaces, and see no inner reality at all. It is impossible to convey to them an idea of real, inner ferment, just as it would be impossible to explain the beauty of a song to someone who is deaf. As yet, the whole history of this eon—this ‘cycle of existence,’ as it is called—has been like a life passed in the shade, with but few days of sunshine. And in such a time, wisdom is like a beautiful painting, gathering dust in the lost corner of a forgotten gallery. Yet it cannot cease to shine with its own greatness, and one who sees it is dazzled forever. But at the present moment, the grand canvas still awaits discovery by the living.”

Uncle often addressed us in short discourses veined with poetry. We began to feel his sorrow. We thirsted after the lost grandeur he harkened back to, again and again, in those harsh cries of his. In time, hearing Noah speak was like listening to a master violinist, or like hearing an old bard from the Nur Mountains singing ancient tales and accompanying himself on a tambourine. In Uncle's voice, you could feel deep desire, dream, beauty and pain, and intense love.

From time to time, at midnight gatherings, Noah was accompanied by other *sadra*, or "elders." Together they conducted a rapacious discourse. Initially they presided over toasts consumed "in honor of" certain archangels. Then, after the red wine was gone, they began to compare their respective visions of tradition. Each occupied his own special place and spoke through the uniqueness of his own perception. Each was a living plenitude, in no need of "correction" by the others. The interplay of so many rich voices did not create a single great harmony, but a series of incomparable recitals. At first we thought of them as being like ourselves, voices straining to achieve clarity, still nebulous and imprecise. In time, however, as we became familiar with the personalities assembled for these ceremonial toasts, we began to see, beneath the gloss of eloquence, something deeper. It became evident that there were different layers of meaning in such discourse. At one level, there was the successive power of individual voices to entice and enchant us. But at another, these "clashes" of opinion and idea represented a kind of contrapuntal inner dialogue. Whenever one of these elders addressed himself to another, he provoked a sympathetic and special response. Question fed question, one assertion summoned another more comprehensive assertion. Beyond this, something still more subtle occurred: everything, we came to see, is connected to the season, the hour, the setting in which it is uttered. What is compelling and totally valid at one time, in one context, has no meaning in a different ambience. The grandeur of an idea is bound up with the person who utters it, the way it is expressed, the audience to which it is addressed, the moment in which it is articulated. What may desolate or enrapture many souls in one special moment, may not even touch them in others.

And correspondingly, there are dreams that never blossom in certain souls, passions they never taste. Some men are inwardly in the "wrong conditions" to receive these impressions; they have, so to speak, mirrors in their souls which were long ago shattered, and no longer reflect the images received by others. In winter, according to an ancient parable, a dead tree and a living one both appear barren; but when spring comes, only one blossoms and bears fruit.

One summer evening, when our shirts were stained with wine-drops and the wine had risen to our heads, Magrupi began to sing. His voice was a shade richer, huskier than anyone else's. His words were like pieces of jade that had been formed into perfectly cut, glistening jewels. "Only a jeweler," said the poet, Bulungir, "can savor the perfection of the gems Magrupi has fashioned." On hearing him begin to declaim, the others fell silent, out of respect and curiosity.

His copper cheeks were flushed with wine. His eyes, as always, took on a deep luster under the night sky. Herons croaked across the plain, then fluttered off into the reeds.

“Life,” Magrupi sang, “must be honored, like a beautiful woman. Life must be caressed through our singing and our tears. Someone may say, ‘Life is not just a feast, it is the bitterest of all struggles.’ And to that, my reply is ‘Yes.’ For the feast is so filling that the struggle only enhances its beauty. Only we, by our own inner blindness, fail to savor the wine and the honey. And we have often chosen to glut our eyes with pain.”

Then he sang like a nightingale, weeping and singing at the same time. And every word induced in us still deeper intoxication, still richer wine-reveries. Those words, however, cannot be translated. They are as elusive as the wind singing in the high trees.

Uncle picked up the thread of Magrupi’s song: “Ah, but man must still choose the meaning he confers on both bitterness and sweetness. If our deepest desire is for beauty, we shall bring it into being, like a wine-maker faithfully tending his vineyards, making the wine-grapes ferment. Some of us have a need of beauty, while others cannot receive it in abundance. They tire of even the greatest beauty in a little while.”

“No matter how many times I’m wounded,” Magrupi cried, “they’ll never take away the thirst inside of me.”

“The thirst?”

“The thirsting for sweetness, my boy. The insatiable love of beauty and finery. Have you seen the golden-coated horses of Orhan? A single one of them is enough to revive our passion for quality and our longing for what is fine and high.”

“Don’t you remember the words of the man who shod Bulungir’s horses?” he asked. “The worn old hands of Hani could barely raise a basin of spring-water. ‘Ah, men, even if they pour vinegar down my guts for a hundred years, I won’t forget the taste of honey,’ he told us. And as he sang and purred those words, he was caressing a woman’s breasts.”

“Those words were like a pledge of faithfulness to the meaning and richness of life,” Noah proclaimed. “And he who pledges himself to meaning is already on the road to finding it.”

“Yes, yes: just as the one who loves suffering can make it come to pass. A passion for living can too easily be turned into a passion for suffering and making others suffer. You must beware of those who want to turn your song into bitter weeping. Tears, too, can be very passionate and very compelling. But such is life that it is always wiser to turn your wounds into fountains, not to let them fester on.”

“A time for tears exists, too,” Aunt Suleyma reminded us, more sober than the others. “What is loved as deeply as the precious bloom of youth, must make us suffer when it wilts away. There is a time to remember the flowers that faded yesterday, and a time to savor the flowers blossoming only now, and only here.”

“Yet the time of sorrow is always limited, even by Law. If even the dearest and closest one dies, we observe the *Pomana* (Feast for the Departed) only so many times. The feast is offered in six days, nine days, six weeks, six months and in one year. Then it is not offered again for this person. Only the *khazatauri* is offered then.” (The *khazatauri* is a *pomana* of a different kind: offered annually or semi-annually in the form of a ritual meal in honor of the souls of all the generations of the dead.)

“Pour more brandy and drink,” Noah said, his tone betraying irritation. “The last wine-bottle was consumed while we sat and meditated death. Let us not squander my brandy with similar failings. It is always worth more to smell the flowers and drink the wine of life, than it is to sit and talk of decay or death. Winter has barely begun to thaw and the first green grass to sprout, and soon winter has returned again. Look around: the grass is green and tall, the night is very warm. Let us linger here, in the grass. Let us drink toasts in honor of these trees, these stars. It is to celebrate such things that we were given eyes.”

“Drink, drink,” Nuri affirmed. “This night sky is thick with turning stars, each one begging to be hailed in song, and thirsty for the libations owed them. The talent of a man, on such a night, is shown through the way he drinks to honor the stars.”

Falling down beside Uncle Noah, Nuri clasped the bottle tightly, then drained it to the last drop.

“And may all you youths,” Magrupi added, “be like men in quest of a watering place a year away, burning to undertake the long journey. Kiss the flowers, kiss them while your youth is in bloom. And see that you gather all the pollen.”

Suleyma, a “wilderness-tarnished” woman who persistently warned us against the evils of mechanical civilization, was in a rare mood of tenderness, though her words were customarily like thorns that scraped against the walls of the heart. She was a fearsome presence, before whom children trembled. But now, as Magrupi and Noah continued to drink, she ran her calloused hands through infants’ hair and fondled them sweetly. “A fulfilled man helps to fulfill the world, and a distorted man helps to distort the world,” she advised. “Ripen well, and let your sweetness sweeten the earth. Become a living hive of tradition, a source of grand tales and a treasure-house of song. Through the power of singing, trees, earth, sun, moon—even grass and wind—are unified. The song-birds convey tradition far better than all the scholars putting ink on paper.”

Meanwhile, after praising some rowan trees, the minstrel, Magrupi, suddenly turned to a high-flowering birch and began to serenade it, invoking an old legend:

On the misted summit of a mountain, in the misty evening air, a birch tree grows:  
golden are the birch’s leaves, golden its thick bark; and near its roots, on the gold-colored earth, lies a pitcher filled with glistening water.

He who drinks the silver water from the golden tree’s edge, has discovered the fountain of life.

Taking the ladle made by a king's metal-worker, he tastes the silver water and rejoices...

"To find this tree," the singer explained, "you must pass over mountains no magpie can traverse. You must cross over spaces a crow cannot fly over, and rise to peaks no hawk can attain. The hours of life pass quickly, and the journey is long. But, through the power of song, the land of the golden tree may be reached..."

Along the way are scattered piles of human bones, "the remains of those who sang poorly, and did not know the way."

Incidents of great richness in the song were passed over into the space of a fleeting phrase. It was very late and the brandy had already "finished" some of us. Yet the song could not be interrupted until the singer concluded it. A song has its own life, which must not be "ended" abruptly, just as a flower must not be cut from a plant or a tree, but allowed to grow and fade of its own nature. Finally, however, the great minstrel cried the last, sweet words, and we returned to our camp.

Yet, even as we meandered homeward, Uncle Noah could not resist one last, song-like phrase: "Let the bird soar; let it climb beyond even the harshest of all mountains, beyond the wheel-shaped lakes at Sulemish, beyond the furthest streams and rivers and the last herd of wild horses. Where it goes, what it may attain, is in the hands of God alone. Let these boys feast on rich song until their thirst for more can never be slaked. Where the bird of song travels, which tree he makes his nest in, is not for us to say. *Inshallah* ("God willing"), they may wander the whole earth. But now, dear ones, I toast your youth, I drink to your health," Uncle said, then finished his own last cup.

On another star-drenched evening, we found ourselves surrounded by a maze of ancient trees, so tall, it was said, that they had "become mountains," and that when a man on horseback rode among them on high ground, "his outstretched hand might scrape against the stars." We drank wine sparingly, in ritual toasts only, more concerned with the beauty of the forest.

"You know," Uncle observed, "that we are often called madmen or heretics by our critics. But there are two ways of defining madness: according to society, madness is departure from the average way of seeing things, and the average way of behaving. Yet an older, wiser definition of madness has called it the inability to express truth. According to this more ancient definition, when men say that the Juki are mad, it often only means that we don't share the illusions which permeate the times. And in trying to describe our failings, sometimes people only describe our fullness."

"The differences between men are often very subtle and difficult to define," Nuri added. "A black dog and a white dog are both dogs. If there is a difference even between dogs, it has to be something more than the color of a dog's coat. We men are not judged as impartially as dogs, however. A man is a shell, containing a surging, billowing sea of inner possibilities. Within a

man, a thousand forests yearn to blossom. Yet life hastens by, and when we ‘drop the body,’ we have brought into flower no more than a single sapling. And we sin against our kind repeatedly, judging by surfaces, defining the husk but ignoring the inner reality.”

“But, Uncle,” cousin Ridwan ventured to say, “you have said to us even when we drank the warm milk of our mothers, ‘*Juki jukensa, kapiri kapensa*’ (‘Gypsies with the Gypsies, strangers with the strangers’).”

“It is one of God’s mysteries that we, the ‘ill-starred ones,’ even exist in this world,” Noah responded. “There is a sense in which man is a great spiritual agency, covered by his corporeal form as a horse is covered with a blanket, to warm it. But remember, too, that the physical and the metaphysical are interwoven in this world. The earth is a meeting-ground for material and immaterial forces, and in man they are enmeshed, so that you cannot extract one from the other. You cannot embrace a man’s soul and despise his form. And you cannot ask that the Juki lose awareness of the barriers which isolate us from other men. The real nobility are not those who dwell in castles and palaces, and earn medals from every society. No, those have an easy, not a noble, life. Real nobility means to accept the burden of great sacrifices. It means to be free of all the limits they want to contain you with, so that they can never capture you, never prevent your full blossoming through the distortions inflicted on the masses. We were made to celebrate life—for life, alone, remains to us as a ‘possession’—and to become beautiful inside, even when a thousand ugly beings strive to humiliate us. We are the ‘nobles’, whose nobility lies only in the richness we invest in this life; in the meaning you can discern in the dancing of bees and in the silent growth of a medlar tree. Be full, be free—for just as a stream purifies itself as it flows, so, too, do men purify their aspiration as they wander over the earth.”

“If I wish any man luck,” Magrupi recalled, “I say that he should not become absorbed by a single land. I don’t say he should accumulate treasures and store them in palaces. I wish him a long, long journey over wild wastes and harsh lands, into green places and cool preserves, over islands and unheard of cities, over the ‘limits’ of this whole age. I wish for him the road with many forks and many difficulties. For it is richer than life in a palace, and more instructive.”

Asked to define the Juki, Noah responded that “whoever is absorbed in defining us is not one of us. And whoever has ripened and grown full in this community is his own definition, beyond the measure of what the *kapiri* may say.”

“Others,” he added “have offered many definitions. Especially the authors and great ‘men of letters’ who want to put us inside of books, like a precious animal caught and displayed. But, you see, the deer in the forest is under no obligation to justify his existence to the hunter, or to live in accord with the hunter’s definitions.”

“To the others,” said Magrupi, “God has bequeathed books full of wonders. He has given revelations to the *kapiri*, who wrote them down, first on leaves, then in parchment; and then with ink, and now on printing presses. The Torah was a great gift to the Jews; the words of Christ

were recorded and made into a new book by the Christians. Islam descended on this world as a flaming torrent of words, through the chosen one, Muhammad, the last of the prophets; and those words were recorded, becoming the Koran. These books are great celestial jewels which fell to earth, as God intended. But we, we were not even given the art of writing. We have no celestial books. We have remained only with the meanings woven into life itself. There are certain phenomena of nature which symbolize our culture: streams which thaw and flow freely across frontiers; the wind that sings in the high trees; birds soaring past all barriers traversing the earth; leaves that fell to earth from an ancient tree and were scattered by the winds to the East and the West; or a tree which blossoms in silence, far from the applause of man.

“We have been given all the portents and signs which enter into this world, like a surging river. The mist spread over the Anatolian woods is always something more than a mere mist. The flanks of the white hills are not only sodden with dew, they are sodden with metaphysical meaning. A sap is poured over the world ceaselessly, but it is an intangible, subtle sap, never captured by mechanical means. Beauty is not recorded by instruments; it must be received and experienced through a living soul. The red-legged partridges passing over the Plain of Thistles are not only partridges; they bring with them an invisible meaning. They, too, symbolize, and are witness to, something higher. The world is made of symbols and portents (*āyāt*), each one like a well whose depths carry us beyond the surface of existence. These wells must be explored. Only he who enters into a well and moves through its depths, can see the infinity beneath the form.”

“Have you entered the well?” someone asked.

“I have entered like a man who comes to a garden to water the roses,” Magrupi replied.

“Those roses,” Noah cautioned, “are so beautiful they make you cry. And when you walk in that garden and smell them, you fall down in a rapture, and your reason is stolen from you. For to be in such a garden means to break open ordinary reason as a tree is broken in a storm. It means to tear open the ‘old thoughts’ and enter a land where they no longer apply. This is not something to amuse us, which can be understood and evaluated by one who has not seen those roses. And still less is it a mundane ‘secret’ to be uncovered, like a cistern of precious water hidden away in some old ruin.”

On those summer strolls, while we rejoiced in the running sap and the pools of glimmering water, love of life ascended to a spiritual dimension. And the apparent “lawlessness” among us was, when seen from within, a finely patterned harmony of meanings. Love of the green, fermenting earth combined freely with sonorous metaphysical expression. Piercing cries and the tilting of wine glasses accompanied subtle and deep philosophical refrains. Whether smitten with “wine-madness” or grave and sober, our *sadra* valorized and re-valorized the same themes in ever new and fresh variation.

Asked about certain controversies which had erupted among the sectarian bodies around us, Uncle said only, “We were not put on the earth to partake of those quarrels. Each camp has its

own inner meaning, and it may be that two armies ranged against one another both belong to a single tree. It may even be, as the sages of the past put it, that ‘there is also a blessing in the disputes of the theologians.’ But all the bearers of grand causes speak from a position of wisdom already attained and perfected. They speak like someone who lives in a castle, and is forever sealed off from living impression. We live, so to speak, on an open plain, incapable of ceasing to drink from all the rivers that flow across the world. And just as water purifies itself as it flows, so also do men purify their aspiration, as they wander across the earth.”

“Earth,” said Aunt Suleyma in her husky tone, “is the mother of us all and we must try to become worthy of all the gifts she has bestowed on us. There is no single parcel of land which can exhaust our possibilities; no speck of the earth’s crust can claim us to the exclusion of other green fields, and other orchards. If you plant a lemon-tree in Bokhara and I plant one in San Francisco, they are both only lemon trees, bearing the same sour fruit. Similarly, an orange does not taste better because it was grown on a certain side of the frontier. And all the fruits of this very benevolent ‘Mother’ of ours, belong to each of us and to everyone.”

“We owe a great debt,” Burhan confessed, “to Ismailis, Noysairis and Druses; and to the Christians we have known in these mountains. But it was not meant that we become armed partisans. Nor have we the ability to accumulate gold brocade and priceless tapestries of knowledge. We are still in fever with the sweetness which will blossom tomorrow. Our way is not to accumulate, but to abandon, and then explore anew.”

Water flowed over the sharp peaks of Shabapli, falling onto the rocks and the moss below, trickling into rock-pools and gliding over stones. The pools glistened like silver beneath the stars. The half-moon surged, never settling on the water’s quivering surface.

We sat beside these pools of “moon-water” and listened to Uncle Noah’s tales and admonitions which were given to us as spontaneously and as serenely as the flowing of the waters.

Between tales of the Orange Peri and the Three Medieval Maidens, a bitter-sweet cry filled the woods, the half-protesting, half-instructing voice of Jibril, whose graceful insolence was known to all.

“Why are people so eager to judge us? Every leaf on a tree has its own unique pattern and every flower, even the rarest, fulfills only its own nature. But men are expected to grow according to a single pattern, like ants. How could that be, when each man is himself a river coursing with hidden meaning? How can someone as deep and many-sided as a living soul be fixed to a simple pattern of understanding? What they want to kill in us is the most imperishable thing of all, our own uniqueness and incomparability. And this is a transgression against the Source of All Splendor. It is a desecration, not a form of piety.”

“It is because they are involved with ceremony, imprisoned in the world of forms. We are not imprisoned by the beauty of even the grandest dogma, we remain free. And they can’t capture us, just as the wind cannot be captured with a jar...” Burhan added.

“O Cherished Ones,” Magrupi sang, “may we never receive the gifts of this age. May we turn from the path they have prepared for us, and stroll slowly on our own ancient road. May there be deep clefts in this earth, separating us from the company of our critics. May we pursue our own rapacious thirsts. And may we glut our eyes with honeycomb, blind to the limits of the times.”

### **Epilogue: Grand Causes and Gypsy Loyalties**

Expressions of fidelity and faith toward any “cause,” Uncle Noah explained, are like a plague infesting the *hashi nura* (Gypsy Camp), threatening the survival of everything vital and living. And whenever strangers propounded their cherished programs, “for all the best reasons,” the whole camp grew silent and appeared not to understand. A second attempt was made to “explain things,” then a third and sometimes even a fourth. But no matter how many ways those social and political causes were presented, still they received almost no notice.

“Our loyalty,” my mentor explained, “is not to the great causes which are celebrated in the kingdoms and states of this age. We owe a debt only to Life herself, our great benefactress; for her works cannot be contained and defined away by the bearers of causes. They try to place limits on her, like men who want to put chains on a beautiful and precious animal. They have refused to see that Life is like a river that flows endlessly over the earth, silent and free, unable to stop showering us with gifts. Life has poured beauty before our eyes so many times that we should feel shame not to rejoice in the sweetness of the whole earth. Kiss the earth, embrace her unstintingly. Love life, and burn it up with never a tear. Be grateful, dear ones, for the ways Life has recompensed us and made sorrow into joy. She has made even sadness something very sweet. Here, now, she has given us wheel-shaped lakes which mirror all the trees, turning them upside down, and a sky full of cranes that pay no heed to boundaries, but only pursue their own fullness.”

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**Editorial Note:** The author of this remarkable article, one of the most beautiful evocations we have seen of the nomadic spirit—and this in an age when nomadism is everywhere perishing or under threat—writes as follows about its leading personality, Uncle Noah: “Uncle had repaired to the pine woods of Beirut last year, like a hunter who returned too often to a favorite watering place... But Uncle had a deep love for Lebanon. Greater sweetness was given him there than in any other land. If there still remained a *hashi nura*—a “gypsy camp”—in those pines, no doubt he was living there. We know that the pines have now been turned into burning cinders and scalded tree-stumps. We do not know the fate of Uncle Noah who, like so many others, has

disappeared. The words barely beginning to bud within me, through his memory, now swiftly blossom into fullness. He has become like a germ of passion cast into my veins.”