

THE DIFFICULT JOURNEY

Revised Edition

Ahmad Thomson



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book would not have been written had it not been for Shaykh Dr Abdal-Qadir as-Sufi ad-Darqawi al-Murabit, *alayhi rahma*, who showed me the beauty and majesty and truth of Islam and who sent me out on the Hajj and who was there to welcome me on my return.

It is dedicated to all those who helped along the way, and it is especially for all those who have been, or who hope to go, on the Difficult Journey and the Way Back.

My thanks are also due to all those who supported me while this book was being written, including Afsar Siddiqui, Imam Muhammad Abdar-Rahman Saeed, Ahmad As-Suwaidi, Abdal-Aziz Al-Alayan, and Hamid Al-Jazayri, and particularly my parents, Hugh and Mary, may they rest in peace, and my former wife's parents, Paul and Jean, may they rest in peace, and especially my former wife, Susan, whose patience and love helped me keep going.

Finally, I would also like to thank all those who helped make it possible to have the first edition of this book published, long after it had been written, especially Dr A A El-Kassas and Fouad Mattar.

Thank you!

Ahmad Thomson
London, Spring 2026



AUTHOR'S NOTE

This edition of *The Difficult Journey* combines the two volumes which were originally published as *The Difficult Journey* and *The Way Back*.

Most of the definitions in the Glossary of Arabic Terms are taken directly or derive from the books listed in the Bibliography which should all be read in order to arrive at an understanding which is far beyond the scope of this book. They are from the overflowing wisdom of Shaykh Dr Abdal-Qadir as-Sufi ad-Darqawi al-Murabit, by the permission of Allah and His Messenger, may Allah bless him and his family and his companions and all those who seek sincerely to follow in his and their footsteps, and grant them peace. Amin



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PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

Many of the people described in these pages have now grown old or have died, may Allah be merciful to all of us – and this account of a wonderful journey which unfolded some 49 years ago describes a world which in many respects has long ceased to exist. It survives in this literary time capsule as a reminder of what life was like before the advent of mobile phones, the internet and social media – when the here and now was, as it still is, where and when you happen to be.

**Every one on it will pass away
but the Face of your Lord will remain
Master of Majesty and Generosity.**

(Qur'an: 55.26–27)



PREFACE

As I sit facing Makka it is summer here in England. People are making the most of the warm days and the long evenings. As always, the weather is one of the main topics of conversation, along with what is happening at Wimbledon, and in the Test Match, and on the TV, and of course who is currently doing what with whom.

Flowers are blooming in millions of gardens, thrilling to even more millions of summer rain drops, and a million loves are being born or renewed, or are dying or dead, with each passing moment. Far around us in the night sky, millions of stars shine out, their light flashing across millions of light years through space, filling those who gaze on them with wonder, unnoticed by those who are asleep.

Each one of us lives in a different world, in a different universe, each one true, in a subtle unified patterning that can only be described as perfect. We travel through life, learning as we go, and sometimes we pause, as the spinning earth swims through space at two hundred miles a second in a perfect orbit, with us pausing there somewhere on its fragile surface, resting on earth or water with fire beneath us and air around us and in us, and as we pause, sometimes we dive into the ocean of our memory and glide smoothly through recollections of past moments in our journey through life:

It was in the summer of 1977 that Abdal-Jalil, Mustafa al-Alawi and I set out to go on the Hajj, the pilgrimage to the House of Allah in Makka, the Difficult Journey as it is called, for this is one of the meanings of the Arabic word al-Hajj. It is a long time ago now since we first set out, and yet all these years later the journey still remains vividly clear, from start to finish, in my awareness. It was the journey of a life-time – and the key to unlock the meaning of one's whole life journey, as well as all the journeys made within it, for whoever makes this journey with understanding must surely realise that surely we come from Allah and surely to Him we return.

Ahmad Thomson
Dunchideock, Summer 1990



ASWAN

Although Muslims are allowed not to fast during Ramadan if they are travelling – provided that they make up the days they have missed at a later stage – the Qur'an does say that it is better for you if you do fast. Accordingly we decided to fast while we travelled, even though this might entail some hardship at times. I had always tried to avoid being in debt whenever possible, and besides which, I had always found it so much easier fasting during Ramadan than at any other time of the year, that making up days missed at a later stage always seemed to involve more difficulty than actually fasting difficult days in Ramadan, even in those exceptional situations when one was not obliged to do so.

It usually takes one's metabolism two or three days to accustom itself to the fasting pattern, especially if one does not fast regularly all the year round, and accordingly we took things very easy on our first day of fasting, resting quietly in the zawiyya until it was time to drive to Aswan to catch the ferry. It was the hottest time of the year in the Sahara, and my previous four fasts of Ramadan had taken place in a much cooler environment. As is often the case when one is faced with a new experience, I was a little apprehensive as to whether I would be able to survive fasting in such heat, and was very careful to breathe through my nose and not my mouth so as to avoid losing precious moisture. As with all my other anxieties before earlier months of Ramadan, my fears turned out to be largely unfounded, and as before, I was able to conclude from experience rather than through rational thought, that the One Who has made the fast of Ramadan obligatory, has also made it possible.

After dhur it was time to be on our way. Hajj Ahmad and the other two fuqara from Alexandria were also starting out on their journey back up north that day, and we shook hands firmly and embraced each other, united not only by our way of life, but also by the journey that we had shared together. They had been so generous to us, both with their money and with their selves, and had shown what true brotherhood is.

Two of the fuqara from the zawiyya at which we had been staying drove us into Aswan, past the mighty wall of the Aswan Dam, and up to the departure point for the ferry at the edge of the lake which lay on the other side of it. I had been to Lake Kariba during my childhood, but this was a much larger expanse of water, and I would not like to be around when the time finally comes for the wall to go. As we said goodbye and thank you, one of the fuqara handed Abdal-Jalil a Sudanese five pound note, which

he accepted thankfully. This was the only money we had, and we had no idea how much the tickets for the ferry would cost.

All the people who were waiting to board the ferry began to move forward, and we just joined the general movement, silently reciting Surat'al-Fatiha, and asking Allah to put us on board that ferry. We passed through customs, had our passports routinely stamped, and walked up the shaky gang-plank on to the dilapidated Victorian paddle steamer that had definitely seen better days. No one stopped us, and no one asked to see our tickets. Lashed to the main boat was another smaller boat, with a sheltered area in the middle of the deck. This was already full up, mainly with families surrounded by large bundles of possessions and a few live chickens clucking away in their woven cages. There was room on its flat roof, but it was still very hot, and we would simply fry up there. Making our way up to the front of the boat, we were surprised to find an empty space up against the outside panelling of the sheltered area. Thankfully we sat down, a little shaky at the knees, and once we had regained our strength, we managed to rig up an awning by tying my striped rug to some convenient stays. This gave us the shade that we needed, for it was hot, very hot, the hottest time of the year, and we were parched!

It turned out that we had been among the first to board the ferry, and for the next hour or two, more and more passengers crowded on to the two boats, the men mostly wearing white djelabas and turbans and the women dressed in colourful swathes of brightly patterned cloth. After what seemed a long time, the ferry slipped its moorings and set off southwards down the vast Aswan Dam, crowded with people and low in the water, with its giant paddle swirling the waters purposefully behind us as the tired engines tried their best to move us in the right direction. The three of us sat at the bows with the lake stretching out before us, and the sun on our right now beginning to sink low into the western Sahara. It was very beautiful, and very natural. In this setting travel by 'plane seemed odd and uncommon, with its computerised standardised routines that ensure the swiftest of passages with maximum efficiency and the minimum of inconvenience. Here on the ferry, no one was in a hurry, and there was plenty of time to enjoy each moment. Insh'Allah we would arrive without the engine breaking down.

At last the sun finally disappeared altogether, and scooping up the lake water from the bow wave which was only about a foot below deck level, we each did wudu and then prayed maghrib and isha on our little patch of deck. Although we had neither food nor water, we did not have to worry about our provision. A small group of people, who, like us, had chosen

to fast, invited us to join them in their meal, which we gladly did, sitting together cross-legged in their corner of the deck and gratefully quenching our thirst and only eating a little, for we were so thirsty that we did not feel at all hungry.

Shaykh Abdal-Qadir once said that outwardly the fast of Ramadan is like an illness, while inwardly it is a journey. I wondered where we would be by the time the end of Ramadan had arrived. Insh'Allah we would be in the heart of the Sudan. As the new moon appeared low over the western horizon for a while and then sank beneath it, followed closely by the evening star, I relaxed in the darkness as we chatted together, refreshed and cool beneath the stars, with the steady throb of the engines making the two boats shake and vibrate. The impossible had happened! We were well and truly on our way to the Sudan in the all-pervading baraka of Ramadan, and it had all unfolded in such a wonderful way that I personally could never have planned this adventure, even if I had owned the whole world. Allah's plan always turns out to be better than one's own plan.

Still thirsty, we tracked down the man who was making and selling tea. A fellow passenger refused to let us buy our own, and gratefully we sipped the glasses of strong black sweet tea that he handed us, answering the usual questions in a good natured manner, now that all our needs had been met. Later, we stretched out on the flat roof of the sheltered area, with the lake all around us and stars all above us, and fell fast asleep to the exciting sound of the throbbing engines and the churned up waters, undisturbed by the noise made by the other people in our floating village.



We awoke before dawn, chilled into wakefulness by the cold desert night, but, not realising just how hot the day would be, we hardly drank anything. It was a mistake which we did not repeat again. As the day unfolded and the sun rose higher in the sky, reflected a million times in a million little wavelets on the lake's surface, it grew hotter and hotter, until even the people who had always lived in the Sahara were finding it hot. Our make-shift awning was only partially successful in giving us shade, and there was no escape. Poor Mustafa did not know what had hit him, and for all our previous experience of warm climates, Abdal-Jalil and I were not much better prepared. It was a long hot day. The sun seemed to hang in the sky forever. We grew thirstier and thirstier, dazzled by the sparkling waters of the lake into which we longed to plunge.

We chugged on slowly but surely through the day and the heat, only stopping once, at a small island, to give the man who lived there some

provisions. Apparently he was the weatherman, and knew the lake well. Insh'Allah there would be no storms during the next day or so, so it was safe to continue. On we went, and it seemed as if the sun would always be there, always shining down on us, and not for the first time I longed for one of those cold, wet, windy, English days that everybody always seems to complain about. In the end I had no choice but to become completely submitted to the situation, to accept that I was dried out and thirsty, and then of course I was able to enjoy it, once I no longer had any expectations of it being other than what it was.

At last the sun set. Again we were invited by some of those who were also fasting to share their food and drink. Gratefully we sank our teeth into cool juicy red watermelon chunks, soaking up glass after glass of water like sponges that had not seen water for years. In vain our more experienced hosts warned us not to drink too much, for otherwise we would not feel like eating anything and would grow weak. This was something we would learn in the days ahead, but on that particular evening the mercy of Allah that pervades the first third of Ramadan especially was definitely manifesting itself in the form of cool wet water. The Prophet Muhammad, may the blessings and peace of Allah be on him, said that those who fast have two rewards: One when they break their fast, and one when they meet their Lord.

As always during Ramadan, the difference between the day and the night was strongly emphasised, and now that we were free to eat and drink again, the day that we had endured already seemed long gone. We were grateful for it, for if we had not fasted during the day, we would not have enjoyed the delights of the night nearly as much. We chugged on through another deliciously cool night, and on waking up before dawn, made sure that we were fully tanked up with water before the call to prayer echoed out across the lake, signalling the start of our third day's fasting. As a result, we all had to go to the toilet an hour or two later, but at least we did not start the day off feeling thirsty as we had done the day before.

We had no idea how long our journey on the ferry was going to last, and by now time had become very elastic anyway, so that sometimes even a few moments seemed to stretch on forever. As it happened, we arrived at Wadi Halfa late that morning, and soon the ferry was tied up alongside the simple jetty, the gang-plank was in place, and everyone was gathering their belongings together and readying themselves to disembark. It was at this point that the ticket collector suddenly appeared and asked us for our tickets, about which, in the excitement of the journey and the difficulty of the fasting, we had completely forgotten. Abdal-Jalil proffered our Sudanese

five pound note, but it was not enough. The full fare for the three of us was eight pounds. The only article of any value that we had was my striped rug. I asked the ticket collector to wait a few minutes while I tried to sell it, and approached a fellow traveller, asking him if he would like to buy it. He looked at it, told us to wait, and disappeared into the crowd.

While we waited, the ticket collector continued collecting fares from the other passengers, returning now and then to see what was happening. He was most apologetic about the whole matter, especially once he had realised that we were Muslims and were fasting, but he was only doing his job. We were just reassuring him and telling him not to worry about it, when our fellow traveller reappeared, his cupped hands full of loose change. "Bismillah," he said, giving it to us with a large smile, and refusing to accept the rug that I tried to give to him in return. When we counted the money up, it amounted to just over three pounds.

We gave the ticket collector all our money which he graciously accepted, and disembarked, thankful that that hurdle was behind us, but slightly apprehensive about what would happen next. On entering the small hot crowded customs building, we had to fill in a declaration stating how much money we had and where we were going to stay. This did not take long to complete. We had no money and no address to give. We handed our forms to the placid looking customs official. Silently I recited Surat'al-Fatiha. Surely, having come this far, and having tasted such generosity from virtually everyone we had met, we would not be turned back now.

The customs official looked at us, at our passports, at our declarations, and back at us again. "No money?" he said.

"Yes," we replied, "No money."

He paused significantly, looking at our documentation once again, perhaps not quite sure what to do about us, and in that moment a bearded turbanned man on the other side of the barrier called out, "Shaykh Abdal-Bourhani!" in a clear strong voice.

"Yes!" I replied, "Shaykh Abdal-Bourhani!"

"Shaykh Abdal-Bourhani?" queried the customs official.

"Yes," we all replied together, "Shaykh Abdal-Bourhani."

"Good," he said firmly, stamping our passports and letting us through the barrier, as if there was nothing more to say.

The man who had opened the way for us, greeted us warmly. He was the muqaddem of the Bourhaniyya zawiyya in Wadi Halfa, and had received a

message from Hajj Mustafa in Alexandria that we were on the ferry. The train for Khartoum, he explained, did not leave until after isha that evening. Until then we could rest at his house. Gratefully we climbed into his landrover, and bumped along the dirt road to Wadi Halfa. Once again, the day had become extremely hot, and we felt drained of energy, tired and thirsty. As if he were reading my thoughts, the kind muqaddem turned towards me as we bumped along the uneven road. "Don't worry, we will pay for the train tickets." A few minutes later, all our anxieties about our provision now completely dispelled, we were lying flat out in our generous host's house, thankful for the breath of wind that stole past the curtains through the open window and over our hot tanned faces. Al-hamdulillahi wa shukrulillah! We were in the Sudan and we were still alive. Just!

