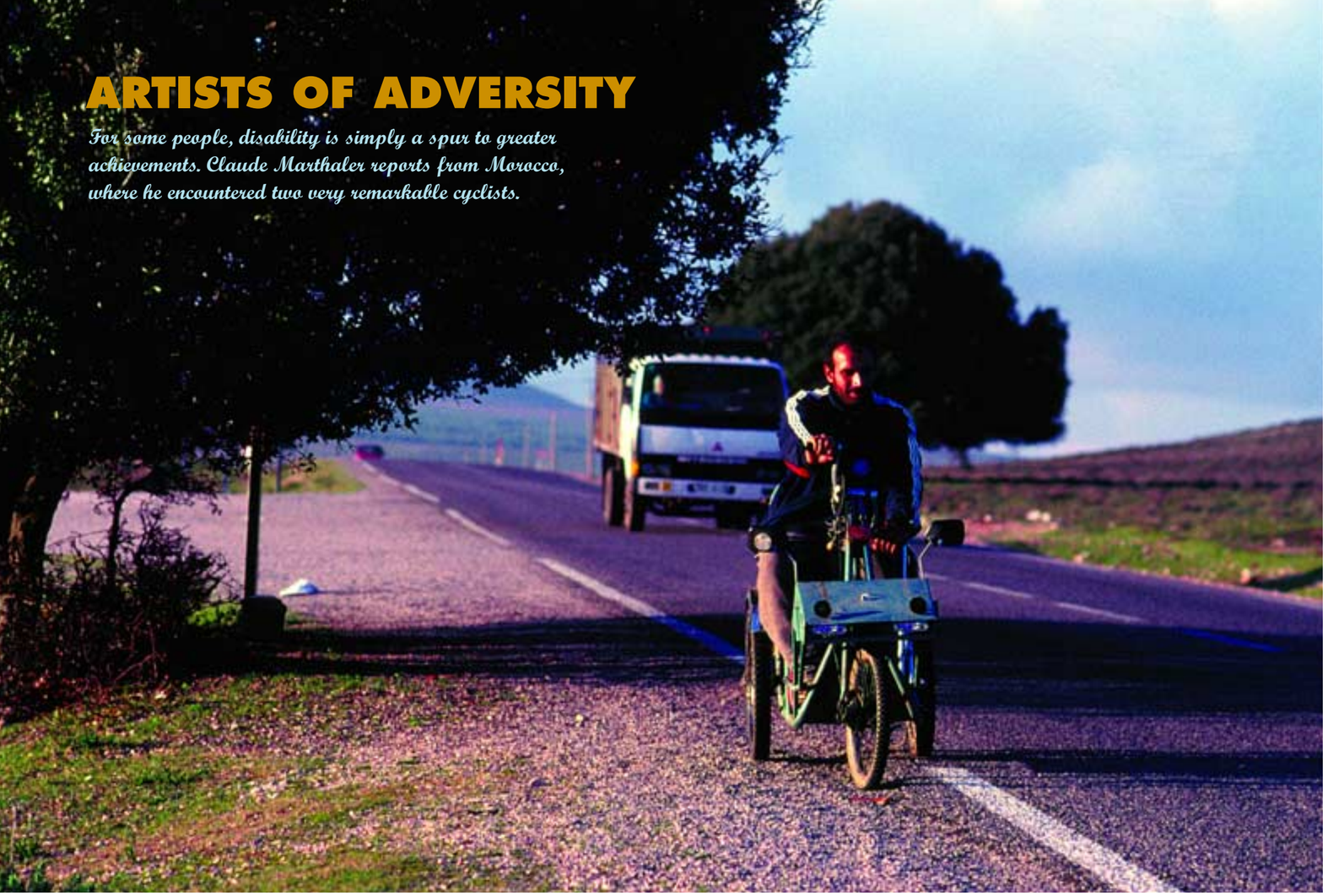
ARTISTS OF ADVERSITY

For some people, disability is simply a spur to greater achievements. Claude Marthaler reports from Morocco, where he encountered two very remarkable cyclists.



In Tibet, I came across Chen Yin Chao, a Chinese Buddhist whose feet were reversed 180 degrees. He had travelled some 40000km on foot over the last five years. Then in Mexico I met three paraplegics, who had rolled their wheelchairs between their capital and Ottawa, Canada, some 5000km. But I had to reach the northernmost tip of Africa before I met disabled cyclonautes.

From the 'third world' and disabled, the Moroccans Kadiri Driss, 44 and Mohamed Azourar, 31, are doubly handicapped by circumstance. But as the French writer Andrè Gide once wrote "The greatest artist is he for whom obstacles serve only as a trampoline". Paradoxically performance-enhanced by discrimination, they had crossed inner and outside borders. They know better than anybody that 'travel' and 'travail' (work) have, as Bruce Chatwin noticed, the same origin. Turning their wheels, they come back to the essence of sport: the fight against oneself.

Above all, they speak clearly against our handicapped world's vision of disabled people. Living on the last link of the social chain, they energetically refute any stereotyping or condescension, this inherited Christian pity which just puts sticks in their wheels.

I was soon to realise that these lonely pioneer road warriors are true characters and self-propelled visionaries. Their language reveals a mixture of suffering, hope and pride, but never of complaint. Their aspirations were those of any passionate human: to realise their dreams.

To find them proved to take even longer than a police inquiry: never had Morocco seemed so big. I had to be patient and persevering – just like them.

MOHAMED AZOURAR: A hand-made journey

One day a restaurant owner told me about a strange tricyclist who had passed through before me. I had just crossed a tough mountain pass, and could barely believe a disabled rider could have done it, pedalling by hand. Then later on, in Marrakech, I found a picture of this rider by chance in a national magazine.

In Africa rumours always prove to be true, and so it was that I finally found the modest home of Mohamed Azourar some two months later, in the Azrou cedar-forest region, at the Aït Yahya Ou Alla hamlet. He was just leaving on his tricycle, but turned around and, moving on crutches, took me in: "You are the first foreign cyclist to visit me at home!" he exclaimed, visibly joyful, his isolation obvious. His burning eyes transmitted something vibrant, and showed instant recognition of a pedal-powered counterpart. He added: "One hand is not enough to applause!".

He was short, weighted some 50kg (although Azourar in the Berber language means 'thick') and wore a pair of second-hand 'Nike' shoes that, I discovered, had given to him last year by my friend Serge, who is currently running around the world (see www.runforkids.org). I could only guess at the strength of his massive upper body under his 'Adidas' jacket, which he never seemed to take off.

While his mother started a fire to prepare a pot of green tea, a cat jumped on Mohamed's lap, indifferent to his legs, which had been deprived of mobility since the age of two. We sat down and he told me of his travels.

At snail's pace (10km/h on the flat), he has recently hand-pedalled some 17000km in three successive journeys through Morocco and Libya. In 1995, he started to ride 7500km throughout Morocco, crossing the Sahara in winter and the Atlas range in summer. In 1997, he tried a tour around the Mediterranean sea, taking a boat from Casablanca to Tripoli "because Algeria didn't let me go through for political reasons". Tunisia refused him entry, too. Then, last year, he rode 8000km in eight months, crossing every single province of Morocco.

It is seldom nowadays that I meet someone with such a precise geographical sense, such a strong recollection of places and people - a memory won by sweat. He showed me piles of pictures and a heavy book filled with messages from people who had invited him home. Mohamed definitively had a traveller' sense of memory, where people count much more than tourist highlights or local handicraft.

One incident he recalled particularly clearly. Riding along, he had spotted something that only his extremely low speed allowed him to notice: two dead policemen concealed beside the road. He was greatly agitated and waved cars to stop. Finally, a driver slowed down and soon the police came in numbers.

The story attracted a lot of attention, and word of Mohamed's good deed spread out through the police-stations of the kingdom. He was helped in many unexpected ways. A military chief, for example, offered him a mobile phone that he is, through lack of money, only using to receive calls.

He had also often experienced cruel solitude on the road. Nobody stopped to offer help when he was repairing a puncture on his tricycle, which takes him a long time and huge effort. Luckily, he's only ever punctured five times.

His own people usually take him for a foreigner at first sight. Sometimes they increase their prices, because they believe that travelling presupposes money. Children in particular see him as a foreigner. They cry: "Come to see the tourist!" Not many tourists move on just two or three wheels, but only tourists travel.

Using his tricycle in his daily movements, he is a well-known regional character. He hands are so melded to the pedals that some people are surprised when they first see him walking with crutches, thinking a miracle must have happened. But his tricycle, proudly decorated with a Moroccan flag and a picture of the king, is never far away.

Without sponsors or assistance, Mohamed seems

LEFT:
Mountains are occasions for patience, with 100kg of tricycle to crank

BELOW:
Claude Marthaler and Mohamed Azourar

simply and slowly to follow his inner path, like the prophet Job, known for his patience. We set out on the road together, and I followed this master of patience across the 1760m Ifrane Pass, moving at some 3.5km/h. As the centre of gravity of his vehicle was well back, and he couldn't ride out of the saddle, his upper body concentrated his whole physical effort. Shoulders giving knocks like the blow of a boxer's fist, his hands grabbing the pedals. Mohamed, eldest son and the only sportsman of his family, was acting like a locomotive – on his bicycle as in life. On the road, a car driver pulled up to greet him. The driver said "Your courage has invited us to stop."

With a Fiat 124 hand brake, thick truck drum brake cables, a self-mounted 21 gear system, motorbike and BMX rims, his 100kg tricycle is a unique vessel. It has smelled the road's dust, it has history. Mohamed is thinking to equip it with solar panels for a radio and lights, but above all, to make it lighter. His heavy-duty vehicle doesn't need any lock for protection.

Mohamed wants to figure in the Guinness Book of Records, "not for the record itself, but for recognition of the disabled". He dreams of an international Tour de France for the disabled, "because so far there are only track races". He dreams about travelling around the world with other friends by tricycle. He imagines travelling in a peloton of disabled people.

Mohamed, who knows each and every corner of Morocco, which, with its desert, ocean, mountains and plains looks like a geographical microcosm of the world, is not content to limit himself. As, finishing my round-the-world journey, I showed him pictures from all over the globe, I could see how his eyes lit up. "I'd like to cross Europe and more, Insh Allah!" ("If God wants it").

He took a picture out of a bag. It had been taken in Tarifa, Morocco, with a statue of the famous Saint Exupèry aeroplane in the background. He told me of his own secret dream of flying with wings instead of pedals. He had developed a taste for it: between Boujdor and Daklha, he recalls 'flying' on his tricycle at 45km/h for 16km, carried by the strong 'Harmattan' wind.

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A seven-minute documentary about his journeys is in production.

Claude Marthaler has now reached the end of his world tour, which has taken him over 120,000 km in seven years. He has ridden through the former Soviet Union, crossed the Indian subcontinent, and cycled through the varied terrain of China, South Korea and Japan. From Tokyo he flew to Alaska and cycled down the Americas. Claude started the last leg from Cape Town in May 1999, and is now at home in Geneva, Switzerland. Claude is currently working on 'Songwheels', a book about his world tour by bicycle, and is looking for an editor. Anybody interested, please contact him at: yak83@hotmail.com or via www.redfish.com/yak or care of Rose Marthaler, Rue Tronchin 1, CH 1202 Genève, Switzerland.
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SONG by Kadiri Driss – synopsis

SONG is the name that a globe trotter gives to a Vietnamese girl whose sad singing voice captures his soul as he is walking by the living boats in a Vietnamese village. Unable to see her because of her insistence not to disclose herself to him, he offers her a violin before leaving. The violin enables her to learn music and become a famous musician who employs her fame and wealth to help handicapped people. Having herself lost her sight at an early age during an American attack on her village in which she lost her parents, she can never read the letters he sends her. The irony of the story is that she never knew that the globe trotter who had offered her the violin is a Moroccan handicapped cyclist who means his world tour to draw attention to the miserable conditions of third world disabled people, and who never knew that 'SONG' can read his letters only through a friend.

Ten years later, destiny brings the two together again in New-York at a world ceremony to help the disabled. They decide to begin a long journey to support their third world fellow-sufferers and to celebrate their marriage by taking part in collective marriages in Vietnam, Morocco and other parts of the world.

It is noteworthy that this is a true story: the author of the story is a Moroccan globe trotter who wrote it during his world tour. This story takes place in Vietnam, Paris, Vienna, Venice, New-York and Marrakech, Morocco.

SONG: L'histoire du globe-trotter handicapé qui a défié le monde à bicicletta, Driss Kadiri, second edition 1999, self-edited.
ISBN 9981 1992 0 6.

KADIRI DRISS: Songwheels

Moroccan policemen, who systematically arrest drivers for bribes, are widely hated by motorists, but they always treated me with an exaggerated degree of respect. One day they even gave me breakfast, and their checkpoint transformed itself in a coffee-shop. "Kadiri Driss, like you, round the world, wrote a book" declared one. "His feet are bent!!" he added with a voice full of exclamation marks.

Two months later, I met Kadiri Driss in a café in Rabat. He walked out of a hand-controlled car. His legs have little strength, giving a disjointed appearance to his whole body. I could barely imagine him riding a bike. He wore a fashionable leather jacket, a black pullover and a pair of black sunglasses, suggesting an intellectual or an artist. He unmistakably took care of his image.

"I change the colour of my car every year to attract women, I am a playboy. Travelling is the best in life. Or travelling, or women, but first women!" He smiled and showed me a whole album of suggestive pictures taken in Thailand, as if they were a proof of his professed identity.

I liked his joyful excessiveness, but also saw his deep despair. Travel is a love-story in itself and travel literature contains a lot of love-stories. In any solo cyclonaute's journey, one fantasy is universal: to encounter a beautiful partner riding a bike. So was it for Kadiri, too – but since he was two years old he had had club feet and therefore, I thought, prostitution was his only logical answer.

Kadiri Driss, born in Oujda near the Algerian border, works at the Ministry of Tourism and earns 1200 dirhams (about £70, $105) monthly. In spring 1994, he left his country and rode his bike for two years around northern Africa, Europe, Asia and Australia. He visited more than forty countries. When I asked him to convert his journey into kilometres, he said he didn't know, eventually coming up with "perhaps 20000". His words were constantly oscillating between fiction and reality, revealing a tortured, solitary life's journey.

Much of his energy is concentrated into the book he wrote about his travels: *Song*. He wrote and published it himself (in French) and subtitled it: 'The story of the handicapped globe-trotter who defied the world by bicycle'. He was convinced from the start that his book would be successful.

He knocked unsuccessfully at many editors' doors and finally not only self-edited, but also self-published. Now he wants *Song* to be translated. With his megalomaniac way of talking that meant not only "five to ten million books", but also the chance to create a movie out of it. A titanic task, a big gear to push. I perceived it as an attempt to reconcile his body and his mind, to neutralise prejudices towards the disabled. "People don't realise the amount of suffering and the realities of such a journey".

He claimed that *Song* was "the best-selling Moroccan book in Morocco" (about ten thousand in two years) but strangely enough it was simply not to be seen or found in any bookshop. He started with an edition of three thousand, which cost him some US$9000, followed by a second run of five thousand, a third edition being now in prospect.

Song is a testimony and an ode to courage rather than a travel literature piece: Kadiri uses simple language, close to how he speaks. The book is divided into two parts: the first 107 pages contain autobiographical references followed by his impressions along the road. The second is a parable of his life, with a happy ending.

Though full of generalities about foreign countries, his report is worth reading for its exposure of discrimination. Kadiri recalls for example his humiliation as he had to crawl on all fours in the public Turkish baths, "people looking at me as if I came from another world."

His synopsis (see side bar) describes the second part of the book. The story is deliberately narrated in such a way that you always wonder if had happened or not.

Though perhaps not convincing as a piece of literature, his conclusion has the undeniable merit of clarity: "People have to understand that life is not only about money or snobbery, it is also about patience, sobriety and above all tolerance. We must share all that we own with the needy and our neighbours, despite our lack of means."

He wants to travel again, this time for three years through Africa and the Americas, alternating cycling and train travel "to avoid the tropics and civil wars". With this journey he wants to complete his world tour after a three-year-long pause: to satisfy the unavoidable urge to re-anchor himself, by moving more than anybody else.

"The bicycle is sacred. It has allowed me to exist" he said like an mantra. "The journey allowed me to demonstrate to others who I am."

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