

DESERT BIRTHS

By **LAURA ANNE MICHAELIS**

All Scripture references used are from the NIV.



Laura Anne Michaelis is a Canadian midwife, who has served in nomad communities in Chad for the past six years. With a heart for Jesus, she intertwines love and midwifery, delivering newborns, and sharing her faith in nomad communities.

A DESERT BIRTH

“You can’t tie the knot that way,” she said, her hands skillfully undoing my haphazard attempt before retying it correctly. Two weeks of learning seemingly simple tasks had passed—things I thought I knew, like tying knots, turned out to be challenges I needed to learn from. While my background of camping in northern Canada offered a modest advantage, it felt as though I was reliving childhood days, receiving basic instructions again, and needing to step into a posture of learning.

Jesus’ words...*unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven... Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven* (Matt. 18: 3–4) flickered through my mind, like a whisper of wisdom, as the determined 15-year-old girl patiently demonstrated the proper method for the tenth time. Who knew that securing water jugs on a donkey could actually be so challenging. Maybe, just maybe, I had finally gotten it right. “Lord, grant me the humility and openness to learn,” I quietly exhaled.

Settling into the nomad way of life in Chad, I realized that immersing myself in their culture, language, and daily routines was a more profound endeavor than I had initially imagined. Cooking over an open flame or securing knots became more than tasks; they became bridges connecting me to these resilient

nomads. Their simple, rugged, and nomadic lifestyle, defined by battling the elements, sourcing sustenance, and combating swift illnesses, revealed a people of remarkable strength and determination. A people created in the image of God. It struck me that this same God, who intricately placed every star in the sky and breathed the breath of life into everything living, also adores these nomadic people. God’s love has traversed great distances and gone to great lengths to save these souls. Their unique journey and heritage are embraced by the same God who holds the universe. As missionaries, we are privileged to be instruments of this unchanging love, demonstrating that the embrace of God’s affections knows no bounds. So, amidst the challenges and shared experiences, I see these moments as opportunities to extend a compassionate hand and to speak of Christ.

RESILIENT WOMEN

As a midwife, my calling embraces the mission of safeguarding and advocating for the well-being of women and their newborns. Please allow me to share with you a little about these women.

The women of the Arab nomad community in Chad stand as some of the most hard-working individuals I’ve encountered. From the first rays of a 5 a.m. sunrise to the day’s end, their tireless efforts include cooking for their families, collecting firewood, fetching water,

tending to livestock, nurturing children, and grinding millet, among myriad other responsibilities. Children are considered a blessing and large families are desired. However, Chadians say that a pregnant woman straddles the boundary between life and death. She is living but walking around with the worry and fear of the risks associated with childbirth for both herself and her unborn baby.

DANCING WITH SURVIVAL

“Ashta is in labor; can you help deliver her baby?” asked her brother. “Yes,” I replied. “OK, I’ll take you to their campsite.” Ashta was a young nomad girl of about 15, whom I had met a few weeks prior. During her prenatal visit, I discovered she had a congenitally enlarged spleen, which intensified her vulnerability during labor and delivery.

Arriving at their camp, the sight of an unfinished tent greeted us—this meant that they had been traveling earlier that morning and had hurriedly set up a makeshift tent upon arrival due to Ashta’s imminent labor. Navigating around cow droppings and a languid dog, I entered the tent to find Ashta curled up, overwhelmed by labor pains. Her mother reached out and pulled me into the tent urging, “Examine her, ensure her safety.”

Assessing her condition alongside a colleague, we offered reassurance that all was well and progressing as normal.

As darkness fell, the moment arrived for Ashta to push. Equipped with headlamps and resolve, we stood ready. As Ashta was pushing, the baby’s heartbeat wavered, causing concern. We prayed and asked God to help Ashta have strength and for us to have wisdom to deliver this baby. With tremendous effort, Ashta successfully delivered her child, though the infant’s struggle was far from over. Overwhelmed with fear, Ashta’s mother draped a blanket over the baby, resigned to the baby being dead. Swift action averted tragedy, as my co-worker took the blanket off and revived the baby, the tent filled with sighs of relief as the baby gave a cry. With mother and child resting on a bed, we asked for permission to pray a blessing over the baby in Jesus’ name. They accepted

and with gratitude, we thanked God for the gift of life and breath bestowed upon the newborn boy.

YEARNING SOULS

Yet, beyond the immediate physical needs that shape the lives of Chad’s nomads, there exists a deeply rooted spiritual need. Predominantly following the Islamic faith, the Arab nomads are a people searching for favor and connection with God. From birth, the father sings the Adah, the Muslim call to prayer in the baby’s right ear desiring that he or she follows in their way of faith. Amongst their Islamic beliefs, folk traditions and superstitions are woven in, which creates an intricate tapestry of both physical and spiritual challenges. At birth a string with a small pouch containing a prayer is tied around the baby’s hand or neck; this is done to ward off and protect the baby from any evil spirits or illness.

It is important to note that up until now we don’t know of anyone who has become a believer in Jesus amongst the Arab nomad camps in Chad. They are a people group where the light of Christ has yet to illuminate their souls to see the glorious wonders of Jesus.

Walking through a modest encampment in Chad, the realities of life become clear. The vulnerability of their children is undeniable—as many as one in five children do not make it to their fifth birthday. This sobering fact is a constant reminder of the urgency that underlies our mission. Nomads’ lives are marked by a delicate dance with survival, and yet, even as they navigate these harsh rhythms of life, there is a yearning that reverberates—a yearning that only comes from an eternal being created by God. *He has also set eternity in the human heart* (Eccles. 3:11).

The needs are vast and multifaceted. The hearts of nomads are awaiting the Good News. There is a calling for missionaries, bold bearers of Christ’s message, to venture into uncharted territory, to sow seeds of faith in all types of soil. This call is for messengers of hope and ambassadors of compassion. The challenge is substantial, but so is the promise—*I will be with you always* (Matt. 28:20). 