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# TALKING TO THE RAWI

*(An encounter with a traditional teller of tales in a Moroccan market place)*

When I finally got to talk to a rawi in Taroudant in southern Morocco, there were a lot of questions I wanted to ask.

The rawi, as readers of the *Alif Layla wa layla* (Arabian Nights) may know, is the professional storyteller in the Arab culture for whom the Nights are, traditionally, the equivalent of a pattern book. More correctly, he (despite Shahrazad, always he in market and coffee house) is the *rawi qissas*, the reciter of narratives - to distinguish him from the *rawi quran*, the reciter of the Koran. This I'd learned from Aziz, an Arab student from UAE who'd stayed with us a couple of years previously. When I'd asked him about the continued existence of rawis in his new country however, he'd nestled down into his Adidas sports suit and adjusted his Walkman. 'These things are for the old people.' he said dismissively.

But without the fabulous oil reserves, Morocco is much poorer; traditional things survive there in plenty. In Marrakesh where I'd first watched them at work, the storytellers are one of the main *halqa* entertainers at the Djemaa el-Fna, the large square around which the city's social life revolves. They draw large crowds with their improvised tellings of tales from Morocco's rich stock of oral traditions. And that despite ample competition from snake charmers, casters of horoscopes, sellers of patent medicines, belly dancers, drummers, oud players and troops of twirling *gnawa* dancers with big metal castanets. Their style is

necessarily dramatic and they constantly involve their audiences, bouncing off responses. They'll break off at a crucial moment in the narrative to make a collection, shaming the mean and reticent into giving. Because like street entertainers closer to home, they survive largely on donations.

For all that, it's no tourist attraction. Few could follow the strange Moroccan Arabic, myself very much included. The vast majority of *halqa* listeners are Moroccans. *Halqa* means literally 'circle'. It refers originally to the formations around entertainers, though performers themselves are evidently known as *halqas* by association. Outside Marrakesh, which has a slightly more relaxed attitudes to such things, in the Berber markets in the Atlas Mountains, halqa listeners are exclusively men. 'It would not be right for the women,' a Berber man told me. 'But yes, we have the rawi qissas, like in Arabic language. And the men will go home and tell their wives the stories and the wives will tell each other.' We were squatting on stools in the shade of the tiny upper courtyard of a mud stuccoed Berber house as he told me that. A solicitous wife served us green tea and nuts. In the gloom of the inner rooms, you could catch the glint of a television, given pride of place amongst oddly contrasting and more homespun possessions. I wondered how long the tradition could continue.

Taroudant is an elegantly walled city almost in the shade of the High Atlas peaks. The broad avenues around the perimeter suggest a classical sense of order that promptly disappears once you enter the maze of *souk* streets within. Ahmad was an affable and intelligent 'student' who spoke good English, all of which made it harder to shake him off. He would show us the sights. No, no, there'd be no need to pay him unless we wanted to. He knew some very good places for carpets and antique jewellery.

I don't much like being guided. It's useful sometimes, but generally cuts down the range of experience available, to say nothing of the hassles in a country like Morocco when you don't want to buy from the guide's 'friends'. So to stall him, since he insisted on falling in step with us, I asked him about the rawis. Ahmed

knew a lot about rawis. Why would he not? They were a normal feature of life. Yes, there would very likely be a rawi qissas or two in the market today. Yes, of course he would show us. How did they become rawis? Through family tradition naturally. What stories would they tell? Many stories, maybe from *Alif Layla wa Layla* maybe from Moroccan mythology, maybe this, maybe that...

We found the rawis in a down-at-heel area of open ground that resembled a tip or a building site, just beyond one of the two main squares. Men stood in circles listening, watching. There's a kind of concentrated stillness in halqa audiences that shuts out the rowdiness of an Arab city. The crowds focused hypnotised attention on a man extolling the virtues of a cure for fevers, on a family of snake charmers swinging large snakes in bags, caught in the spell of the moment. 'This one is a rawi....' said Ahmed, indicating a tall, hook-nosed Berber villager, intoning to no-one in particular, '... but he doesn't know much Arabic. He is mixing up the Berber, so no one listens...' I gave the man a coin, feeling sorry for him. He smiled briefly and continued his oration.

'Ah,' said Ahmed, pointing to another halqa thirty yards or so away, 'this one I think is rawi qissas.' We walked over and joined the group. No one seemed to notice. The normal hassling and curious glances were suspended. Everyone was held in the trance of the story. The rawi, a man in his thirties of mixed Berber and African stock, was wearing a white jellaba and talking gently, authoritatively to an audience of about forty, swapping thoughts and ideas with people squatting at the front of the circle. His style was much less flashy than some I'd watched in Djemaa el-Fna. His listeners ranged from young lads to old men. I listened, unable of course to follow what was being said, but very aware of the strangely focused quality in the air that goes with good storytelling.

'This man also rawi,' said Ahmed, pulling me away from the group after a while. 'He is friend of the rawi who speaks. He makes collection for him.' A slight, sallow-complexioned man, also in his thirties, wearing a leather jacket and brown trousers and a wispy growth of black beard peered at me as Ahmed

spoke. He didn't smile as I shook his hand and ineptly tried some of my Arabic phrases. No, he didn't know French, much less English. But yes, he would answer some questions through Ahmed.

It was a chance I'd been waiting for, but inevitably I wasn't prepared. No tape machine, notebook or camera at the ready, I'd have to rely on simply paying attention. Which wasn't hard. The rawi was shy, a little suspicious of a foreigner asking him questions, but he was evidently used to holding audiences. And Ahmed's translation was fluent and enthusiastic.

He had begun to study to be a teller of tales at the age of twelve. His uncle, not his father, had been a rawi qissas before him. He'd started by learning all of the stories in the *Alif Layla wa Layla*. Then there were other big cycles of stories he'd had to study. Here in Taroudant, he and the other rawi were working together, telling (appropriately for the holy month of Ramadan) the *Wahidan*, a religious epic concerning the successors of Mohammed. This would take several days. Each day of this week they would come to this same place and continue the stories for about two hours. They would make a collection. Many of the same people would come back tomorrow. They would say 'see you tomorrow' and they'd be there. During other times of the year, he told many different kinds of stories, usually in market places. Where did the stories come from? Well, from the great books and then from other storytellers and then... oh, there were stories he just made up.

I was surprised at that; it wasn't something I'd expected. But the rawi was insistent when I queried the point; he definitely made up some of his tales. No, he was not, like me, a musician and used no instruments but he did work with players of *oud* (Arab lute) and *darbuka* (Arab goblet shaped drum) sometimes. They improvised interludes and introductions to his stories. He didn't know how many stories he knew - he'd never needed to count them...

He had an intense, smouldering quality as he talked. I had the impression that he didn't think much of me - if I was, as I'd been introduced, an English rawi, why would I need to ask such trivial questions? But we parted with smiles and good wishes as I handed him some dirhams for the collection. 'It is good to give to this man,' Ahmed said as we walked away. 'This man very poor and he have a family too. And he can do things for you that you don't know, with his stories. It is always good to give to rawi qissas. '

Ahmed couldn't explain this, but I gathered there was some sort of *baraka* involved. It's a much-used word in Morocco, popularly meaning something between a blessing and luck. And there might just have been some immediate evidence for its efficacy, because when Ahmed finally got his way and deposited us in a Berber rug shop where we were subjected to the high pressure sell, for once I got the bargaining right, certainly more by luck than judgement. Now every time I look at the fabulously embroidered blue Moroccan Berber blanket I didn't mean to buy, even at that knock down price, I can remember the rawi qissas at Taroudant.