

A Bride is a Dangerous Thing

by [Geoffrey Clarfield](#) (August 2023)



Untitled, Ramses Younan, 1935

Women have been omitted by God from His mercy.

-Moroccan Proverb

The sun was soon to set as the late afternoon light poured down upon my Moorish garden. The sound of water flowing in the fountain contrasted nicely with the position of the orange trees that gave the closed internal courtyard an open feeling, as if a bit of an orchard had been brought into the house.

I gazed at the water as it splashed on the blue and white surface of the tiles and collected in a round basin at the bottom of the fountain. The noise of traffic was distant. I could hear the birds up on the roof, pigeons with their mournful, almost cow-like mewings. I was about to get ready to shower as I opened my diary to write my daily entry.

I had been sent by the Israeli government to Morocco, an ancient, Arab, Islamic kingdom whose reigning monarch claims descent from the Prophet Muhammad himself. The king's lineage goes back four hundred years in Morocco. These are Alawite Sultans. The present King, really the Sultan, is Mohammed the Sixth. His father was the famous Hassan II whose father was Mohammed the Fifth, "Al Khamis" as they say in Arabic.

Although the Muslim brotherhood is strong in Morocco, the King and his court have managed to stave them off, since the King and his courtiers comprise both religious and civil rulers who are slowly dragging Morocco into the 21st century.

When Morocco and Israel recently opened diplomatic relations, there was an agreement to send a "cultural attaché" to the Kingdom, a gesture of good will, implying that their relations were not just political, but were based on the fact that Jews had lived in Morocco for two thousand years. The fact that only 5,000 Jews remained in Morocco, most having emigrated to France, Israel, and Quebec, was to be ignored. There were issues of culture at stake here, and I was the one slated to "pull it off."

I decided to avoid Casablanca, that big, white-washed city that gleams off the Atlantic Ocean, with its new Israeli Embassy. For, I knew I would not find the soul of Morocco there. There, I would be reduced to curating exhibits on Moroccan Jewish heritage, hobnobbing with other diplomats and going to cocktail parties.

“Oh,” I could practically hear the British cultural attaché say, “So you are the new culture boy in town. Tell me about Israeli Museums. Have you found the lost treasure of Titus yet, or maybe the menorah of the Temple? ... I hear the Tel Aviv night life is smashing. Drop by for coffee one day and we can talk. I am writing a book about cultural appropriation. I can you tell all about it.”

Instead, I set up residence in Tangier, that ancient Mediterranean port with its old city, the casbah on a hill. I took a house in the old city and turned its living room into an office. It was more like a reception area, covered with Moroccan rugs and low-lying furniture, as it is the Moroccan custom to sit on bed-like couches and eat and drink from copper trays that stand just a foot off the floor. In deference to Muslim sentiment, I had no pictures of people on the walls, just landscapes of Israel, and a large photo of the Western Wall of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

I did all this to provide a familiar Moroccan environment where I could meet with artists, musicians, archaeologists, writers, and others of the “creative class” who were ill disposed towards the Jewish state. These meetings usually ended up in the garden in the courtyard, where the splash of the fountain provided a familiar atmosphere for my guests as I offered up Moroccan tea, green, sweet, and served it with a flourish from a silver teapot.

Starting, you must pour close to the glasses’ edge, lifting the teapot sometimes two feet in the air, and then with a swift descent bring it back to the glass with a flourish. It

took some time, and many spills to master this technique but after a month I poured tea like a Moroccan-born man.

I threw myself into improving my Moroccan Arabic (My grandmother had been born in Tangier). I hired a Moroccan cook, Amina and a gofer/messenger, Hassan. I read histories of Morocco, ethnographic studies, and the ethnomusicological literature. I upgraded my skills on the oud, a lute-like stringed instrument, with a local master and could soon play some of the classic Moroccan pop songs, the laments of Haja Hamdawiya, and the driving, rhythmic songs of Hamid Zahir.

I would dress up in my djellaba (traditional hooded Moroccan cloak), put on my yellow slippers, put on a turban, and watch the sun stream in through the Mediterranean humidity, singing songs, playing on my oud.

Hasan would come upstairs to the rooftop to watch and listen. He was in his mid-sixties but looked older. He had dark eyes and a stubbly beard. He was thin and a bit shorter than me. He usually wore a grey and black striped woolen djellaba that reminded me of a medieval monk's robe. He carried a Berber style knife, probably made of silver, around his shoulder and a leather bag ornamented with arabesques.

When I played music, he would take out his long pipe, his sebsi, and smoke kif, the Moroccan strain of marijuana. He told me that long ago, as a kid, he had worked as a gardener for the famous Moroccan Jewish musician, Sami al Maghribi, a Jewish bard close to the throne, who later became a Sephardic cantor when he eventually emigrated to Montreal.

As I mastered the local language, Hassan would say to me, Sidi (sir) you are a good man. The Jews had it good here in Morocco, why did they go to Israel?

I liked Hasan and did not have the heart to give him a lecture on the status of Jews in Arab lands, their periodic persecution by their Muslim masters, and their near extinction

by the Nazis who had occupied Tunisia and set up concentration camps there. He would not have understood any of this as he could neither read nor write.

Hasan was devout. He prayed five times a day, fasted during Ramadan, gave alms to the poor, and was a devoted family man. His Islam was permeated with saint worship, for he swore by the tomb of saint Sidi Gilani before he undertook any serious errand or trip on my behalf.

One afternoon, as I was reading the great Scandinavian ethnologist, Westermarck, who had lived in Morocco and written about its folklore and beliefs at the end of the 19th and beginning of the twentieth century, I came upon the section asserting/explaining that, in Morocco/Arab lands, a bride is a dangerous person. I read the short excerpt in French to Hasan.

A bride is also a somewhat dangerous person. Her glance or the sight of her may cause misfortune. The ceremonies which precede, or are connected with, her arrival at the bridegroom's place are largely intended to prevent her carrying evil with her to her new home. It is presumably for this purpose that she, on her way thither, is taken to a river which she has to cross on her mule three times to and fro, and that, if the procession passes a shrine, she has to ride round it three times... (Volume II, Page 9).

Hassan had listened carefully. He poured himself a cup of tea, lit up his sebsi, contemplated the curlicues of smoke that floated out into the courtyard and then slowly and deliberately recounted the following story.

When I was twenty-five, I had just got married. My wife

Fatima was pregnant and one afternoon I was called by my father, my uncles, and male cousins to an assembly. We all met in the courtyard of my father's house near to here on Rue Del Bomba (fireman's lane). I was told that a distant cousin had ran off with a man and married someone without the blessing of my father and uncles. I was sent to fetch her.

It took me twelve hours on the bus to get to the small town of Sidi Malek. It is no different than any other small town in northern Morocco. There is the old French bus station, the market, the mosque, the government offices, and the police station, the old casbah and some new buildings near the new lycee or school.

I had been given twenty pieces of gold to sell. It was a way to cover my real identity. I met with many townfolk interested in buying, as the wedding season was approaching, and gold jewelry is a significant part of the marriage ceremony. I asked who was getting married and who had married, all with the intention of showing that I was sincerely interested in the market for my precious goods.

I eventually found the family where my cousin was staying. I came into the house and was offered tea. I showed my wares. The master of the house agreed to pay a good sum for half of my gold but asked me to stay in the courtyard while he got the money from down the street.

There was no one else in the house. I opened every door in the courtyard until I came to one where I heard a person snoring. It was my cousin. I woke her up. I explained to her that she had dishonored the family, that if she came with me right now, all would be forgiven, her marriage would be annulled, and she would marry someone that the male elders of the family would choose for her.

She cursed me and all our family. She spat in my face and

grabbed my knife. She held it out in front of me. She was shaking with anger and fear. I tried to grab it from her and cut my finger. We moved around the room, me trying to corner her and her keeping me at bay.

I finally caught her. She fell. I heard a groan. I turned her over. The knife, my knife had gone deep into her stomach. Her life was bleeding out on the floor. I swept up my knife. I wiped the blood on her handkerchief. I closed the door. I left the house and walked out into the street.

I kept on walking for seven days. I took the paths of the shepherds and came home. A meeting was held, and my father and his uncles blessed me for what I had done. I went to the shrine of Sidi Malek. I killed a goat and said a prayer. I slept in the shrine of Sidi Malek that night and dreamed that I saw my cousin in heaven. She did not smile.

I awoke the next morning. No one came after me, not the police, not her family, no one. Sidi Malek had protected me and does so to this day.

“You see this knife that I wear, every day?” He continued.

“Yes” I said.

Hassan continued speaking, “That is the one that did the job. You know Sidi, a bride is a dangerous thing.”

The sun was setting, and its light came down into my Moorish garden. The water flowed from the fountain. The traffic was distant. I could hear the birds up on the roof, pigeons with their cow like mewings. I was about to get ready to shower. I opened my diary and began to write my daily entry.

It took some time to find Hassan and Amina. Not many Moroccans

with their background had worked with or for Jews. Most of our people had left Morocco by the early sixties. After the '67 and '73 wars almost all Jews had left the country. A few stayed in Tangier, and the majority of those who remained moved to Casablanca, where they live to this day. Hassan came from an Arabic-speaking clan and had worked for a famous Moroccan Jewish musician. Amina came from the Rif, Berber from the north of Morocco. Both had married and had children, but their spouses had passed away. In the past they had had worked for expatriates in Tangier during the late 1950s when the city was still under international rule.

Hassan is a serious, thoughtful man who has the kind of inner voice of someone who is literate, well-travelled and well-read of which he is neither. Amina is very quiet around him but is in close contact with her family near Wazzan and has long conversations by phone with various relatives.

Although at first, she had nothing to say, she slowly opened up over time and taught me much. I slowly realized that Hassan and Amina thought that Israel was as big and as powerful as the United States. As the Arabs have a tendency of honoring the strong and not the weak, this gave me an initial respect which I later earned from them when I was able to help them and their families.

In turn I depended on them to explain to me the nonlinear world of Morocco, especially the life and death code of honor and shame that paralyzes the development of friendship and love in Morocco.

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Geoffrey Clarfield is an anthropologist at large. For twenty years he lived in, worked among and explored the cultures and

societies of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. As a development anthropologist he has worked for the following clients: the UN, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Norwegian, Canadian, Italian, Swiss and Kenyan governments as well international NGOs. His essays largely focus on the translation of cultures.

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