

The Genies are Long Gone

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



Seated Riffian (Le Rifain assis), Henri Matisse, 1912

Wazzan is a two and half hour drive from Tangier. I had been invited by the Moroccan government to visit the tomb of Rabbi Abram Ben Diwan who is buried there. He was an 18th century Jewish wonder worker/faith-healer who cured many and answered many a prayer of the suffering Jewish subjects of the Sultan of Morocco.

Since the peace, it the tomb has been spruced up with government money and is beginning to see visitors from Israel whose families once lived there. They come, they pray, they feast, they marvel at the beauty of northern Morocco and return home to Israel, reversing the ritual pilgrimage that existed for millennia, going from Morocco to Israel and back again.

Wazzan is a holy city for Muslims, for the graves of the Sharifs of Wazzan lie there. Their many descendants still live in Wazzan and Tangier. The Wazzani Sharifs claim descent from the Prophet, which has often put them no more than one step behind the ruling family, the Allawi, whose descendant is today's King who sits on the throne of Morocco. When the Sultan is invested, it is the Sharif of Wazzan who holds the stirrup of the horse upon which the Sultan climbs during this rare ceremony.

I was driving to Wazzan, but I was not alone. In the passenger seat beside me sat my cook, Amina, who kept me in good cuisine and good cheer in my house in Tangier. She had asked to join me for my official visit, touting a culinary purpose: she desired the olives of Wazzan, harvested from the ancient groves of olives that surround the city. These groves have been cultivated for centuries by the peasants of the region, who are mostly Berber.

Amina also had a personal motive, for Wazzan happened to be

the home of her mother's family, so she has many relatives there.

Her roots are here in the Rif mountains, which have always served as a tribal area in perpetual opposition to the Sultans who rule the cities of the south. (The Rif is also the home of the "Master Musicians of Jajouka," a group of local musicians, catapulted to world fame by the late Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones, but that is another tale, already told).

As we circled up terraced hillsides on which thousands of olives grow, Amina told me, "*Sidi* (sir), my ancestors fought very hard against the Spanish. They pushed us out of Spain many centuries ago and came after us before, during and after WWI. Raisuli, Abdel Krim, they killed many thousands of Spanish soldiers. Why? For Islam!—For polygamy, for honor and shame. So they could rule their own people, and take their wealth. Nothing has changed since independence. The rich take from the poor, and the poor go to Europe to work for the rich Christians in Spain, France and Germany. Is Islam so weak that we cannot support our own people?"

I did not answer. My role is that of a diplomat. For me to start talking about internal injustice in Morocco would be a mistake. I remembered the advice of an old French expatriate, a gifted photographer who still lives in Marrakech, "You can accuse your mother of being a whore but you cannot accuse your neighbor's mother of the same." So I kept my mouth shut.

The radio station was blasting my favorite Moroccan female singer, Haja Hamdawiya, who was lamenting, "The cup is sweet, the cup is sweet," alluding either to the sweet pleasure of drinking alcohol, which is against Muslim law or perhaps the lure of extra-marital sex, which is also illegal. Despite her subversive lyric, and others like it, the diminutive Hamdawiya was finally featured on Moroccan National TV and became a kind of star late in life, loved by the people and loathed by the authorities. She looked a bit like Amina, who could not carry

a tune, as I was frequently reminded as she cleaned house and cooked dinner.

Quiet as Amina appeared, she could think for herself. "Sidi," she said, "Tell me about the Sharif of Wazzan who was possessed by the spirit of Jesus Christ. I can neither read nor write French or Arabic." I knew the story well as I had been recently reading the history of the Rif mountains and the various family quarrels of the various Sharifian families in this turbulent region, which is part of the turbulent history of Morocco just before WWI. The Sultan had lost power, the Sherifs of Wazzan were out of control, and the French, who were soon to occupy the country, declared the Sultan's half-brother to be Sultan.

Mustering my best spoken Arabic, I paraphrased the following excerpt from Walter Harris' account of that time in *Morocco That Was*.

"It was like this: more than one hundred years ago. the Sultan had lost most of his power and the French and the Spanish were getting ready to conquer the country. There was no law here in the mountains. The Sharifs of Wazzan were the only local authority, but they were at each other's throats. It is told that one of them, Mulai Muhammed, was once sitting on the second floor of his house, with a good view of the street below, eating and drinking with his followers when out of nowhere shots rang out from the street below and missed Mulai Muhammad by a few feet, the bullets hitting the wall beside him. He just kept on nonchalantly eating and drinking. Later, however, he sent out spies to discover who was trying to kill him. Not an easy task, for it could have been anyone.

"All the people in the Rif had pinned their hopes on Mulai Thani, a handsome young member of the Sharifian lineage, a

man who had served as a soldier fighting with the French in Algeria. The people believed that he, and only he, could bridge the gap between the waning power of the Sultan and the growing power of the French, for he was at home in both worlds. But it was not to be. For there was just one problem. He had broken the Islamic taboo on alcohol, a habit that he had picked up from the French, and was a known alcoholic.

When he binge drank, Thani would become violent and attack innocent people or the servants in his household, giving them severe beatings. Then he would sleep it off and ask for their forgiveness, give them money to make the Haj, or money for a dowry, if it was a young woman he had beaten. He never took advantage of his female servants in the way of men. One day, Thani was so drunk that he picked up a pistol, saw a group of men walking back from the mosque, and started shooting at them. He killed a good number, but you see the Sharifs of Wazzan have so much baraka (blessing and magic power), that the families of the slain men said, "It must be the will of God for the gun was fired by a Wazzani Sharif."

I paused and quoted one of Thani's letters to Harris which I found so disturbing that I had practically memorized it. It went something like,

"My dear friend, I beg you to tell my brothers that I thank them very much for having sent still another soldier to kill me. I went up to my couba (upper room) for a little air. As I looked out of the window, I saw a soldier armed with his rifle. I was afraid and I aimed my rifle at him but, as he told me he would do nothing, I let him pass quietly. At once, he went to my brothers' to say that I had

wished to kill him. I swear to you on the head of our Prophet Mohamed that if I had wished to do so, I have other places from which I could kill everyone who passes, only I am not mad. I killed those men because I was drunk and also angry ... I swear to you my dear friend that I was 'off my head..."

"Amina," I added, "what he left out of this letter was that he had also tried to kill the two sons of his brother when he pulled a pistol on them in a mosque, but because he was drunk at the time, missed them. Thani went from bad to worse. Finally, the Sultan's soldiers were sent to arrest him. When they brought him to Tangier, they allowed him to see his father, who he then tried to strangle to death. He was kept under house arrest for some time and then sent to France, where he ended up in a hospital for mad people and died proclaiming that he was Jesus Christ."

As we approached town, Amina asked me to stop so that we could get some tea at the edge of town. Over tea she told me, "Sidi, Morocco is a land of jnun (genies). They are everywhere and there are different kinds. Some of them help the living, some of them harass us, some can be controlled by powerful humans and some come to inhabit the souls of troubled men and women. I believe that the spirit of Issa (Jesus), peace be upon him, for he was a prophet of God, came to rest upon Thani temporarily."

"Let me tell you something my grandmother once told me and then perhaps you will believe what I am saying. During the time of ignorance—before the coming of Islam to Morocco—there lived a simple peasant named Hamou. He took care of his farm and sold the surplus in the nearby town.

He neither drank nor smoked kif. He was the perfect husband. His wife, Zeineb, would make food, come to the fields, and comfort him while he ate. They would then go to a small hut and have husband and wife relations, sleep a little and go back to work. They were as content as Adam and Hawah were in their Garden when the world began.

“One day Zeineb stepped on a snake. It bit her and she became faint. Hamou made her comfortable in the hut and called all the healers in the area. They gave her herbs, they bathed her in magical waters, but nothing could help her. She died and Hamou saw the spirit of life exit her body during her last breath.

“Hamou stopped eating, he stopped drinking tea, he lived on a bowl of soup and did very little farming. He stopped visiting his neighbors, and in his grief withdrew from those around him who loved him. As he ate less and less and drank less and less the months piled up like years and soon his hair turned white, his skin wrinkled, and he looked like he was one hundred years old. The children avoided him because they believed he was possessed by a genie.

“It went on like this for quite some time until Jesus, a prophet of God, was walking through the country healing the sick. He met Hamou on the way to the well with his donkey and stopped him, ‘Oh, my father!’ he said, ‘You are the saddest face I have met on my journeys. Tell me what ails you.’ Hamou told Jesus the whole story and together they went to visit the tomb of Zeineb.

“The prophet prayed, dark clouds appeared, lightning came down from the sky and you could hear thunder for miles. He put his hands on the tombstone of Zeineb and cried out, ‘God, my father, let Zeineb rise again!’ With shock and horror, Hamou saw Zeineb rise up from the earth, brush off the dust that had covered her and ask for water to bathe.

“Hamou fetched water from the well and soon after his beautiful young wife was standing there alive and breathing. He got down on his knees, wept, thanked Jesus for this miracle and stood up. Zeineb looked at him and said, ‘Who are you?’ He said, ‘I am your beloved husband, Hamou, who spent many years of happiness with you!’ She looked at him and said, ‘I do not know you. You are old. You are ugly. I could never love you.’

“The prophet Jesus was watching all of this and became angrier and angrier. He cried out, ‘Let the earth be opened and swallow up this child of man for she is arrogant, insolent and ungrateful!’ So the earth swallowed her up. Just outside of Wazzan, there is a fissure in the rocks. Occasionally a mysterious smoke comes out of the rock. My mother told me that that is where Zeineb disappeared so long ago.”

We sat there sipping our tea. I said little and then she said, “If Jesus, peace be upon him, could bring Zeineb back to life and then ask the earth to swallow her up, he could easily take possession of a Sharif of Wazzan until he passed away in the land of the infidels. For Allah and his prophets are infinitely more powerful than you or I, yes?”

I realized then what separated me from Amina as much as oil is separate from water. Amina lived in an enchanted world. Although I believe in God, I live in a world without enchantment.

I was reminded of a passage written by Salman Rushdie in *Joseph Anton, A Memoir*, which shows the riches of her world and, by contrast, the poverty of ours:

To grow up steeped in these tellings was to learn two

unforgettable lessons: first, that stories were not true (there were no “real” genies in bottles or flying carpets or wonderful lamps) but, by being untrue, they could make him feel and know truths that the truth could not tell him, and second, that they all belonged to him, just as they belonged to his father, ... and to everyone else, they were all his, as they were his father’s, bright stories and dark stories, sacred stories and profane, his to alter and renew and discard and pick up again as and when he pleased, his to laugh at and rejoice in and live in and with and by, to give the stories life by loving them and to be given life in return. Man was the storytelling animal, the only creature on earth that told itself stories to understand what kind of creature it was. The story was his birthright, and nobody could take it away.

It made me wonder if we, pay too great a price for our rational world-view, at the loss of wonder and imagination.

Amina directed me to her family’s house. The moment we arrived she was flooded with doting cousins, aunts, uncles, nephews and nieces. There were hugs all around and some of the women ululated. At my house in Tangier, Amina is always calm, careful and dignified. Here, she came alive and had a smile on her face. I was given no choice but to come in and drink tea and eat candied gazelle horns. I was bemused as I realized that her family didn’t know what to make of me. I was her boss and paid her well, but I was a Jew—an Israeli—yet I was at home in their language and with their customs. I amused myself wondering what they would say about me after I left. The demands of hospitality met, I thanked them and bid them goodbye.

Ten minutes later, I arrived at the tomb of the Rabbi. I was directed to a seat in the front row. The Israeli Ambassador had driven in from Rabat and gave an adequate speech. The

government representative for Wazzan was there and spoke with enthusiasm about the return of the Jews to the tombs of their ancestors. My colleague, Brahim, from the Ministry of Culture sat beside me. I was invited to say (sing) the prayer for the dead and I offered a not too bad version of a Moroccan Jewish version of Kaddish.

Over tea, Brahim told me, "Last night I had the strangest dream. I was a peasant farmer with a beautiful wife whom I loved dearly. Then a snake bit me and I woke up. I cannot get the dream out of my head" I smiled and refilled his tea cup and said, "It was just a bad dream. You are a modern man and, for us, the genies are long gone."

Afterword

The truth of the matter is that for the majority of Moroccans today, "the genies are not long gone." They still plague them in their daily lives. It is an aspect of the daily life of the citizens of that nation, that is missed by most of the millions of tourists and do-gooders who come to Morocco each year.

Here is just one example, taken from the Moroccan Press, which shows the dissonance between would-be modernizers and a people steeped in such traditions when it comes to what is now accepted as "mental health."

BOUYA OMAR, April 9, 2014 (AFP) – A thin mist hangs in the air as a handful of troubled souls wander aimlessly around the Bouya Omar mausoleum in central Morocco, the occasional chilling cry rising from behind its walls. These are Morocco's "possessed" –from violent schizophrenics to hard drug users—who are believed to be tormented by evil spirits and whose relatives bring them here to await deliverance.

But many are left wondering exactly what goes on inside the sanctuary of the 16th-century Moroccan saint, situated in a small town named after him on the plains east of Marrakesh.

Bouya Omar's followers claim the mentally ill are healed by the saint's supernatural powers, but rights groups allege gross mistreatment of those taken there, with one former inmate describing months of "hell". Activists say hundreds of people have been kept in chains here, sometimes starved and beaten, making the place a byword for cruelty and highlighting the stigma attached to mental illness in Morocco. Their numbers cannot be verified and officials are reluctant to speak about what they say is a "sensitive subject."

I have given much thought to the survival and active presence of genies in the life of contemporary Moroccans. I see it as filling a void created by the absence of skepticism, the absence of a science-obsessed society, the absence of the psychological equivalent of the Protestant Reformation, and the absence of meaningful Muslim reform.

If you look into Jewish society as it existed in the Shtetls of Eastern Europe, you will find similar beliefs as you read about people being possessed by spirits, the Dybukks of Jewish folklore and ritual: the wandering soul of a dead person, or a demon, that enters the body of a living person and controls that body's behavior and ritual. I am told that my great great grandmother on my father's side was possessed by a Dybuk before they moved from what is now Slovakia to Vienna. Apparently, after she moved to the big city, the Dybbuk did not follow her.

As the Germans said during the Middle Ages, "City air makes free."

[Table of Contents](#)

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.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)