

# Keeping a Moroccan Tradition Alive, One Tale at a Time

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Published: February 27, 2006

MARRAKESH, [Morocco](#) — It's time for work and Mohammad Jabiri heads for Jemaa el Fna, the main square of Marrakesh, often called the cultural crossroads for all of Morocco.



Marlise Simons/The New York Times

Mohammad Jabiri, a storyteller for more than 40 years, at work in the Jemaa el Fna square in Marrakesh.

Stooping a little, he weaves through the crowds, past the snake charmers and their flutes, the racket of drummers and cymbalists, the cheers for the acrobats and the shouting of the kebab vendors, until he stakes out a quiet spot for himself.

Mr. Jabiri is a storyteller, a profession he has practiced for more than 40 years. Every day, he conjures up a real or imagined past that is filled with ancient battles and populated with sinners and prophets, wise sultans and tricky thieves.

For this he needs few props: he puts down a small stool and some colored illustrations. The rest is performance. His eyes can grow large and magnetic and his voice booms or whispers, depending on the intrigue.

Mr. Jabiri, 71, is one of eight bards still performing publicly in the Marrakesh region of southern Morocco. But most, like him, fear that their generation may be the last in a line that is as old as this medieval city.

These men descend from the era — long before radio and television, movie theaters and telephones — when itinerant narrators brought news and entertainment to country fairs and village squares.

Yet somehow, Mr. Jabiri still manages to defy the formidable electronic competition.

"Some people feel that television is very far away from them," he explained to a visitor. "They prefer making contact, they prefer hearing live stories."

And so they did on a recent afternoon, as Mr. Jabiri called out a blessing, raised his right hand and began the tale of the young woman who fell in love with a saintly hermit. But the hermit rejected her as an envoy of the devil, so she decided to lie down with a shepherd who crossed her path, became pregnant and said it was the hermit's child.

As the story unfolded over the next hour, it took on several subplots with unexpected twists and turns. The audience was made up of men only, some sitting on the ground, some leaning on their bicycles. Women are not supposed to stop and listen to wild or bawdy tales.

"Young people like stories from '1,001 Nights' because there is less religion," Mr. Jabiri said later that day as he listed his considerable repertoire.

"Older people like stories about the life of the Prophet and his companions," he said. "They like war stories, battles between the Muslims and the Persians or between the Muslims and the Christians. People also like miracles, like Jesus Christ healing the blind."

Students of local customs say the stories are a great melting pot of religious and folk tales from the region's Berber, Gnawi and Arab traditions.

Mohammad el-Haouzi, a biologist who grew up near the square, said he loved the ever changing spectacle of jugglers, healers, musicians and storytellers. "I may stop by at night when I need some distraction," he said. "You can eat, laugh, have your teeth fixed or your body painted."

Mr. Haouzi has heard uncounted tales here, and even when he knows them, they rarely sound the same. The magic is in the telling, he said, and the mood may change with the narrator's antics, or the shouting or taunting from the audience. The tales may be moralizing or burlesque or may spoof the powerful.

"One man often parodied the bombast of television journalists," Mr. Haouzi said. "He had the crowds howling with laughter."

Juan Goytisolo is a rare European expatriate who speaks Morocco's Arabic dialect and understands the storytellers. A prominent Spanish writer who has lived here since the 1970's, he is devoted to Jemaa el Fna and its artists. They inspired his novel "Makbara," he said.

In a cafe overlooking the square, he spoke admiringly about the "old masters" he has known, their improvisations and pranks, and the tricks they use to capture and hold their audience. Some may start a fake fight to attract listeners. He recalled that "Sarouh, a very strong man who is dead now, would lift a donkey up into the air. As it started braying, people would come running. 'You fools,' he would yell at the crowd. 'When I speak about the Koran nobody listens, but all of you rush to listen to a donkey.' "

Another narrator, seeing the crowd thin, would shout, "All those cursed by their parents must leave," Mr. Goytisolo said with a chuckle. "So of course everybody would stay, and pay."

Mr. Goytisolo has been the driving force behind a movement to protect the square, which he calls a "great and rich cultural space, that is in danger of being drowned by commerce, by the pressure to develop." The group has in recent years managed to block projects like a tall glass tower and an underground garage. Cars have now been banned altogether.

He also obtained help from Unesco, which in 2001 designated the square part of the "Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity."

Over the past few years, students have used video recorders to document the sights and sounds of the square, and some of the storytellers have visited schools, Mr. Goytisolo said, "so that children know there is more than the canned stuff they see on television." But he worries, he said, that the old masters are dying and not being replaced.

Mr. Jabiri said that in his youth it was easier for a storyteller to make a living. Although he could barely read and write, he learned his trade by listening to older bards and imitating them. Finally, he wanted to see the world and, he recalled with pride, told his stories as far away as Casablanca, Fez and Meknes.

But now, foreign tourism has brought inflation and, earning two or three dollars per day, he can no longer afford the bus fare to travel or pay for a bed. He sees change all around him. Some of his colleagues are sick and have stopped coming. Two young apprentices working in Marrakesh have a long way to go.

As dusk falls on the square, Mr. Jabiri is still telling his tale and it has reached a critical moment. The pregnant young woman, the hermit and the shepherd have all been summoned

to be judged by the king. The king tells the hermit he will be beheaded, but he can make one last wish.

At this point, Mr. Jabiri abruptly stops and suggests that his enraptured audience make a payment so he can continue. He collects his coins, intones a blessing and, his voice rising and his eyes large and wide, he completes his tale, in which the baby speaks and saves the hermit, who falls in love with the young woman. At least this story has a happy ending.