

# *Halqa,* a circle of people.

In the centre, a man is telling something to the crowd. He is a storyteller. One doesn't find him only in Marrakech; he's in almost any Moroccan city. One always sees him in the medina (the old part of the city), in the afternoons, never in the mornings. His presence is less visible, less notorious now than in the past few decades. The man has serious and threatening competitors: movie theatres with their Cowboys and Indians, Egyptian, and even Chinese movies; the television with its moving oriental dramas, the radio with its Moroccan plays. Nevertheless, our storyteller is persistent, like the vestiges of the walls of the old cities. He does not offer what his competitors offer. His goods are words, and his words are authentic, not from the Arabian Nights, not at all from the Biography of the Prophet, despite the man's name: *Meddah an-nabi* (the Eulogist of the Prophet). Who is he? What tales does he tell? Why is he so tenacious in his presence?

I am drawn to the crowd. I recognise him from my early school days, an age when television was still a luxury. His voice, that same voice that I had listened to during the years of my childhood, intoxicated me. This time, I want to find out who this man is who is paid by the crowd for his words.

He is telling the story of a poor widow. She has a number of children. They are crying for food. His description is brief and profound. He describes poverty: to silence the hungry children, the mother puts a few stones in a pot on the fire. She repeatedly tells them that the soup will be ready shortly. The children fall asleep.

The hero saviour is not the Caliph Omar, though he supposedly once saved a woman in a similar situation, nor even the Caliph Haroun Rachid, who, allegedly, once found himself in the presence of a woman cooking stones so that the children would fall asleep. The hero saviour this time is the Sultan. Wondering

incognito at night, disguised with his vizier as merchants, he is eager to observe his people. On one of these nights, he sees a light coming from a hut. He asks his vizier to look in. Then they knock at the widow's door and ask for the hospitality that God has recommended to the believers. No one, not even a poor widow, can refuse that, even if she is totally poverty stricken. The guests receive what is available: a roof under which they can spend the night.

However, the Sultan is curious and, like a shepherd, concerned with the well-being of his sheep. He can't help asking the widow what she is cooking. The storyteller not only narrates, but also sings. He interrupts his story and improvises a song that sums up the sequences that he has just finished. Not all storytellers are singers, but mine is. I still remember the banjo he used to use more than three decades ago. Now, it has aged like its player. When he stops singing, he asks the crowd to say the blessing of the Prophet: *Salat 'ala 'n-nabi*. In unison, the crowd shouts "God bless you, oh Prophet of God". He then asks them again, and they repeat obediently. He pretends that he has heard nothing. The crowd shouts in one loud voice: "God bless you, oh Prophet of God". Then: "One more time, oh Children of the Believers". The crowd shouts even louder.

He puts his banjo on the ground and says solemnly: "Oh Children of the Muslims, if you leave me now, God will judge between us". There is a contract whose terms are not explicit between the storyteller, the *hlayqi*, and his crowd (*halqa*). Words cost money: But though he is supposed to be paid for his story, he is also paid for his *medh*, his eulogy of the Prophet. The storyteller is also paid to offer blessings and prayers for the would-be giver, the *mardi al-walidin* (the prodigious son). Each gives what he can afford.

Once the terms of the contract are made explicit, the man circulates around the square of people, collecting coins. From time to time, he stops to announce a generous offer: "*Amardi al-walidin* made an offer of 5 dirhams. May God save him, say 'Amen', oh Children of the Muslims", or "May God spare him any loss, say 'Amen', oh Children of the Believers". The crowd responds again: "Amen!". He then asks for applause for the generous donor, and the crowd applauds obediently. Eventually, the offers decline. The storyteller circulates in vain. No more donors.

In the economic culture of Morocco, two things are avoided: uneven numbers and incomplete numbers. Thus, at the end of the first collection, the storyteller counts what he has been given, and the crowd anticipates, like in a ritual, that a second collection will complete the incomplete and restore the uneven number. If it is 75 rials, he asks for 100, and if it is 105, he requests 120. But before he resumes his

demands, he extols those men (women don't attend) who are willing to complete the incomplete. The collection may resume for a second, third or even fourth time in order to balance the sum of money that he has been given.

Only now does the story resume, but not without first asking the crowd to repeat the blessing for the Prophet. The repetition may seem tedious to an outsider, but the audience loves to repeat the blessing for the Prophet, the more, the better. Then he takes his banjo and improvises a song summarising the earlier parts.

We are back to the narrative:

"The Sultan asks the woman why she is cooking stones in a pot. The woman replies that she is impoverished, and that her children have been crying for food. In order to put them to bed, she has made them believe that she is cooking a soup for them. The Sultan is disturbed. However, he has no money to give her, nor does his vizier. Sultans don't carry money, it seems: they don't need it. But the Sultan must resolve the misery in his kingdom. The only thing that he has that has value is his royal ring. He doesn't hesitate a moment; he takes it off and offers it to the poor woman. He explains that the ring has a special value, and that it will save her from poverty for the rest of her life. Having done this, the Sultan and the vizier leave. It's already dawn.

"In the morning, happy and grateful to the unknown visitors, the poor widow takes the ring to the main market to sell. She shows it to the jeweller, a Jew, who recognises the value and the nature of the royal object at first sight. As soon as he takes it in his hands, he screams at her: 'Where did you get this ring? This is my ring! You stole it from me!' He shouts more and more loudly 'Thief! Thief!' In a few moments, a huge crowd has gathered. Then two guards arrive. They are all taken to the police station, and from there to the court. In court, the Jew accuses the woman of having stolen his ring. He has as a witness, the Pasha of the city, a good friend of his who also knows the judge. The poor widow stands alone, a victim accused of theft. She has no one to stand up for her. The Jew claims that he caught the woman with his stolen ring. The Pasha confirms his story. The judge pronounces the woman guilty of theft. The ring must be returned to its owner, and the woman punished by being whipped in public. And what was said, was done."

At this point in the story, the storyteller takes up his banjo again and improvises a song, summing up the whole episode. Another collection of money goes through the same stages: numerous blessings of the Prophet, various collections with different purposes to balance the number and, once more, the song that sums up the preceding episode.

Then he continues: "That very day, oh Children of the Muslims, the woman is freed. She is at home healing her wounds and cursing the visitors as thieves responsible for her misfortune. The woman starts to pray to God: 'Oh God! What have I done to be tortured in this manner? Is it not enough that my children and myself are starving to death? Oh God, Saviour of the poor and the weak, Helper of the oppressed, may my misery come to an end, and may my cause be fairly dealt with! Oh God, you know the truth, you know that I am not a thief, that my only crime is in having followed your commandment by providing hospitality to the passer-bys (*'abir al-sabil*)!' The woman continues to pray to God until darkness.

"Oh, Children of the Muslims, the Sultan, good and just as he is, couldn't stop thinking about the widow who opened her door to him out of hospitality. His heart is broken to see such poverty and misery, a single mother with nothing to offer to her children but stones. He can't wait for the evening to visit her again and make sure that the shadow of need will never approach that family again.

"As soon as the day goes by, Oh Children of the Believers, the Sultan leaves the palace. He and his vizier are both disguised as fakirs. They proceed, under the wings of darkness, to the poor neighbourhood where the woman lives. As they approach the door, they see the dim light of a candle. To their great astonishment, the woman is weeping and repeating prayers to God, asking Him for justice. They knock; total silence reigns. They knock again and no answer, not the slightest movement of a living soul. When they insist, the voice of the woman just beyond the door of the hut is heard: 'Who is it?'. 'We are asking for hospitality,' answers the Sultan, and the vizier continues: 'We are two fakirs, in the countryside, devoting our time to prayers and fasting!' —'Good, says the woman, because if you expect something to eat, I have nothing to feed you. Please go, and knock at a house of someone better-off!' The two visitors insist and finally the woman opens the door, but only on condition that no one asks her any question.

"The two visitors, oh Children of Believers, sit in a corner of the hut while the woman continues to nurse her wounds. The Sultan tells his vizier to ask the woman what happened to her. Before he opens his mouth, the woman's hand moves as fast as light to a stick with which she threatens the vizier: 'Did you forget what I told you before you entered? Did I not say no questions?' The vizier shaking with fear whispers in the Sultan's ears: 'No your Majesty! You ask her.' —'No, says the Sultan authoritatively, you ask her."

The storyteller not only narrates; he also entertains. From time to time, he creates comic situations such as the above. The crowd

laughs at the Sultan and the vizier, both of them scared by this powerless woman. Neither of them can speak. She has power over both of them. The situation is indeed ironic and extremely meaningful. Here is a woman in the presence of two males, a widow in the presence of a Sultan and his minister, and yet it is her words that prevail. The Sultan is no more powerful than the weakest of his subjects. Indeed, a subject can even silence the Sultan. It is a perfect kingdom.

At this point in the story, and while the crowd is laughing at the situation of the Sultan and his vizier silenced by the poor widow, the storyteller finds the moment ripe to interrupt his tale and ask for money. He again makes his tour with its various stages. The crowd is waiting patiently to see what will happen to the widow, to the Jew and to the Pasha of the city. Some of them give more than expected so as to hasten the continuation of the story.

The blessing of the Prophet is repeated a number of times, the storyteller resumes his story. "Oh Children of the Muslims, he begins anew, the Sultan and his vizier cast an obligatory request for mercy, the 'ar, on the poor woman. She now must tell them the cause of those wounds and bruises." The man takes his banjo and improvises a song in which he sums up what happened to the woman:

"By the time the woman finishes her story, the night has swept by. It is dawn. The Sultan and his minister leave for the palace. Once there, the Sultan summons the Jew, the Pasha, and the poor widow. He asks each to tell his and her story. The Jew claims the ring to be his and accuses the woman of having stolen it. The Pasha, as a witness, confirms his account. The woman claims that the ring was given to her by two merchants, and that when she tried to sell it to the Jew, he accused her of theft. The Sultan stands as judge, provider, and witness. He has tried to alleviate a misfortune by providing his only earthly possession of that moment, a symbol of his royal status—a ring. But the misfortune has persisted, and been made worse by others—the Jew and the Pasha.

"Oh Children of the Muslims," the storyteller continues, thus ending his story. "The Jew and the Pasha are put in jail. The woman is saved from injustice. And God will stand between me and you, if you abandon me now. I would like some of you to help me with whatever you can in order to buy dinner for my children."

The crowd disperses quickly; some people hand the storyteller a coin or two as they leave. The crowd has been convinced by the moral of the story, which, in any case, they share: the Sultan is just and whatever injustice may occur is the fault of others.

The storyteller, of course, doesn't offer the same messages and goods as those provided by the mass media, the news and entertainment programmes of various sorts. These originate from an institution. They are ideological and essentially state-controlled. They shape the views of people in ways beneficial to the state. And the audience pays for these, whether aware of it or not. The case of the storyteller is similar, and yet different. The form of his goods is different, but not their content. He offers stories, but they conform to the ideas propagated by the state. His stories also shape the views of his audience like those messages of the mass media. In a way he is an agent of the state; but he does not know this, and he is not recognised as such. He is not an institution, but he has a function. He is self-appointed, but one of the functions that he fulfils is to express a kind of criticism that the state tolerates. However, he is also paid by the people. The space of the storyteller is limited; it is always the old medina. It is peripheral and the place where he belongs. The periphery doesn't imply, in any way, marginality. The peripheral space is crucial: it is where change begins, vertically with Ibn Khaldun, at the borders; and horizontally with Marx, at the bottom. In that space, to be sure, there are functions that can only be fulfilled by those prepared to conform.

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