

A Sense of Water: Water and Culture Stories

Morna is Cape Verdean music straight from the heart. Every time I hear it, I get choked up, and I'm not even Cape Verdean. The primary instruments used in *morna* include the violin, guitar, and most importantly, the voice. The music is slow and melancholic. The lyrics tell the story of Cape Verde: slavery, the lack of work, the strength of the sea, and, yes, the extreme lack of potable water. Drought is a word Cape Verdeans know too well. It has caused mass migration to other countries, leaving loved ones behind to pray and sing about their precious water.

I was living with my host family when I was first exposed to *morna*. I was sitting in a room beside the roof, and it was dark outside. I heard a sad, beautiful song coming from the roof, so I went to explore. As I stepped onto the roof, there, in the dark, were about 10 people playing instruments and singing. My host father was playing a guitar. I sat down, mesmerized by the sad music. I wasn't alone. A large crowd had gathered, including some personnel from our Peace Corps office. The music played on until morning and I remained—fixated on music that reflects a culture's hardships and realizing one of the most basic needs shared by everyone in the world—water.

*by Peace Corps Volunteer Brandon Lundy
São Domingos, Cape Verde Islands*

Mauritanians are avid tea drinkers, as are many other North and West African peoples. Many share the same ceremonial custom—green tea with mint—that has become a common part of everyday life. In fact, this delicious tea is made in rounds of three glasses and drunk several times a day, including during the blazing afternoon heat. Water is used to meticulously clean the small glasses after each round, as well as to make the tea.

Water is also used in religious washing before prayer. Mauritania, being the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, has a largely Muslim population. Muslims must pray five times a day according to the Koran. Each prayer requires the cleansing of hands, face, and feet before praying.

*by Peace Corps Volunteer Heather Cameron
Rosso, Mauritania*

Mauritania forms the barrier between the Sahara and Africa to the south, and is a dry, arid country with a precarious relationship with water. Because water is so precious, it serves as an important part in the welcoming of a guest into one's home. Although most Mauritanians are not well off, they will always go out of their way to make you feel welcome. This welcoming ceremony includes offering you a bath, making you tea (in three rounds, with each round sweeter and weaker than the round before), and many times giving you *zrig*, a drink made from soured milk and water and sweetened with sugar.

Water is also used in many religious ceremonies. Mauritanians may go to the *marabout*, or holy man, to consult him about an illness. Often he will write some Koranic verses on a wooden board. The *marabout* will use water to erase the words and that water will be considered holy. When people drink this special water, they believe they will be cured of whatever is ailing them. My host sister, Maydala, has been suffering for many years from an ailment, and three times a day she will drink water that the *marabout* has made especially for her.

*by Peace Corps Volunteer Kerry Zahn
Paris, Mauritania*

The south of Morocco is officially classified as semi-arid; for most of us that means just plain dry. Rainy season here is at the time most people in the United States are having winter. Contrary to my initial understanding, rainy season around here means the only season when it possibly might rain, but there are

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no guarantees that it will. During this season, every conversation I began with comments on whether there had been any rain in the past few days, its abundance, and if any other neighboring villages had had rain.

In the springtime, the nomads from the Sahara roam into my region. They come to graze their camels on the stalks of the barley that have been left after harvest. As I sit and watch the camels herded by, black silhouettes against the setting sun, I believe it is the closest I will ever come to anything from the *Arabian Nights*. These tribes have sustained their traditional pastoral lifestyle for centuries, with a few minor adjustments—I watch some of them drive their camels with rickety white mini-trucks.

One of the most sacred of social rules can be traced to these nomads. It is absolutely forbidden to ever deny water to anybody asking for a drink. It is quite customary to see someone walk into a store, ask for water, drink it, and move on; it's just how life works. This stems from the nomads traveling around the desert for centuries; they depended on the wells and villages they knew to provide them with water.

So, in my dry region, where water is scarce and the farmers are perpetually looking to the sky and Allah for rain, I see these same farmers handing a family that has set up camp for a week or two a few gallons of water. Water is the scarcest and most precious of resources and yet their religion and culture have made people generous with it.

*by Peace Corps Volunteer Jennifer Bohman
Souss Massa National Park, Morocco*

"Everything alive was made from water," reads a passage from the Koran.

Moroccans, a deeply religious people, consider water to be the essence of life. It is fitting then that the city of Marrakech, the heart of Morocco, is an oasis. The city's center, Djema El Fna, ripples with a rhythm unlike any I've ever known. Street vendors and storytellers, acrobats and snake tamers, bearded *ulmans* and veiled Berber *binats*—all drift to the tides of its drumbeats and the breathy rush of its flutes.

Surrounded by the snow-capped High Atlas Mountains, Marrakech is built within a fertile valley. Long, thin granite formations of gold, pink, and mauve hold the city with its bordering palm trees like an outstretched hand. I once remarked on this to a shopkeeper who told me, "Yes, it is a good sign. We are protected from the evil eye." (The image of a hand with an eye at the center of the palm is known as The Hand of Fatima; it is the most prevalent symbol found in Morocco and is used as a talisman, particularly against the evils inflicted by jealousy.)

As far as I know, water is not a focal point in religious ceremonies, except as part of mandatory absolution before prayer. For most Moroccans, this cleansing takes place in the *hammam*, a communal bathing area, sometimes referred to by Westerners as a "Turkish bath." Although the *hammam* is a retreat, I wouldn't describe it as tranquil. When my neighbors, Amina and Aisha, first asked me to accompany them to the *hammam*, I was expecting to spend the afternoon lazing about in a languid, steam-filled haze. I was mistaken.

Armed with soap stones, pumice, sisal mitts, a green-gel detergent ("shampoo," they said), three buckets of hot water, and one bucket of ice water, we scrubbed and scoured, scoured and scrubbed. In the interest of truth, I must admit that I myself was more scrubbed upon than scrubbing. Amina and Aisha, who rolled their eyes up to Allah every time I cut carrots or kneaded dough, sighed with undisguised pity when I tried to handle a sisal mitt. "This way, this way!" they demonstrated until, with growing impatience, they sanded me down in soap. Twenty-five years worth of accumulated grime rolled off me, along with millions of terrified skin cells. Looking down at the sisal mitt, I couldn't help examining the dirt I never knew I had. Then, raising my head, I saw that, despite the *hammam's* veiling mist of vapor, I had become

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the clear-cut center of attention. With tears streaming down their faces, Amina and Aisha and everyone else in the room—from toothless grandmothers to 10-year-old girls in braids—were laughing to the point of hysterics. It was obvious, I suppose, that I was not prepared for such vigorous bathing. I was not just *mskeena*, meaning poor, pitiful one; the greatness of my pathetic state was emphasized with the shrill cries of "m-s-skeeeeeeeennnn-ah!" I laughed, too, though not quite as heartily. Noticing my unease, Amina picked up a bucket of water, pouring half over her head, the other half over mine. Flashing a smile, she teased: "It's water! Just water!"

*by Peace Corps Volunteer Beth Giebus
Tetouan and Agadir, Morocco*

Much Moroccan art is seen in local crafts, and water has contributed greatly to the need for such crafts. Bowls, *bidons* (water containers), and other water-holding devices are crucial to the Moroccan people. In many villages people do not have running water in their homes. Some people visit wells, and some visit streams, lakes or springs, sometimes traveling long distances. This means there is a great need for water holders—both to carry and to store water). Some water *bidons* are ornately carved wood bowls and barrels. Sometimes metal and copper are pounded into large containers, which are also decorated. Clay pots and bowls are also a specialty in Morocco. Artisans learn their craft over many years. The area of Fes (Fez) is particularly known for its beautiful pottery.

People of the desert have a great deal of music and many folk tales about water. At weddings, women sing "*Oweed aman*" ("Bring the water") as a good luck wish for the new bride and groom.

*by Peace Corps Volunteer Erin Olson
Agadir L'henna, Morocco*

Sitting slightly askew on heavy sacks of grain in the blazing spring sun, I settled myself down for a six-hour open-air Cameo ride to my village 80 km away. I thought I was being quite shrewd by leaving today because yesterday was Ahydood, the "Water Holiday." Celebrated throughout Morocco, Ahydood is when people ask for rain for their new growing season.

The children especially get involved in this celebration. They carry squirt guns, water buckets, and any other gadget that holds water and allows for quick dispensing and soaking. They wait on rooftops, behind cars, around corners, and other places you'd never expect to douse unsuspecting victims with water. It is all done in a sporting way and everyone takes the soaking with good humor. Most of that day, I stayed inside the apartment, knowing I would be an obvious target if I went outside. To my surprise, not a single drop of water touched me on the two occasions I did go outside.

After the Cameo left town, we came to a slow moving river. It was then that I noticed the rows of children on both sides of the road. They wore devilish smirks on their faces, all holding something behind their backs. I thought, "What's going on? Ahydood was yesterday, right? Does it run for more than one day?" I quickly turned to a man sitting next to me and asked, "When was Ahydood?" he grinned and said, "Today." I thought, "Uh oh, no wonder I didn't get soaked yesterday. I've been grossly misinformed."

As we approached, it seemed that the Cameo driver purposely slowed down. Since he was inside the cab with the windows up, either he wanted a free washing, or gets a good laugh out of hearing everyone yell as they are doused with cold water. I tend to believe the latter.

As buckets were emptied on us, I just removed my glasses and hat and enjoyed the cool water on that hot day. The six-hour ride was sporadically interrupted with random streams of water as we passed through other villages.

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When I arrived in my village, I went to my house, changed into dry clothes, and went to the village center where the people were gathering; singing and playing drums (called *taloonts*), saying "*Arlpe anzar*" ("May God bring rain"). As people came and went, huge bowls of cous-cous were brought out for us to eat. People returned to their houses for dinner a little after sunset.

An old folk tale tells the story of a young couple in love who sought to be married. But because they were not from the same tribe, their marriage was forbidden. It is said that when they were told of this they cried so much their tears formed two lakes. These two lakes are the basis for the annual Imilchil Wedding Festival and are appropriately named Isli and Tislit, meaning groom and bride, respectively (in Berber).

One day out of every year, every man in every village goes to the spring to remove all the vegetation that has grown since last year. They lay the vegetation around the spring to let it dry (feed for animals) and then cook a massive meal of boiled vegetables and meat (called a *douez*) to celebrate.

*by Peace Corps Volunteer Ryan Powell
Ait Yaddou, Morocco*

There is a Muslim ritualistic washing that takes place before prayer five times a day—right now—in late October. *S'hor* is around 4 a.m., *D'hor* around noon, *L'asair* around 3 p.m., *Maghreb* at 5:45 p.m., and *L'ashou* around 7:30 p.m. People follow the washing ceremony with different degrees of strictness. You are meant to wash your hands, feet, and face five times each—with water; no soap is necessary. The water must be pure and of drinking quality for these ablutions. Even in a drought, people aim to use their best water to wash before prayer. Also, during certain prayers, people will go through the motion of washing their faces—effectively, "washing with the prayer."

*by Peace Corps Volunteer Jessica Seem
Zaouia Village, Morocco*