

Middle East

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Can the art of storytelling be preserved?



Egypt's El Warsha troupe is trying to revive traditional oral poetry

At a festival in Jordan celebrating the centuries-old art of storytelling, the BBC's Richard Hamilton asks whether modern technology can help preserve a dying tradition?

It is thought that storytelling as a profession originated in the Middle East, in Mesopotamia to be precise. It is the region that produced the most famous collection of all, Alf Layla wa-Layla or One Thousand and One Nights, in about the ninth Century.

From this epicentre, telling tales spread across the Arab World and North Africa.

For more than 1,000 years people would pay to listen to a storyteller who would inform and entertain largely illiterate crowds in public spaces, such as the Djemaa el-Fna, or main square, in Marrakech.

But with a few exceptions the storyteller is no more. They have all but become extinct.

"Nomads have forgotten how to tell stories as they have moved to the city," says Yahya Rajel, who recounts tales of the desert to those visiting Mauritania.

"The oral tradition in Mauritania is very, very old. It existed as a way of informing children, even before schools were created," he adds.

The desert has shaped Mauritanian stories and there is no better place, he thinks, to listen to them.

"The wilderness is the ideal environment for a story but people have no time for that now in the city."

'Respected profession'

A similar picture has emerged across the Arab world, from Mauritania's capital, Nouakchott, to Baghdad, in Iraq.

"In our country, the professional storyteller disappeared in the middle of the 20th Century," says Belhadj Belgacem, a library curator from Tunisia who performs traditional folk tales at schools.

"Before that, storytellers could be found everywhere; in the squares and cafes. It was a respected profession. There's even a story of a husband who left his wife so he could spend more time listening to a storyteller."

The same fate has befallen the storytellers who used to frequent the cafes of Cairo, according to Hassan el-Gretly.

His El Warsha theatre troupe tries to resuscitate traditional oral poems such as the 13th Century Hilali epic, which tells of the clashes of Arab tribes in North Africa.

"What you might call professional storytelling in Egypt is now concerned either with singing narrative ballads or epic poems, which are the only two forms still performed, for example during Ramadan or on saints' feast days.

"But I feel I have caught the very last wave of the last shadow players and the last professional storytellers."

'Art lives on'

So what is to blame for the disappearance of such a noble art?

"It's certainly technology," says Mr Belgacem.

"Television and radio changed the way people spend their leisure time. It's also development and 'progress' - just as the book is now under threat from the internet."

But in a strange twist, like a tale from One Thousand and One Nights, perhaps technology - thought to be responsible for the decline of the storyteller - could turn out to be its saviour.

Storytellers from Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Mauritania and even Ireland have recently been performing and sharing their ideas at the Hakaya festival in Amman, Jordan.

Many of them are not full-time traditional storytellers but actors, directors and film makers for whom storytelling remains at the heart of their creative lives.

While celebrating the art of the oral narrative, the festival also looked at ways of keeping it alive through modern media.

Although Hassan el Gretly laments the passing of the storyteller or hakawati, he says the art also lives on in theatrical performances, film, television and the internet.

Mr Gretly is even working on a story about a boy who died in the recent uprising against President Hosni Mubarak.

So the Arab Spring has provided fertile ground for new stories, not about Ali Baba, Sinbad and Aladdin but about real people whose personal narratives have been transmitted on Facebook and Twitter rather than from the mouths of storytellers.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has also produced a modern form of storytelling which has an uncanny resemblance to ancient myths and fables.

Small heroes

The Palestinian anthropologist and folklorist, Dr Shareef Kanaaneh, was astonished to discover that the stories he heard from children who clashed with Israeli soldiers during the first intifada (1987-1993) were almost exactly the same as the ancient folk tales.

"One of the things that attracted my attention was the similarity of the stories created by the children to the folk tales.

"The heroes are mostly small, deformed and handicapped, yet they defeat the soldiers. The same happens in folk tales."

He believes that the stories made up by the children tie in with the ancient legends because both reflect the mentality of the child and the process of growing up.

In psychological terms, Dr Shareef believes, the story explains a rite of passage in which the child overcomes adversity to become a man and hence inherit the "kingdom" of his father.

Researchers like Dr Shareef are collecting Palestinian stories as a way of preserving memory and identity.

The oral tales are even being recorded as archives on websites such as Palestineremembered.com.

"We may not have a Palestinian state but we have created a virtual Palestine," says Rakan Mahmoud, who runs the website.

'No young apprentices'

But while there are many projects to save Palestinian storytelling, the same is not true for other parts of the Arab world.

And as for the storytellers who performed in Marrakech, known as the *hlaykia*, their days are numbered.

The few that have survived are old men with no young apprentices to take up the baton of their ancient tradition.

The UN's cultural organisation Unesco had been trying to record their tales on the internet, but the project lost momentum and has now been passed to the Moroccan ministry of culture.

The fate of the storytellers of Marrakech hangs in its hands.

Richard Hamilton is the author of [The Last Storytellers](#), a book about Morocco's ancient storytelling tradition.

