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## A Journalist's Exploration of Moroccan Culture and Society

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A Journalist's Exploration of Moroccan Culture and Society

Hannah Finnerty

Honors Project

May 12, 2019

# A Moroccan Spark of Pintele Yid

The office of Haim Toledano could be mistaken for a hoarder's basement. A dozen colored glass lamps float above a dozen end tables. Twin damascene gazelle statues peer out the front window, their alert and empty eyes unsettling. Piles of dusty, weather-warped photographs are spread across every surface. Glass cabinets are snugly packed in and packed full of jewelry, trinkets and bugs who probably met their doom in the same way I believed I would in that office: death by suffocation.

One of Toledano's many hats in Meknes, Morocco is an antiques salesman, so the oppressive number of plastic wrapped silver teapots and ivory inlaid ashtrays began to make sense. But the photographs remained a mystery.

Most are pictures of himself or family members. Under some stacks are faded file folders of newspaper clippings that mention the Toledano name. The bits of wall that aren't covered by the cabinets are covered in even more photographs, most ornately framed and crookedly hung. The pièce de résistance of Toledano's collection is the monstrous portrait of King Hassan II, the Moroccan king from 1961 until his death in 1999. It is flanked on either side by smaller but still significantly sized photographs of Hassan II's predecessor, Mohammed V, and the current king, Mohammed VI. It is customary for Moroccan business owners to hang a picture of the king, but these pictures, organized in an altar-like fashion,



*Haim Toledano stands in a small corner of his office, surrounded by photos that represent his family's Jewish legacy in Meknes. | Hannah Finnerty*

seemed unnecessarily large, as if Toledano venerates the men as more than kings. So I asked.

“Since independence, the kings have given the Jews the best treatment we could ask for,” he said, his little body hunched over a makeshift table of microwave oven boxes, sorting through pictures to show me. “When we need

anything, we are well served. When we knock on any door, they open it.”

Graves in the Jewish cemetery in Meknes tell a story of eight generations of Toledanos, much like Haim, that led the Meknesi community in one way or another – business men, community leaders, judges, rabbis. Toledano is a

household name in Meknes, and Haim is a bit of a local celebrity. As we sat in his office, he often stopped midsentence to blow kisses to locals who had knocked on his front window to wave hello.

At 85, Toledano has been the leader of the Jewish community in Meknes – a current group of about 30 people – for over 60 years. But when Toledano was a boy, the Jewish community was much bigger. Census numbers from 1951 show nearly 12,500 Jews called Meknes home. These numbers reflect a similar trend across Morocco. Once the largest Jewish community in the Arab world, a population of over 250,000 has been reduced to a few thousand.

As the Jewish Moroccan population ages and dwindles, some grow worried about the preservation of the culture, a culture older than the modern state of Morocco itself. Without rapt attention, the subtle hallmarks of Jewish heritage are lost in the carnival of Moroccan city life – abandoned shells of former synagogues, informational plaques, white blue walls of old neighborhoods.

Despite concern, Toledano and other community leaders remain confident that the Moroccan Jewish tradition will carry on, just as it has for centuries.

“It’s like a mother and her children,” he says, sipping on unpalatably sweet Moroccan mint tea. “She can never stop loving them, and she can never forget

them. A Moroccan Jew can never forget Morocco.”

The Jews were first drawn to Morocco by the Carthaginian gold market in the fifth to third centuries B.C., according to legend. From the coasts, missionary work took the Jews inland where they converted the indigenous Maghrebi peoples, or Berbers. The year 70 B.C. brought with it the Siege of Jerusalem. As the Romans partook in the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews fled, and many went as far as Morocco.

Following this initial influx of Jews, Jewish migration to Morocco occurred in waves: the Visigoth persecution of Jews in Spain, the Spanish Reconquista, the Alhambra Decree ordering the expulsion of Jews from Spain, a similar expulsion of Jews in Portugal. A final wave came with the rise of Nazi Germany. At the time, masses of Jewish people had migrated to the Arab world –

nearly 800,000. North Africa had been a place of relative peace and protection from the Nazi extermination camps in the West and further persecution in the former Soviet Union and satellite states.

“Mohammed V rescued us from the Nazis,” Toledano said. “If it weren’t for the monarchy, we would have been killed.”

In the years of Hitler’s rise to power and the Holocaust, the Nazi-aligned Vichy government in France had influence over

Morocco, as Morocco was a French protectorate at the time. Despite French oversight, the King Mohammed V refused to send Jewish Moroccans to concentration camps when France ordered.

The king famously replied, “We have no Jews in Morocco, only Moroccan citizens.”

I began to pay more attention to photographs of the king – in the grocery store high above the produce piles, in my favorite cafe leaning against a window. In that café, I met Ahmed Chouari, a professor and researcher of Moroccan Jewry. He said the king’s protection of the Jews was indicative of his perspective of his role as king.

“The king often considered himself a commander of the faithful,” Chouari said, looking down into his espresso and then over at the portrait before continuing, as if he were assessing if the king was within earshot. “That’s not just those faithful to Islam – it included Christians, Jews, Muslims, all faiths.”

Perhaps if Mohammed V were in Venezia Ice listening to our conversation that day, that’s exactly what he would want to hear, reassurance that his actions were seen purely as support for the Jewish community and a gesture of equality to all faiths. Given how every autocratic leader has behaved in the history of the world, I could not help but think there were other factors at play.

In 1438, the first Jewish district, or mellah, in Morocco was established in Fez. Soon, mellahs popped up in cities across the country. With few exceptions,



these mellahs were built near the royal palaces. Youness Yona Abeddour, a Moroccan Jew and a Ph.D. student researching Moroccan Jewish identity, said the mellahs were partly created for tax purposes. Jews were considered dhimmis, a historical term for monotheistic minorities living in countries with Muslim majorities. Dhimmis were free to practice and observe religious customs in exchange for paying a jizya, or a poll-tax, which was incredibly high under certain radical Moroccan dynasties to encourage religious conversion. Having the Jews in a confined place near the royal palace was a practical solution to supervise and simplify their taxation.

In modern Morocco, I experienced this closeness between the Jewish quarters and the royal cities. A two-lane road is all that separates the wall of the royal city in Meknes from the new mellah. The Ibn Danan synagogue in Fez is just a few minutes' walk from the old royal palace.

But Abeddour said the strategic location of the mellahs had another purpose. The location of the mellah close to the royal palace is often noted as a sign of protection from anti-Semites, “as if to say an attack on a Jew is an attack on the king,” Chouari said.

Kings had incentive to protect their Jewish constituents. Jewish Moroccans were historically considerable contributors to the Moroccan economy. Many of them were successful business owners inside and outside the mellahs, much like Toledano, who owns dozens of properties.



*Once a neighborhood for the Meknesi Jews, the mellah in Meknes is now home to any citizen, including Muslims. Many of the houses remain empty, as some immigrated Jewish families have held on to their properties. | Hannah Finnerty*

Jewish Moroccans dominated international trade from Morocco. In Essaouira, for example, Jewish traders settled there in the eighteenth century and effectively turned the Moroccan coastal town into a bustling port and trade town. Many Moroccan towns have a similar economic story to Essaouira, owing strong economic development to their Jewish inhabitants. Poll taxes and staggering customs duties on imports and exports also helped to stimulate a struggling Moroccan economy. Given the role Jews played in the economy, protecting the Jews from anti-Semitic Moroccans and from Nazi persecution was in the best interest of the country.

But today, the Jewish population does not seem to play the same role in the economy as it once did. Some are among Morocco's most vulnerable, poverty-stricken populations, and

social welfare programs have surfaced to treat and serve Moroccan Jews. American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, or JDC, assists Jewish diaspora and provides all-encompassing support – cash assistance for food, rent and utilities, medical care, and homecare for needy Moroccan Jews. It runs a home for the elderly in Casablanca and supports a health clinic for Jews who cannot afford medical care.

As the Jewish community's contributions to the Moroccan economy have shrunk considerably with a dwindling and poorer Jewish Moroccan population, Morocco's incentives for keeping the national Jewish community in its best interest have shifted. Less interested in how Jewish Moroccans themselves impact the economy, the incentives appear to have manifested themselves in Israeli relations.

Morocco declared formal relations with Israel in 1994. Ties were cut by Morocco on the outset of the Second Intifada in 2000, but trade between the two countries has continued uninterrupted. In 2017, Morocco imported \$22 million in goods from Israel, according to data from Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics. Exports totaled \$15 million. These numbers put Morocco as Israel's third largest Arab trading partner.

Not only economically do the two countries have connections, but Morocco is considered by many as Israel's closest ally in the Arab world. Israeli premiers have visited Morocco on several occasions: Shimon Peres in 1986 and Ehud Barak in 1999. In 2016, Andre Azoulay, one of Mohammed VI's advisors and a Jewish Moroccan, attended Peres' funeral. Just last September, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had a secret meeting with the Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

Even before 1994, the two countries maintained close ties. Morocco has served as a mediator between Israel and other Arab countries, and it remains one of the only Arab countries that permits Israeli citizens entrance. Moroccan Jews that left Morocco for Israel retain their Moroccan citizenship. Israel has aided the monarchy in the Western Sahara conflict and his feud with Polisario, the Moroccan political party advocating for the independence of the southern territory. But Morocco's support for its Jewish population and its relatively friendly relationship with Israel hasn't been easy to maintain.

Since the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the British Mandate of Palestine, friction has been building up between Palestine and Israel. Israeli declaration of independence in 1948 lifted the lid on the conflict boiling inside; the two sides took up arms in First Arab-Israeli War. But boiling water splashed beyond the boundaries of Palestine. With a newfound sense of unity and purpose in their war against the Israeli state, Arab countries rallied together to support their fellow Arab country.

"There was a push for the preservation of Arab identity and religion and language, and nationalism was on the rise," Chouari said. "All of this was to protect and preserve the *Ummah*."

Derived from the Qur'an, *Ummah* is the term for the supranational Islamic community which encompasses all Muslims, regardless of nationality, class and ethnicity – including Palestinians.

"Morocco was at an impasse, having to maintain a relationship with Israel in a discrete way, but at the same time sharing and participating in some of the reactions of the other Arab countries, like supporting military action against Israel," Chouari said with a shrug. "and that's politics."

Thousands of miles from Israel, the Moroccan government has been fairly successful at keeping this careful balance in check. As the strong waves of Arab nationalism are losing their intensity, other Arab countries have followed Morocco and are softening their hardline stances on Israel, despite little resolution with the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Egypt and Jordan have initiated peace and free trade agreements with Israel, perhaps due to their shared borders. Jordan, Israel's eastern neighbor, is Israel's number one regional trading partner, followed by Egypt. Jordan and Israel are working in tandem on the \$2 billion Red-Dead pipeline project to help preserve their shared tourism asset, the Dead Sea, and provide potable water to Israel, Palestine and Jordan. While Saudi Arabia has no formal ties with Israel, behind-the-scenes relations between the two countries are widely acknowledged, specifically in dealings with their shared enemy, Iran.

However, many Arab countries refuse entrance to Israeli passports, and few have formal relations. Lebanon, home of Hezbollah, one of Israel's longtime political and military adversaries, is a leader in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, along with Syria. In early 2019, there were rumblings of a meeting between Mohammed VI and Netanyahu that would take place in Morocco. Although the rumor was unfounded, Algerian and Tunisian authorities quickly announced that they will refuse Netanyahu into their airspace if or when he makes a flight to Rabat.

Despite a few hold outs, Morocco has been a pioneer in normalizing Arab relations with the Israelis, and I was curious to know what Moroccan Jews thought of themselves in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict, the conflict that exacerbated those relations. I wondered if Moroccan Jews struggled with feeling religiously committed to Judaism

and Israel while simultaneously recognizing their connection to the Arab state of Palestine as citizen of an Arab country. For some Moroccan Jews, two halves of their identities are at war in the Promised Land.

“I don’t care about Israel,” Toledano dismissed the question as if the decades-old conflict that has resulted in 116,000 dead and 114,000 injured isn’t one of the most pressing issues of our time. “There is no reason why I would ever go. I’m living here in Morocco, and I love Morocco.” He loosened his Versace scarf from around his neck and gestured to the cluttered office. “What is going on between them is no concern to us. Israel is so far from us. Our lives are here.”

The clash may represent two parts of his identity, being Arab and Jewish, but first and foremost he is Moroccan, he said. Just like most Moroccans, he greets people with *salaam alaykum*, a typical greeting in the Arab-speaking world. Meaning “peace be upon you,” the phrase has Quranic roots. In line with Moroccan tradition, he eats couscous every Friday without fail. The only difference between Muslim Moroccans and Toledano is that the 85-year-old enjoys his couscous with a little whiskey. He offered me a beer to drink with the heaping platter of couscous, steaming and smothered with tender, spiced vegetables, chick peas and chicken.

He said that being Jewish doesn’t immediately require a deep devotion to the Israeli state, just as being an Arab doesn’t demand an attachment to every Arab. He feels removed from the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict. He seems to be the exception.

Abeddour identifies as a Masorti Jew, one who is neither strictly religious nor secular. He has lived and worked with Jewish diaspora in Morocco, his birth country, and in countries across the world, including Israel. Speaking from his own experiences with Moroccan Jews, the diaspora presents itself as different from Israel, yet most are generally in support of an Israeli state.

“Israel, for a good number of Moroccan Jews, is seen as the Jewish homeland. Some live with one leg in each country,” Abeddour said in a message. “In many of my conversations with them, they talk about Israel as ‘we’, they are proud of the achievements of Israelis, and when I taught Hebrew in Casablanca, most of my adult students were learning modern Hebrew in order to move to Israel. When they are in cultural centers, they talk about Israeli politics. When I go visit family members and friends [in Morocco], they are curious to know the latest news about the country [Israel]. Of course, all that passion for Israel is kept at home and not shared with the wider public.

“I have rarely met a Moroccan Jew, living in Morocco, in their private space criticizing Israel or the government.”

However, diaspora groups are popping up across the world and taking stances in opposition to the

Israeli occupation. They are active in making their voices heard. Jewish Voice for Peace is one of many organizations that advocate for equality for Israelis and Palestinians and oppose the occupation.

“Israel claims to be acting in the name of the Jewish people, so we are compelled to make sure the world knows that many Jews are opposed to their actions,” the JVP website says.

For others, including Abeddour, the conflict is complicated at best.

Abeddour participated in Achvat Amim, an Israeli program for young diaspora Jews to come to Israel and Palestine and learn about both narratives. He said he was motivated to learn about the conflict firsthand and its impact on both Israeli and Palestinian societies. Instead of coming out of the program with answers, he only had more questions.

“The more you try to indulge in it and better understand it, the more complex it gets,” he said about the conflict in a message. “First and foremost, it should not be perceived as a black-and-white dichotomy, but rather as a layered historical process that started with the Ottoman empire and the British mandate and not only in 1948.”

While Jewish diaspora is divided on opinions of Israel, Moroccans are similarly divided on their perceptions of Moroccan Jews.

**“I have rarely met a Moroccan Jew, living in Morocco, in their private space criticizing Israel or the government.”**

“In general, Moroccans don’t think about Jews in Morocco because the population is so small, there are so few, and I would say most don’t associate them with Israel at all. Besides, they are first and foremost Moroccan,” Chouari said. “Sometimes there are negative words, but really, there’s a good relationship with the Jews and Muslims of Morocco.”

In Toledano's childhood, he played in the mellah and in the downtown district Hamria with his friends, both Jewish and Muslim. In fact, he said he had so many Muslim friends that his father started to endearingly call him “Muslim” as a nickname. Today, he works and lives in Meknes with few problems. His biggest complaint is the unkempt tile sidewalks that have buckled with time. As we walked around the city, he watched his feet to not trip.

Mohammed, a Fez local, has memories of living with his Muslim family in the mellah alongside the Jews when he was a young boy. Some of his best friends were Jewish. He said that every Friday, the neighborhood

Jewish women would cook to avoid cooking on Saturday, or Shabbat, the Jewish holy day. The narrow streets would fill with fantastic smells, and he remembers that Jewish women would hand out hot slices of cake to the local

children, Jewish and Muslim. These are the ideas he associates with Moroccan Jews; A connection to Israel is far from Mohammed’s mind. Unfortunately, there are always exceptions to the rule. Fewer and fewer Moroccans recall this peaceful coexistence that Mohammed experienced during his childhood. As the number of Moroccan Jews continues to shrink, Jews become abstractions to younger Moroccans, and they are associated with the occupiers of Palestine. Anti-Semitism is still alive in Morocco, and the inability or unwillingness of some Moroccans to distinguish the Jewish diaspora from the Israeli state has exacerbated the hate.

During the first Arab-Israeli War, 44 Jews died in anti-Jewish riots that sprung up in the Moroccan towns of Oujda and Djerada. A Jewish community center in Casablanca was one target of a series of suicide bombings orchestrated by Moroccan jihadists in 2003. In October 2015, a pro-Palestinian protest took place in Casablanca. While a pro-Palestinian protest is not on its face anti-Semitic, some protestors

dressed up as Haredi Orthodox Jews and demolished a model of the al-Aqsa mosque, a holy site for Muslims in Jerusalem. The protestors dressed as Jews were held at gunpoint by protestors and were led to a mock execution.

**He said that every Friday, the neighborhood Jewish women would cook to avoid cooking on Saturday, or Shabbat, the Jewish holy day. The narrow streets would fill with fantastic smells, and he remembers that Jewish women would hand out hot slices of cake to the local children, Jewish and Muslim.**

“When you mistreat an important part of your population, ultimately, you are the loser, especially when those people could contribute in a massive way to the society, diversity, economy and cultural richness of the country,” Chouari said.

Toledano seems oblivious to the increase of anti-Semitism across the country that has been acknowledged by several watch groups.

“My sons are all in France, most of my friends have moved away or have died, my wife passed 26 years ago,” he said. “If I had experienced anything bad, I would have left Morocco long ago.”

But Toledano lives in a sphere of influence. Some of the faded pictures in his office show him with Hassan II and Mohammed VI. He is frequently asked to attend city and police events, most recently the inauguration of a new police precinct in Meknes. His wealth and affluence are not to be overlooked when considering his life experiences, including lack of incidents with anti-Semites.

Abeddour said he and his family have not personally experienced anti-Semitism in Morocco. They are what he calls “assimilated” Jews, those that have non-Jewish sounding names and speak the Moroccan Arabic dialect.

Other Jewish Moroccans haven’t been as lucky as Abeddour and Toledano. While large-scale anti-Semitic incidents in Morocco are rare, most infractions take the form of vandalism, under the breath slurs and insults, and a rising popularity of Arabic translations of Hitler’s autobiography *Mein Kampf*.



Chouari said the prevalence of anti-Semitism could have ties to a lack of education on the entwined nature of Muslim and Jewish history in Morocco.

“Morocco for so long presented itself as only an Arab Muslim country, which was equally reflected in the educational system,” Abeddour wrote in an email. Learning about the entirety of Moroccan history and all the streams of culture and influence that make Morocco the country it is today, including the Jews, contributes to the enhancement of different minority groups, he said. If Moroccans are taught about Moroccan Jewish history, they begin to understand Moroccan Jews and see them as Moroccan, not as “the other.”

Abeddour said the Moroccan government is now promoting a more pluralistic and mosaic-like identity which is more inclusive of the Jewish narrative. In late 2018, the king ordered for the incorporation of Jewish history and Holocaust studies into the public high school curriculum.

“Education has the power to fight against discrimination and racism, as well as the ugly phenomenon of anti-Semitism,” a quote from the king in an official report said. “The history we teach our children must include a pluralistic variety of opinions and stories. It must present humanity’s greatest moments, as well as its darkest moments.”

Chouari said these dark moments are not discussed in some Arab countries, partly due to the tender nature of one outcome of the Holocaust: the creation of the Israeli state and the occupation of

Palestine. Not only is absence of Holocaust education an issue, but Holocaust denial has long been propagated by some Arab states, making Mohammed VI’s mandate all the more unprecedented.

This validation of the international and Moroccan Jewish experience is seen by the Jewish diaspora and most of the international community as a progressive and positive step, and the king has been quick to take more.

In 2010, Mohammed VI appropriated millions of dollars to repair and refurbish the decaying remains of an architectural Jewish history – synagogues, cemeteries and heritage sites – speckled across the country. The names of Jewish streets and districts are being reinstated. After most Jews had left Morocco for Israel, streets previously bearing Hebrew names were often switched out for traditional Muslim ones. Marrakech’s historic Jewish quarter, previously renamed Essalam, was restored to El-Mellah in 2017. Following the Arab Spring in 2011, Morocco’s constitution was updated and included Jewish contributions and culture as a critical element of Moroccan identity.

Following in his father and grandfather’s footsteps, Mohammed VI has been a champion for the remaining Moroccan Jews and for the history left behind by thousands. However,

the future of the small community is uncertain. As older generations die and younger generations pursue educational and employment opportunities in other countries, dwindling numbers have unbottled a realistic fear – a vanished Jewish Moroccan community. Although fear can be crippling, it can also be a motivator. Local and international groups are inspired by this fear and are committed to preserving the Jewish Moroccan story.

The JDC is one of those groups. Although it offers medical care and general financial assistance, the organization also focuses on reviving Jewish life and spiritual health.

“We have this phrase, *pintele yid*, or a spark of Jewishness. We believe where there is a spark of Jewishness, we can turn that into a flame, and then into a fire,” Michael Geller, director of media operations for JDC, said. “We see a spark in Morocco.”

Because of this spark, JDC maintains two Jewish school systems, *Ozar Hatorah* and *Ittihad*, which serve more than 500 Jewish children. Although both are private schools, JDC offers tuition assistance and school supplies to low-income students.

Although the Jewish community in Morocco is shrinking, Geller said JDC will continue its support as long as it is needed.

“There are Jews in these places who want to continue being Jewish

**In 2010, Mohammed VI appropriated millions of dollars to repair and refurbish the decaying remains of an architectural Jewish history – synagogues, cemeteries and heritage sites – speckled across the country.**

and want to continue to engage with their Jewish identity and their Jewish life, and it has always been out our goal to ensure they can continue to do that.”

JDC is not alone in its pursuit to bolster the Moroccan pintele yid. Muslim Moroccans are working to turn that spark into a flame.

A student organization from Al-Akawayn University in Ifrane is spreading a Jewish Moroccan history lesson around the country. Founded and operated by Moroccan Muslims, the Mimouna Association has encouraged bridge building between Jews and Muslims and has made efforts to educate Muslims on Jewish culture and traditions that once thrived in Moroccan society. Since its foundation in 2007, new chapters of the group have been founded at universities and in communities around the country.

But Moroccan Jews are still leaving. Even Toledano has considered it, a man near obsessed with the monarchy and fervent in his national pride.

“Sometimes I think about leaving,” he says, casting his eyes to the street down below his apartment balcony. He readjusts in his armchair, clears his throat and smiles, “But I say no. I know I will never find a place that is more home than Morocco.”

Even if the Jews continue to leave, Morocco will still be home to the stories of the Haims of Meknes, the Mohammeds of Fez, the Yonas of the diaspora, the stories that preserve the history of Moroccan Jews.

It was the stories that I discovered when I visited Toledano’s office again and again. At first I assumed the jewel-encrusted candlestick holders and the woven tapestries were among the most valuable items in the chaotic mess he effortlessly

navigated. But as I grew to understand Toledano and the larger Jewish Moroccan community, it was indeed the discolored photographs that held the most value to not only him, but to the Jewish Moroccan history as well.

Those photographs tell a story of Jewish and Islamic coexistence, of neighbors and friends brought together over glasses of tea and plates of

couscous. They tell of a strong devotion to Judaism when conversion may have been easier, of centuries of Jewish struggle in Morocco and hard times overcome. They tell of an uncertain future for the religious minority, yet they also reveal a history that will resonate in the hearts and minds of Moroccans, just as it always has.

**“Sometimes I think about leaving,” he says, casting his eyes to the street down below his apartment balcony. He readjusts in his armchair, clears his throat and smiles, “But I say no. I know I will never find a place that is more home than Morocco.”**

*Published by BG Falcon Media on March 22, 2019*

# 'I'm Finally Here'

## The Story of an Eritrean Who Found Refuge in Morocco

*After fleeing Eritrea as a refugee, Faisal Saeed is pursuing a university degree in Morocco thanks to scholarships from the Moroccan and German governments.*

"I still can't remember how I felt when I got my letter. I was numb. I couldn't believe that finally my future would start, and at the same time, I was sad because I might not be able to see my family for several years. It was a huge mix of emotions. I was in shock."

Faisal Saeed received an acceptance letter from a Moroccan government scholarship program in 2014 that opened up new possibilities for the young Eritrean refugee. The program allowed him to leave Saudi Arabia for Morocco where he could pursue a university education. Although he arrived in Rabat over four years ago, his experiences as a refugee have made it challenging for the 22-

"I couldn't believe that finally my future would start, and at the same time, I was sad because I might not be able to see my family for several years."



*Faisal Saeed, an Eritrean refugee, fled his home with his family. They made their way to Saudi Arabia, where he lived until he received scholarships to attend universities in Morocco. | Photo provided.*

year-old to find a sense of home in Morocco.

Today, Saeed is one of nearly 6,500 refugees living in

Morocco, according to numbers from the UNHCR. Although most refugees in Morocco are from Syria and Yemen, some migrants, like Saeed, are from Eritrea, a coastal country in the Horn of Africa that borders Sudan, Ethiopia and Djibouti. Saeed is Tigrinyan, one of nine recognized ethnic groups in Eritrea. While the Tigrinya tribe makes up 55 percent of

the country's population, Saeed said the tribe is often a target of government abuse.

Eritrea has one of the worst human rights records in the world. Arbitrary detention, mandatory and indefinite military conscription, torture, sexual violence and forced labor are just some of the violations that have driven nearly 15 percent of the population to flee Eritrea since the 1998 war with Ethiopia.

The one-man dictatorship ruled by President Isaias Afewerki faces little resistance for the abuse against its citizens. Eritrea's independent press was shut down in 2001, and no domestic institution exists that can investigate these abuses.

The Committee to Protect Journalists has consistently ranked Eritrea as the number one most censored country in the world with a record worse than North Korea.

The United Nations Human Rights Council stepped in to fill the shoes of local media and has attempted to report on claims of human rights abuse. Despite requests to visit Eritrea to conduct a fact-finding mission, the HRC was denied. Instead, a team gathered 550 first-hand testimonies from witnesses living in other countries in addition to 160 written submissions.

From the testimonies, the HRC revealed in its 2015 report that “widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed in Eritrea under the authority of the government. Some of these violations may constitute crimes against humanity.”

Saeed’s family members witnessed the abuses described by the HRC’s report around them every day. Saeed said his family left Eritrea in 2000. They made their way to Saudi Arabia where he spent most of his childhood in Riyadh.

“Some people there were nice. Some people were the absolute opposite. They constantly reminded you that you don’t belong there,”

**“Widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed in Eritrea under the authority of the government. Some of these violations may constitute crimes against humanity.”**

Saeed said of Saudi people. “I knew that from an early age that I didn’t belong there.”

As he grew older, he felt trapped in Saudi Arabia.

After finishing secondary school, Saeed’s residency permit expired. Saeed faced a very real fear of being repatriated, of being sent back to Eritrea. As Saudi Arabia is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention that grants rights to refugees, many of Saeed’s friends and family members were deported from Saudi Arabia back to Eritrea.

For Saeed and other Eritrean refugees, “Returning to Eritrea means death,” he said.

The Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs has repeatedly insisted that people who fled are free to return with no repercussions. However, repatriated refugees told Human Rights Watch that upon return to Eritrea, they were subjected to harsh punishment, including torture

and indefinite detention without outside contact.

A report from the European Asylum Support Office stated that “shortly after their return to Eritrea, [repatriated refugees] were beaten and imprisoned in overcrowded cells. One informant explained that several people in his group of returnees died as a result of those beatings.”

If Saeed were to be repatriated to Eritrea, at best, an unpleasant return awaited him. At worst, death. So as graduation grew closer, he desperately searched for opportunities to avoid what he perceived as imminent repatriation. He needed to leave Saudi Arabia.

In December 2014, he received an acceptance letter from the Moroccan Agency for International Cooperation program that provided funding for a university education in Morocco. Almost immediately, he moved to Morocco. He focused on French at a language center in Rabat before he started his bachelor’s degree in Kenitra.

In 2018, he was one of a handful of refugee students selected for the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative program (DAFI) to continue his studies in Morocco. He currently studies radiology in Casablanca at the Higher

Institutes of Nursing and Health Technology Professions.

He's been in Morocco for over four years, but he doesn't feel at home in the North African country.

"I feel like no matter how my situation is here in Morocco, I don't feel like this is my home," he said. "The word 'home,' the definition of it in my mind is the place where my family is because I

didn't have a homeland. I was hardly there. Eritrea is not my home. Saudi Arabia is not my home. Morocco is not my home. I am always a foreigner."

He is unsure of when he will see his family next, as most of his family members are in Saudi Arabia, but he is making the most of his time in Morocco. He's since become the vice-president of the DAFI student association. Above all,

he says he's grateful to have found safety, security and opportunity for a better life in Morocco.

"I'm thankful, to be honest. This is such a good point in my life that I was hoping I would reach that so many refugees don't reach. I'm finally here," he said.



# Italian violin-voice duo tours Morocco

MARRAKESH 26.01

AGADIR 29.01

CASABLANCA 01.02

TETUAN 03.02

**CLIO & MAURICE**

**MAROCCO TOUR**

TANGIER 04.02

MEKNES 05.02

FES 07.02

OUJDA 08.02

To listen to the audio story, [click here](#).

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Clio and Maurice, an Italian voice-violin duo, is making its way around Morocco on the group's first international tour. Clio Colombo, singer, and Martin Nicastro, violinist, are playing in eight cities across the country. The combination of violin and voice is piquing the interest of Italians, and now, Moroccans.

While the couple has been together for nearly six years, it was only a year and a half ago that the two musicians began composing and playing together, somewhat out of the blue. One of Colombo's friends asked the duo to open for her,

effectively launching the two into their performance career. From there, Colombo said the gigs came one after the next.

Their abrupt beginnings have led the couple to develop their own brand of music, a blend of their backgrounds as classically-trained musicians. Nicastro studied at the conservatory in Milan, and Colombo is currently studying music.

Pop is the dominant genre of their music, but flares of blues and soul in the vocals complement the electric violin. Nicastro uses multi-effect pedals which allow him to record, loop and manipulate the music coming from the violin, introducing electronic elements. While the use of the pedal adds interest, Nicastro said that

the unusual pairing of violin and voice makes the duo stand out.

Despite their somewhat unorthodox style and a foreign audience, Clio and Martin have been pleased by the turnout for their Morocco sets. In Tangier, they had a crowd of nearly 250 people, their largest audience yet at a performance.

They hope these high turnouts continue, as their goal is to perform and create music full time. The duo is currently working on their first Clio and Maurice EP which is set to be released early this year. But first, they'll finish spreading their tunes around Morocco. The duo has two more stops on their tour, Fez tonight and Oujda tomorrow.

# The Disappearing Art of Hand-Rolling Couscous



The streets of Moroccan towns and villages are quiet on most Friday afternoons. Stray cats slink about unbothered by the absence of cars, few heavy feet to weave in and out of. Even Yahya, the smiley shoe shiner who never strays far from his usual street corner, has abandoned his post. A silence spreads across a city with half a million inhabitants. No one is around because they're all eating couscous.

Couscous has become a staple in Moroccan culture, most often eaten on Fridays,

the holy day for Muslims. Friday afternoons, Muslims head to the local mosque for prayer. After prayer, families and friends return home to share a heaping platter of couscous, steaming and smothered with tender, spiced vegetables, chick peas and chicken. Washed down with lben, a thick soured milk, Moroccans fill themselves every Friday with friendship, family and, of course, couscous.

However important couscous may be to

Moroccans (it is the national dish, after all), rolling couscous by hand is falling out of popularity. Processed and packaged options are displacing the longstanding tradition. The convenience of strolling down the aisles in the grocery store and grabbing a package of pre-rolled couscous is tempting, considering the time-consuming nature of the dish. But some hold strong. A handful of Moroccans are resisting the ease of store-bought couscous, and in the

process, helping preserve a skill passed down for generations - the art of hand-rolling couscous.

Couscous itself is made from fine particles of semolina flour, contrary to a common misconception that the pasta-like dish is a grain. A splash of water is added to a bowl of the flour, acting as a binding agent. By rolling the moistened flour by hand, small pellets form. The pellets are put through a sieve and sprinkled with more flour to prevent sticking. Here, the little balls of flour can be dried and stored for following Fridays or steamed and served.

Couscous binds together Moroccans as a society, from the bustling traders of the Marrakech medina to isolated sheep herders, from Spanish speakers in Al-Hoceima to Western Saharans. The dish seemingly bypasses social strata. Najwa Lamzouri, a Meknes local, prepares extra couscous for people living on the street so that they too may share in weekly ritual of the national dish. Further, the richest Moroccans eat couscous the same way as the poorest Moroccans - together.

Couscous crosses religious

lines as well. Although eating couscous follows the Muslim's midday Friday prayer, couscous is a Moroccan tradition, not just an Islamic one. The leader of the Jewish community in Meknes, Morocco, Haim Toledano, takes couscous every Friday

*Couscous itself is made from fine particles of semolina flour, contrary to a common misconception that the pasta-like dish is a grain.*

just like the rest of his neighbors. While his couscous isn't preceded by a trip to the mosque, he said it's still a tradition for him, just like every other Moroccan.

Regardless of religion or social class, couscous takes time. At least half a day goes into producing Friday's showstopper, and that doesn't account for shopping beforehand, cleaning up after, and the time to eat and revel in the success of a good plate of couscous. Many people have lost their appreciation for the time that goes into preparing the dish.

When you are eating a plate of couscous, you do not see the labor of love put into each granule, the gentle massage of water and oil into the semolina. You do not see the wiped brows, furrowed in concentration, or the starched aprons, decorated with

smearing rainbows of spiced handprints.

You do not see the kitchen commotion, the bustling about with pots and knives and plates.

You do not see the hands, red and raw and swollen from turning and aerating the freshly steamed couscous which is too hot to touch.

But Selwa Jabli sees.

Jabli, the founder of a non-profit in Meknes, Morocco, recognizes the cultural significance of couscous and the hand-rolling tradition. After all, she still clings to her childhood memories of rolling couscous with her whole family. Gathering together to roll was a special occasion for her, almost as if the act of rolling these tiny granules were a celebration in itself.

"We used to gather with my grandparents, my mother, my aunts, my sisters," she said. "It was a party."

She said at large gatherings, women danced and traditional music would mingle in the air with the smell of fresh couscous. On some occasions, an animal would be sacrificed to feed all the women.

But now, Jabil says more and more families are living in separate apartments, breaking up the traditional household structure. In these smaller households, fewer people are around the house to make couscous together, and fewer people are around to eat it.

"It's easier to get it



prepared without dedicating 3 days to preparing couscous for everyone,” she said.

And that’s what many Moroccans have opted for, as a quick stop at the nearest Marjane or Carrefour is more convenient than making couscous at home from scratch.

But this wave of convenience has some Moroccans worried that pre-packaged couscous is stripping away the hand-rolled couscous tradition. Most supermarket couscous is pre-steamed and dried, and most notably, rolled by machine and not by hand.

“It’s not the same couscous,” Jabli said. She said it doesn’t have the same love that handmade couscous has rolled into.

But the nonprofit run by Jabli, Al-Amal, is trying to keep the tradition alive.

In 2009, Jabli traveled to Zaouiate Ifrane, a poor area of the Atlas Mountains to take clothes and blankets to the residents there. By chance, she met an Amazigh (otherwise identified as Berber) woman who still rolled couscous by hand.

“Because there are not that many people who know how to do it here in Meknes, I had the idea for this woman to



*Selwa Jabli is the founder of the Meknes-based non-profit Al-Amal. | Hannah Finnerty*

come help me teach us,” she said.

Since 2009, a persistent group of women has come together every week at Al-Amal to hand-roll couscous. Jabli hopes that teaching women how to make couscous by hand can lead them to financial security and independence, as they can sell the dried couscous they make. With more funding, she hopes to expand the program.

Jabli admits that while the Al-Amal couscous parties don’t involve dancing or music, the women recognize the importance of their work. Although it may be a small contribution, they are helping

to preserve and pass on part of Moroccan history and culture.

She already sees the tradition passing through to her 10-year-old daughter, Oum Kalthoum, who has learned from her mother how to roll couscous by hand. Her daughter gives Jabli hope that the love and care that filled the couscous from her family’s hands will continue in future generations.

“Couscous is the heart of Morocco,” she said. “You will not find a family in Morocco who doesn’t eat couscous, so we have to keep the tradition no matter what.”