

# Things Were Different Back Then

by [Geoffrey Clarfield](#) (February 2023)



Hassan was warming his hands and feet around the cooking fire in the kitchen, a small room off the patio, the internal courtyard of my house in Tangier with its fountain, orange trees and blue and white tiles which I could endlessly contemplate. That was probably the goal of the artisan who centuries ago invented them so that one could meditate on the many names of Allah and better understand this world and the world to come.

Hassan liked me but I perplexed him. He once said to me, “Sidi

(sir or lord) ... you know so much about Morocco, our traditions, our history and even our religion so why not become a Muslim, you are almost there in every other way? You could still worship at the Rabbis tombs who are venerated by Moroccan Muslims."

He did not do this often as he was respectful of the wishes of the King (the Sultan) who had made peace with Israel and was trying ever so slowly to take the rough edges off his subjects who were having so much trouble adjusting to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Sultan believed in the superiority of Islam (he is descended from the Prophet Mohamed) but his father read philosophy and once said that Moroccans were still in that tribal mentality so well described by the Renaissance writer Montaigne.

Hassan knew that as an official representative of the State of Israel, I was not about to give up on my Jewish faith.

It was a cold day in winter. The sun was shining and the rain and winds had past. I asked Hassan to lay out some carpets around the fountain. I sat there enjoying the sun and he got out his sebsi, his long pipe, filled it with the local marijuana (kif) and quietly sat there doing nothing, for there was nothing to do.

I watched a line of insects climbing up the wall of the garden and then watched birds as they dive bombed in and out, feasting on the ants. I described what I saw to Hassan who cryptically remarked, " When animals kill each other to survive it is clean. When humans kill each other in war it often leaves one feeling dirty, polluted. That is why so many soldiers go to the saints tombs and sacrifice after battles and war. They feel dirty, polluted and want to be cleansed."

I had never heard or read about this and asked him how he knew this as he had never been in the military. He told me,

*My great grandfather was a simple soldier in the army of the Sultan Abdel Aziz. The young sultan was surrounded by courtiers who had made deals with Europeans who imported luxury items which fascinated the young Sultan. He was enamored of mechanical clocks, bicycles and played bicycle polo in his palace with courtiers and European diplomats. He had a menagerie of lions, leopards and even elephants which he believed that tradition demanded. He was kept in the palace by the courtiers who alongside these European entrepreneurs, slowly but surely emptied the coffers of the state until the lesser bureaucrats, the rural tribal Berber and Arab caids (chiefs) who kept the peace stopped getting their payments and stopped visiting the Sultan.*

*Slowly the Sultan lost power. The courtiers did not care because they were rolling in money and had no thought for the future. Slowly, slowly the Sultan lost power, first in the Sahara, then among the Berbers of the Atlas Mountains and then among the Arab tribes of the plains who had always stood by the Sultan, that is to say more than the other tribes for they liked the chaos of revolt when they reveled and pillaged in the war of one tribe against its neighbour.*

*A simple soldiers life was satisfactory for they actually did not fight a lot. The Sultan could never be sure of the loyalty of the various tribes and so, each year his entire court, with all its officials, moved from one locality to the other. There they were fed and honored by the local people. As the Sultan included much of his army during these "visits," the life of a soldier was comfortable.*

*There were the usual camp followers, the butchers, the bakers those who took care of horses and saddles in this massive tented camp which was set up in concentric circles. It was a city under cloth. My grandfather was not among the poorest soldiers. He had a mule which he road, a mule for*

his belongings, a cook and servant and slept in a tent. He received his pay from the Sultan's officers and "helped himself" as the progress of the Sultan moved across the land.

He once told me, "Hassan, it was like a different world. We rose at three in the morning and established long lines across the plains or in the hills and mountains. There were musicians who played near the Sultan and there were black slaves who rode and walked near him with white scarves to chase away the flies. I suspect there were more people in this entourage than there are pilgrims each year at Mecca. The only thing that conjures it up were those American films that the French brought to the cinemas here in the 1930s which were based on the history of the ancient Greeks and Romans who lived in the time of ignorance before Islam."  
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During the last days of the reign of Abdel Aziz a pretender rose up in revolt who through forgery and witchcraft claimed he was the Sultan's elder brother. As the people were unhappy with the Sultan and blamed the meager harvests on the fact that the Sultan was concerting with "infidels," the country went into a widespread revolt under this pretender named Bou Hamara.

Once they came upon the camp of Bou Hamara. He was situated on the ridge of a valley on the other side of one of the foothills of the Atlas The Sultan ordered his soldiers down the ridge, across the stream and up the other side of the valley hoping to surprise Bou Hamara's soldiers.

The first group soon discovered an empty village filled with sacks of grain. They put down their guns, stripped off their clothes, put the grain on their backs and retreated. The Sultan ordered the soldiers near him to fire on them. They killed one or two but when the soldiers returned laden with grain they were greeted as heroes. The Sultan sent a

second group of soldiers that included my grandfather who was called Akram.

His soldiers did the same thing, but Bou Hamara's forces came closer and started shooting at them. Two of his comrades were mortally wounded. It was the custom of Bou Hamara to mutilate and burn the bodies of the wounded and the dead so that they would not go to heaven and so, among our men it became common to bury alive wounded soldiers. One comrade of my grandfather asked to be buried alive. He said, "I am already dead and want to reach Paradise. Bury me now" and he did so.

Expecting the other soldier to do the same he was shocked and surprised when he said, "I am wounded not dead. Put down your grain and carry me back and I will live. Akram was caught in a dilemma for he had not eaten a proper meal in some time. As the bullets continued to fly he stopped to dig a quick shallow hole, threw in the soldier and as he piled on the dirt and stones said to him, "You are dead, you just do not know it yet."

He then carried his grain back to the camp and although the Sultan's army experienced defeat after defeat, he did not starve and returned to Fez with food for his family. Years later he made the Pilgrimage to the tomb of Moulay Idris, and prayed that the soul of the man he buried was in heaven. He told me that he felt no guilt, for death by mutilation and that burning was worse than being buried alive. I asked him why he did not shoot his comrade to first put him out of his misery. He answered, "Things were different back then."

Hassan filled his pipe with some more Kif and continued to contemplate the insects and their avian eaters. He then quietly got up and left the house for he was going to the

market to buy vegetables and fruits to add to our late lunch or dinner.

That night I could not sleep and read about the time of Abd el Aziz in the writings of the British journalist Walter Harris, who had made Morocco his home before the French Protectorate.

He had written:

*Often the soldiers, if they took the trouble, buried the wounded alive, to prevent their heads being carried off as trophies by the enemy. I remember being told while spending an evening with some of the riff-raff of the army—who in spite of their characters, were often the most jovial and cheery of companions the story of a recalcitrant wounded comrade who didn't want to be buried alive. The incident had happened the same day. The man was badly wounded, the camp was a long way off, and his "pals" didn't mean to have the trouble of carrying him there. So they dug his grave and began to push him in. He naturally protested, "I am not dead," he cried. "Don't you see I'm living. "Be quiet" said a companion, "you were killed at least an hour ago, Don't you realize you are dead?" The poor man still cried out until the earth covered him and put an end to his protestation and his life.*

*The soldier who narrated the incident added, "The Moorish soldier is an ungrateful and unbelieving individual. This man, for instance, had no confidence in us, his comrades, when we assured him he was dead. I hate ingratitude," and he filled up his little kif pipe and handed it to us for a whiff.*

I could still smell the aroma of Hassan's kif pipe in my empty courtyard. Although it was late at night and the streets of

the old city where I lived were dangerous to walk in alone, I left the house and started walking quickly, without stopping, alone, and breathing heavily.

I finally arrived home just before sunrise, without incident, lay down on one of the rugs that Hassan had left near the fountain, and fell into a troubled sleep.

When I woke at noon that day the first thing I saw were the birds, dive bombing and eating the ants that had escaped yesterday's attack.

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Geoffrey Clarfield is an anthropologist at large. For twenty years he lived in, worked among and explored the cultures and societies of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. As a development anthropologist he has worked for the following clients: the UN, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Norwegian, Canadian, Italian, Swiss and Kenyan governments as well international NGOs. His essays largely focus on the translation of cultures.

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