

## **Water and Culture Stories** **From the Water in Africa Web Site**

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

The “Morna” is Cape Verdean music straight from the heart. Every time I hear a song it gets me choked up, and I’m not even Cape Verdean. The primary instruments 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 throughout history. 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 the Morna. I was sitting in a room beside the roof. It was dark outside, and 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 ten people playing instruments and singing. My host father was one of the men playing a guitar. I sat down, mesmerized by the sad music coming from these ten guys. As I looked around, I wasn’t alone. A large crowd gathered, including some personnel from our Peace Corps office. The music played on until morning and I remained, fixated on a music reflecting a culture’s hardships and realizing the most basic need shared by everyone in the world—water.



by Peace Corps Volunteer Heather Cameron  
Rosso, Mauritania

Mauritanians are avid tea drinkers as are many North and West African peoples. They all share the same ceremonial custom--green tea with mint-- that has become a common part of every day 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 large Muslim population. Muslims must pray five times per day according to the Koran. Each prayer requires the cleansing of hands, face and feet before praying.



by Peace Corps Volunteer Kerry Zahn  
Paris, Mauritania

Mauritania forms the barrier between the Sahara and the rest of Africa 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, who many times 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

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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 Jennifer Bohman  
Souss Massa National Park, Morocco

The south of Morocco is officially classified as semi-arid—in other words, just plain dry. Rainy season here occurs when most people in the U.S. are experiencing winter. Contrary to my initial understanding, rainy season here means the only season when it possibly might rain. But there are no guarantees. During this season, every conversation I had began with comments on if there was any rain in the past few days, its abundance, and if any other neighboring villages 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 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 scarce stand most precious of resources and yet their religion and culture have made them generous with it.



by Peace Corps Volunteer Beth Giebus  
Tetouan and Agadir, 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,

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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 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 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 ten-year-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-skeeeeeeeennn-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!"

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

Most Moroccan art is seen in their crafts and water has contributed greatly to the need for such crafts. Bowls, bidons and waters holding devices are greatly needed by the Moroccan people. In many villages people do not have running water in their homes. Some people visit wells, some streams, lakes or springs, sometimes traveling large distances. This means there is a great need for water holders (as sometimes this trek is not made everyday). 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 to Morocco. Artisans learn their craft for years. The area of Fes is particularly known for its beautiful pottery.

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

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by Peace Corps Volunteer Ryan Powell  
Ait Yaddou, 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

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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.

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 a Taloont) 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 folktale 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.

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by Peace Corps Volunteer Jessica Seem  
Zaouia Village, Morocco

Before prayers, there is a Muslim ritualistic washing. It occurs five times per day. S’hor is around 4:00 AM, D’hor around noon, L’asair around 3:00 PM, Maghreb at 5:45 PM, and L’ashou around 7:30 PM. People follow the washing ceremony with different degrees of strictness. You must wash your hands, feet, and face five times 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.”