Thaddeus De Caprio

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The Importance of Storytelling Through the Lens of the Experience of the Syrian American Diaspora

I recall an experience at my grandparents' house during my youth. It was Easter Sunday and we were going for our annual feast of assorted Syrian, Italian, and American fare with way too many people in one dining room. When dinner was over, a variety of Syrian desserts and pastries replaced the large trays of stacked stuffed grape leaves and baked *kibbeh*. I put some *knafeh* on my plate and followed my cousins downstairs. I sat, along with my siblings and cousins, on the carpeted floor of my grandfather's musty basement as the fickle fluorescent lights on the ceiling flickered and then illuminated the room. *Gido* was going to tell us a story. My cousins and I, a small army of pre-adolescent goofballs, fell quiet for the first time since we had convened at my grandparent's house in Wayne, New Jersey for Easter dinner.

There is an old joke among the Syrian American community in Wayne that is similar to the "Who's on first?" sketch familiar to anyone with knowledge of the classic comedians Bud Abbott and Lou Costello. Since the Arabic word for 'where' is *'wayn'* , it would be common to hear relatives laughing with another at the question '*min wayn enta*?', Arabic for 'where are you from?'. The response would be '*ana min Wayne'* Which means 'I am from Wayne' but also sounds like 'I am from where'. Pretend confusion would ensue and the joke seemingly never got old.

My grandfather took one last sip of milky *'araq*, placed his glass on a coaster shaped like a small Middle Eastern rug on a poorly balanced wooden coffee table in the center of the room, and sat down in a weathered brown leather chair known to the family as the *'Gido* chair'. He let out a cough and cleared his throat as he proudly looked upon his legion of grandchildren sitting on a large rug gifted to him by his aunt before he left Aleppo, Syria for the United States in 1951. His eyes then turned upwards and a pained expression originating from his bushy, grey eyebrows encroached upon the rest of his face in a display of intense nostalgia that can only be defined as *Haneen*.

He began in his thick accent, "Long time ago, back on the other side, I was little guy like you are now. I have an uncle, *Allah* *yerhamu* (God rest his soul), uncle Karim. Big strong guy like, real tough guy like. He used to work in the factory." In Syria, several of my grandfather's relatives worked in a cigarette factory. My grandfather claimed that upwards mobility was difficult because the factory owners were Muslim, and they wouldn't give promotions as easily to Christians such as his uncle, Karim. *Gido* went on, "One day, they have a big *hafleh* (party) like and everybody come to their house with gifts and *'araq* to celebrate Karim, *Allah yerhamu*, because he leave the factory and make a new restaurant like." This 'restaurant', pronounced by my grandfather with a classy French accent, was really more of a cabaret/improvised *'araq* distillery which catered to a mainly Christian, liquor-loving demographic in the old quarter of Aleppo. The legality of the establishment was hazy at best and led to noise complaints from other less-than-accepting neighbors. Eventually, the 'restaurant' gained the attention of the local authorities who *Gido* affectionately referred to as *'al* *atrak'* or 'the Turks'.

According to *Gido, "Al* *atrak*, bad guys like, they don't like Karim because he doesn't want to pay them. Al atrak say he have to pay them or they going to take it away from him the restaurant! They want tax like, otherwise they gonna kill him with *a sayf (*sword*).*" In reality, this tax was probably a sort of mafia-esque 'look-the-other-way' bribe intended to intimidate the owners of the 'restaurant'. According to Gido, "When *al atrak* come the next time and ask for the money, Karim, big strong guy like, gonna have his friends come to hit them on the head! When they come, at the end of the day and the party is over and everybody going home, Karim's friend doesn't show up! He start to run fast up to the roof and jumping *min stouh il stouh* (from rooftop to rooftop) to get away from *al atrak*!" The story ends with Karim being shot at ("but not one bullet hit him!") as he jumps from roof to roof. Eventually he falls to his death between two houses.

This story has developed, over time, several different endings and the meaning of the story itself changes dramatically depending on the ending chosen by my grandfather. In this version of the story, Karim is an undeniably good-natured, well-meaning individual with mean-spirited Turks pursuing him simply for the purpose of extortion and giving him a hard time. In another version of the story, however, the reason Karim is wanted by the local authorities is because he is suspected of having murdered a Turkish policeman by throwing him into the way of an oncoming train. The latter version of the story conveniently is never recited when my grandmother, ever fearful of her husband's ability to incite a child uprising within the family, is present or within hearing distance.

When my grandmother is not present, the story is more exciting, and actually makes more sense to the listeners as they are able to understand that the justification for chasing a man from rooftop to rooftop does not rest solely on his being an innocent, alcohol-loving Christian. My brother Louis, a graduate of Tisch School of the Arts and aspiring filmmaker recently conducted and filmed an interview with my grandfather in an effort to record and chronicle some of his stories. My grandfather's lasting concern over events that happened nearly a hundred years ago with Turkish authorities which are no longer present in modern-day Syria can be observed. On camera, he tells my brother, "You can film and record, but don't use any names, because it's a crime what he did, Louie!". In the face of a camera, and with his wife nowhere to be found, the true version of the story emerges. It is very possible his uncle committed a crime, but it is impossible to know for certain at this point.

When the story extols the virtues of Karim's innocence, the moral lesson is significantly different. It serves to do little more than paint a bad picture of the Turkish occupation of Syria and by extension make Muslims look bad. My grandfather would use terms and phrasing like, "the Moslem always try to give the Christians hard time," or explain how Lebanon was set up by the French to "fix the headache of the Christians caused by the Moslems". How important is this difference in the story? Is it possible that, over the course of time, the 'innocence-oriented' ending has left a significant mark on the psyche of the grandchildren, opening the door to Islamophobic sentiment later on in life? While the lasting psychological effects of these alternate endings would be better addressed within the framework of psychology, the mechanisms which create this effect still warrant exploration and discussion.

It is worth looking at the field of storytelling in general for the significant role it plays in cultural production and reproduction. Stories are passed down from one generation to the next. I look to the stories of my grandfather in order to draw conclusions about the impact of storytelling on society and the role of informal, family related stories within the larger frame of cultural reproduction.

My goal throughout the course of this essay is to explore the modes and origins of middle eastern storytelling in order to come to an understanding of the traditions which have influenced my grandfather's unique style of storytelling. I will attempt to compare some of my own personal experiences observing my grandfather in the act of storytelling with scholarly accounts and criticisms from various sources on Middle Eastern storytelling traditions. Another issue I'd like to highlight is personal in nature and, being of Syrian background myself, dear to my heart . I aim to assist in the process of keeping alive the stories and traditions of my grandfather and the people of Syria.

In recent years, my grandfather's mental state has begun to deteriorate. His ability to recall certain specific details from his past has suffered. Sometimes he explains in great detail a story of an event which occurred in Brooklyn, when in reality, such an event occurred in Aleppo during his youth. Other times he will recall a story with such vivid memory and imagery that he will not believe my grandmother when she gently (or not-so-gently) informs him that he has accidentally replaced all the names of the people in his story with people who are from a completely different generation, country, and have nothing to do with the story.

How important is this though? The purpose of telling stories, for my grandfather at least, has always been more about teaching a lesson to his listeners than recalling historical events with perfect accuracy. As Augusta Baker and Ellin Greene write in Storytelling: Art & Technique, "Hearing stories told gives children practice in visualization. As children listen they create the scenes, the action, the characters. The ability to visualize, to fantasize, is the basis of creative imagination. It also appears to have a positive effect on social and cognitive development. Children with a strong predisposition toward imaginitive play seem to empathize with other children more readily" (Baker & Greene, 21). The noted Russian author and specialist in children's language and literature, Kornej Cukovskij, believed the goal of storytelling to be "fostering in the child, at whatever cost, compassion and humaneness - this miraculous ability of man to be disturbed by another being's misfortunes, to feel joy about another being's happiness, to experience another's fate as one's own" (Chukovsky, 138). From this concept, it is apparent that storytelling informs its audience about, and prepares them for, real life situations.

Since some general background knowledge on specifically Middle Eastern storytelling traditions is needed, I shall now turn my attention to several important scholars in the fields of Middle Eastern, and Western storytelling and technique. Abdelfatteh Kilito, an acclaimed Moroccan novelist, essayist, and critic examines *The Dove's Neck-Ring*, a treatise on love written in 1022 by the renowned Andalusian poet, theologian, and philosopher, Ibn Hazm. Kilito draws from the 1931 translation by A. R. Nykl.

Let us remember that *The Dove's Neck-Ring* is composed of thirty chapters, each of which defines some aspect of love: exchanges of letters, the messenger, the union, fidelity, betrayal, separation, and so on. Some general considerations are demonstrated by anecdotes as well as by poems authored by Ibn Hazm himself. It appears to me that the originality and audacity of the book are essentially exemplified by its anecdotes, or at least by some of them. (Kilito, 75).

Kilito goes on to give an example of a specific anecdote within *The Dove's Neck-Ring* involving a slave girl's radical declaration of love. In love with the son of a chief, the slave girl grows frustrated at the fact that the son of the chief is unaware of her affection towards him, and eventually kisses him on the cheek spontaneously one day. "By her behavior, the girl has transgressed a rule that the text suggests without mentioning it explicitly: the initiative of the declaration of love is the responsibility of the man, not the woman." (Kilito, 77). Here, Kilito presents us with an example of gender dynamics and expectations of sexuality in Arab culture through a literary lens.

In Ibn Hazm's story, the kiss is not suggested to the young girl by her confidante, nor is it inspired by a literary model, whether in poetry or in book form. It is a matter of a sudden, unpremeditated impulse with uncertain consequences - a risky gamble, which has miraculously been won. The young man, unmoved at first by the poetic prompting, gives in to the kiss that awakens his passion and makes him come to himself. (Kilito, 79).

Kilito is sure to include the response of one of Ibn Hazm's contemporaries, the poet and critic Ibn Rashiq al-Qayrawani. Al-Qayrawani expresses the nature of declarations of love in his book of poetic criticism, *Al- 'Umdah fi mahasin al-shi'r wa adabihi wa naqdihi* (The mainstay of concerning poetry's embellishments, correct usage, and criticism). He states that the custom among Arabs, "is that the poet is responsible for expressing gallant sentiments... With non-Arabs ('Ajam) it is the opposite. They have the custom of attributing the initiative to the woman." (Kilito, 77). Kilito uses this juxtaposition between the styles of Ibn Hazm and al-Qayrawani to emphasize why the nature of Ibn Hazm's slave girl character is so unorthodox and unconventional in the Arab storytelling tradition. She behaved like a non-Arab, and as a creation of Ibn Hazm's mind, opens space for a harsh critique of Ibn Hazm as a poet himself to his contemporaries. This ties into Kilito's following addendum on censorship.

On a political level, the issue of censorship was involved in the 1931 translation of the *Neck* *Ring* by A. R. Nykl. Kilito writes about the political implications of self-imposed censorship on the translation of a text from its original form and language to another.

Some people have also suspected this copyist of also suppressing texts in prose, anecdotes or statements about love that may not have suited his taste or that he may have found too brazen. In any case, the book we now read is not exactly the one that Ibn Hazm wrote. The shadow of censorship thus looms over The *Neck-Ring.* Moreover, the author himself has yielded to self-censorship: what he has written differs from what he could have written. He frequently specifies that there are things he either does not want to say or cannot say and that he has not recorded everything he knows about love. What is the origin of this knowledge that he refuses to disclose even in part? The secluded space of women's quarters. (Kilito, 80).

Kilito makes the case that because the nature of Ibn Hazm's upbringing was "both masculine and feminine" (Kilito, 81), A.R. Nykl in 1931 most likely decided to avoid translating what he would have deemed uncomfortable or morally gray subjects. The political nature of Ibn Hazm's story is such that warrants the same cultural criticism centuries after the release of the original story. What are the political implications of this form of censorship? Accuracy in the translation of the original is hindered at the expense of having to appeal to more Western, even Victorian, standards of decency. No doubt Nykl's efforts were in the interest of making his literature more widely accepted for his target audience, but they sacrifice a certain aspect of 'authenticity' which Ibn Hazm certainly intended to be there in the first place. As this particular story is transported/translated into the realm of Western appreciation and understanding, the very nature of the story is changed.

This idea relates directly to the self censorship exhibited by my grandfather in the presence of his wife, which leads him to choose to change the ending of his story. "The power to choose involves knowledge of self, knowledge of storytelling literature, and knowledge of the group to whom one is telling" (Baker & Greene, 25). When my grandmother is nearby, my grandfather's stories change slightly. He knows how to avoid the possibility of upsetting his wife by changing certain aspects of his stories, whether that may be in the form of different characters, or a whole different lesson entirely. Sometimes the concern is that the story may rile the children up too much and lead to an undesirable situation for the adults in the family, especially when it's time for the grandchildren to say goodbye to their cousins and leave for their respective homes at the end of the evening.

Perhaps my grandfather takes no issue with replacing details or facts here and there throughout his stories. He seems confident that the impact of his stories on his grandchildren's' minds will be similar enough regardless of the manner in which they end. Renowned American mythologist and writer, Joseph Campbell states,

"Whether the hero be ridiculous or sublime, Greek or barbarian, gentile or Jew, his journey varies little in essential plan. Popular tales represent the heroic action as physical; the higher religions show the deed to be moral; nevertheless, there will be found astonishingly little variation in the morphology of the adventure, the character roles involved, the victories gained. If one or another of the basic elements of the archetypal pattern is omitted from a given fairy tale, legend, ritual, or myth, it is bound to be somehow or other implied - and the omission itself can speak volumes for the history and pathology of the example (Campbell, 30).

So how do my grandfather's omissions affect the overall impact of his storytelling? My grandfather is well aware of the consequences of changing details in his stories. The function of storytelling, in many cases, is to impart some sort of wisdom in one form or another to the listener.

In the case of the *Sirat Bani Hilal*, one of the greatest oral storytelling traditions of the Middle East, "Like most of the great Arab epics as well as those from Europe and the Byzantine Empire, there is a loose historical basis for these stories. Minor characters from the original sources were often promoted to heroes, and actual events were modified to suit the narrative or resonate with a particular audience." (Stone).Why change a story by omitting or adding details? My grandfather, through stories, has an uncanny ability to stir the emotions in his grandchildren and spark a revolt against the perceived injustices to which they are subjected by their parents. Simply put, stories can be dangerous.

Palestinian American Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod writes on the danger of stories in her book, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society.* Abu-Lughod's fieldwork is remarkable in that it captures the very essence of just how precarious stories can be in the larger frame of a community. She writes,

My first realization of the sensitive nature of the poems came a bit later. A shepherd's wife was helping out in our busy household by baking bread at our makeshift oven. After a minor disappointment, she broke into one of these poems. I insisted that she repeat it so I could write it down. That evening as I talked with the Haj about what I had seen and heard that day, asking him questions and getting explanations, I read him the poem. His kindly and pedagogical manner suddenly changed. Agitated, he demanded to know who had recited it. I hesitated, suspecting that I had unwittingly betrayed something important, but when I finally confessed that it was the wife of one of his shepherds he was palpably relieved. He explained that the poem had to with despair in love; she sand it because she had lost one husband and her present husband was old and about to die. I then understood that he had feared that one of his wives had recited the poem." (Abu-Lughod, 26).

Abu-Lughod then reports her confession to the Haj's senior wife who promptly instructs her to never reveal any women's poems to men. Similar to the quandary in which my grandfather finds himself when his wife enters his storytelling space, is this example from Abu-Lughod's fieldwork. Stories and, in Abu-Lughod's case, poems, can be extremely incendiary vessels of controversy. In other words, due to the nature of their desired effect or the controversy they are incapable of igniting, some stories are not meant for some ears.

Dwight F. Reynolds, an expert in Arabic folklore, literature, and Middle Easten oral and music traditions, writes on the topic of oral traditions, "Epics such as *Antar* and *Dhat al-Himma* have existed only in oral tradition in modern times in the sense that a public story-teller (hakawati) reads them aloud from a written text with varying degrees of improvised additions and commentaries." (Reynolds, 313). Over time, the oral tradition of the *Sirat Bani Hilal*, an epic of sorts often performed with basic musical accompaniment, has lead to several varying versions of the story as it has moved across the Middle East and North Africa.

For example, one episode relates how the members of the tribe are starving—they need water and pasture. Khalifa al-Zanati—in this version the elderly Berber ruler of Tunis—has heard of Jazia’s beauty and demands her as the price for allowing the tribes to enter his lands with their herds. Her husband Dhi’ab is persuaded to save the tribe by divorcing her. Jazia goes to live with Khalifa and bears him two children, but at last her longing for the desert overwhelms her and, by a series of tricks, she escapes and returns to the Bani Hilal. There is another version of the same story, but told presumably for a Berber audience: Khalifa is a young and hand-some Berber warrior from Tunis who is out searching for lost camels when he encounters Jazia and other young women of the Bani Hilal. She falls in love with him and arranges a meeting place. When he arrives, he is challenged by the men of the Bani Hilal who had also asked for her hand and whom she had refused. Khalifa fights them all, defeats them and flees with Jazia’s help. They marry and have two children. (Stone).

Evidenced here is an example of how stories change based on the storyteller's target audience. In the popular North African version of the story, Khalifa is Berber, not Arab. Often times it is not so much the details that matter for the story to convey its intended message.

Furthermore, sometimes the purpose of a story is not to teach a lesson as much as it is about achieving a desired effect for the storyteller, such as getting one's children to fall asleep or simply entertain them. In stark contrast to the gravity of the story of Uncle Karim, exist traditions such as the story of *'Kanunu'*. *Kanunu* is the name of a boy who doesn't want to wake up and go to school. His mother resorts to begging various household objects to help her wake up *Kanunu*, but all of them decline to help in any way. The story theoretically has no ending; it can go on forever (or at least for as long as it takes the storyteller to run out of household objects to list). This is because the purpose of the story is to literally lull a child to sleep.

There is also the case of the famous Arab folk character, Juha. Juha is a comedic character who possesses an unconventional wisdom in the face of adversity. Stories of Juha vary from simple slapstick to complex legal ruling involving prominent historical figures like Genghis Khan and Attila the Hun. My grandfather knows countless Juha stories and will still recite them at the dinner table or over coffee in Arabic and English to this day.

One story of Juha which has stuck with me through the years, was recently published in a 2007 book titled *Tales of Juha*. The book, a collaboration between editor Salma Khadra Jayyusi, and translators Matthew Sorenson, Faisal Khadra, and Christopher Tingley, is a collection of stories featuring the legendary Juha. I was rather shocked to find an actual written collection of various Juha stories which normally are memorized and passed down orally from one generation to the next. It is interesting to note that the content of the stories has undoubtedly changed slightly over hundreds of years, as is inevitable with all oral storytelling traditions, yet the moral (or punch line rather) conveyed is essentially the same. Here is one of my favorite examples of the unorthodox wise man persona that is Juha,

Juha went to fetch water from the well, and there he saw the reflection of the moon gazing up at him. Thinking the moon must have fallen in the well, he decided he ought to save it. So, he brought a rope with a hook he'd attached to the end and threw it down into the well. The hook caught on a big stone, and Juha started pulling and pulling, so hard that the rope flew off and Juha fell flat on his back. Then he saw the moon up in the sky. "I've put myself to a lot of trouble,' he thought. 'Still, I've saved the poor thing from drowning." (Jayyusi, 79).

The main purpose of this story is entertainment. One can only gain so much intellectual insight from the study of such a passage as this. As opposed to the case of the story of my grandfather's Uncle Karim, most Juha stories do not teach much of a moral lesson. This does not mean these stories are without use however. They are simple, short, yet still culturally significant.

My Grandfather claims he does not know the year of his birth, citing that his birth certificate, in convenient addition to all of his important paper documents, was lost in a fire. There are of course several problems with this claim- if his papers were destroyed in a fire before 1951, how would he have been able to emigrate to the United States? If his papers were destroyed in a fire after 1951, he would have already been in the United States and there would be some other relative of his present in the US who would have remembered such a fire. But there is no one else in his family who can recall a fire shortly after the time of my grandfather's arrival in the United States. The family has widely come to believe he is probably much older than he routinely states he is, and uses this as poorly designed way of making people think he is younger.

Inspired by the current crisis in Syria and my grandfather's gradual loss of memory, I feel responsibility to aid in the process of preserving the old stories and storytelling traditions of Syrian society. This important cultural heritage is vital for the future of Syria in the midst of war which is literally erasing the history of the country. There is concern over a 'lost generation' in Syria; a generation which, coming of age in a warzone, is lacking proper education and is abundant in cynicism and bitterness towards the world and its leaders. The culture of Syria is one of the richest in the world, with a history dating back to the very beginnings of civilization itself. The tradition of narrative storytelling cannot be left to wither and die in a sea of violence and hopelessness.

My grandfather enjoys sharing his stories. In contrast to the grave concern and feeling of powerlessness he expresses in relation to the current situation in Syria, he looks back to the Aleppo of the past with longing and admiration. His recitation of stories has become a coping mechanism for him in his old age. As my mother says, "He just needs someone to listen to his stories. That's his escape". At this point in his life, with everyone around him saying he is unfit to drive a car, or telling him to lay off his beloved whiskey and *'araq* for health reasons; stories are empowering. His stories may be all *Gido* has left to make him feel empowered and relevant in a world that has changed drastically since the days of his youth. At the same time, storytelling in families has its place in society. It serves as more than just an escape for an old man on the edges of sanity.

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