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Moral Authority and Communal Ethics in Moroccan Folktales

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Moroccan folktales articulate moral responsibility, compassion, political authority, and family unity through symbolic and narrative structures embedded in Moroccan oral tradition. Although Moroccan storytelling has been widely documented, its tales still require analysis through an interdisciplinary lens that integrates anthropological, sociological, psychoanalytic, and gender-attuned approaches. Drawing on these foundations, this study argues that Moroccan oral narratives operate simultaneously as cultural texts, psychological expressions, and ethical teachings. Through a close reading of three tales—"The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit," "The Vizier and the Chicken," and "The Tale of Hatim Tai"—the article demonstrates how these stories negotiate tensions between spiritual aspiration and filial duty, reveal expectations of just kingship and political conduct, and highlight compassion and familial bonds as central components of moral life. By attending to symbols, character archetypes, and cultural context, the analysis shows that Moroccan folktales function as tools for exploring the nature of virtue, authority, and social cohesion. Ultimately, the study contributes to folklore scholarship by illustrating how Moroccan tales encode complex moral and psychological insights that remain deeply resonant within contemporary cultural consciousness.

KEYWORDS

Moroccan Folktales

Moral Values

Family Dynamics

Political Power

Religion

Introduction

Across Morocco's diverse oral traditions, storytelling has long served as a vehicle for transmitting ethical values, social expectations, and models of spiritual conduct. These narratives have not only been shared in homes but also performed in *el halqa*, "the most overtly theatrical among artistic spaces in traditional marketplaces and fairs, as well as in other public spheres such as the gates of ancient medinas" (Amine and Carlson 32). Such tales convey a moral vision shaped by Islamic beliefs, Amazigh and Arab cultural memories, and communal experiences. Oral tales are ubiquitous in every corner of the world, and, according to Papailia, "possess a rich potential for philosophical reflection" (187). Beyond their aesthetic appeal, they also perform important social functions, allowing communities to express shared values, collective memories, and cultural anxieties (Thompson and Wojcik 144). In Moroccan orality, folktales consistently foreground themes of compassion, filial piety, moral responsibility, and legitimate political authority. They not only entertain but also articulate the emotional and ethical codes through which communities understand family relations, social order, and divine justice. Yet despite the richness of Moroccan orality, the moral and symbolic structures of tales

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still require further scholarly attention. This article responds to that gap by offering a close reading of three Moroccan stories—"The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit," "The Vizier and the Chicken," and "The Tale of Hatim Tai"—to illuminate how they convey moral lessons, compassion, political authority, and family unity within their cultural-historical contexts.

Interpretation of folktales has long been grounded in anthropological theories. William Bascom's influential essay "Folklore and Anthropology" situates folklore "squarely within the fourth field, cultural anthropology," arguing that it expresses the "customs, traditions, and institutions of living peoples" (283). Bascom's formulation underscores that tales are inseparable from the communities that produce and transmit them. Alan Dundes similarly challenges in "The Study of Folklore in Literature and Culture" the disciplinary division between literary and anthropological approaches, noting that the traditional dichotomy between treating folklore as literature and treating it as culture is ultimately "unnecessary" because "studying folklore in literature and studying folklore in culture is almost exactly the same" (136). Dundes critiques earlier folklore scholarship for fixating on the identification of tale-types and motifs at the expense of cultural meaning, describing such text-centered work as a "sterile study of folklore for folklore's sake" (136).

This shift in folklore studies parallels sociological approaches that emphasize the social nature of "the folk." As Roger D. Abrahams notes in "Towards a Sociological Theory of Folklore," the concept of "folk" is inherently sociological, referring to groups defined by shared values and practices (161). Folktales emerge from and respond to these shared systems. J. L. Fischer's "The Sociopsychological Analysis of Folktales" likewise argues that tales persist over generations only if they are "both psychologically and socially adjustive" (258). From this perspective, folktales function simultaneously as social stabilizers and psychological expressions. Fischer proposes studying four interrelated systems—the tale itself, the teller, the audience, and the cultural environment—asserting that symbolic and social meaning can be derived only by examining how these elements interact (247-73).

Psychoanalytic theories also inform contemporary readings of narrative. Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) established the possibility of decoding symbolic meanings embedded in stories, while Jungian scholarship developed this approach by situating folktales within the collective unconscious. Marie-Louise von Franz, in *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales* (2017), argues that tales express universal psychic patterns involving the shadow, anima, and animus, as well as parental archetypes, and she outlines a rigorous method of interpreting symbols through amplification, comparison, and contextual analysis (10, 40–46). Dundes, in "Projection in Folklore: A Plea for Psychoanalytic Semiotics," emphasizes that folklore carries significance for both tellers and listeners and warns that scholarship has often "dehumanize(d) folklore" by reducing it to structural classification while overlooking its communicative function (1500). Psychoanalytic approaches thus provide a useful lens for understanding the emotional, symbolic, and moral resonance of Moroccan tales, especially those centered on mothers, saints, rulers, and acts of justice.

Another important dimension of folklore interpretation arises from feminist scholarship. Alexander F. Chamberlain, drawing on O. T. Mason's discussion of "Woman's Share in Primitive Culture," highlights women's foundational role in early religion, poetry, and cultural expression, emphasizing their importance as creators and custodians of oral traditions (Chamberlain 205). Early collections such as Lady Wilde's *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, and Superstitions of Ireland* (1887) and Thiselton-Dyer's *Folk-Lore of Women* (1905) illustrate a longstanding interest in women's roles within storytelling cultures. Feminist folklorists later emphasized how women's experiences, voices, and symbolic representations had been neglected in scholarly discourse, seeking, as Kousaleos notes, to illuminate the ways female experience had been "ignored, denied, and devalued in the production of knowledge" (20). In

the Moroccan context—where women storytellers play a central role and mother–child relationships dominate moral discourse—gender-attuned approaches shed light on the emotional and ethical depth of tales such as "The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit."

Despite these rich theoretical traditions, a specific research gap persists in the study of Moroccan folktales. Existing scholarship has made invaluable contributions to the documentation, preservation, and performance analysis of Moroccan oral traditions. Works such as Richard Hamilton's *The Last Storytellers*, Harry Stroomer's collections of Amazigh folktales, and Aicha Rahmouni's studies of storytelling in northern Morocco have preserved important narrative materials and illuminated their cultural contexts. Likewise, scholars such as Khalid Amine have explored the performative dimensions of Moroccan storytelling traditions. Yet relatively little attention has been devoted to interdisciplinary analyses that combine anthropological, sociological, psychoanalytic, and gender-sensitive approaches in the interpretation of specific tales. As a result, the symbolic, psychological, and ethical dimensions of Moroccan narratives remain insufficiently examined.

The present study focuses on three tales that foreground distinct yet interconnected dimensions of Moroccan moral discourse. "The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit" explores spirituality, kinship, gender, and moral responsibility; "The Vizier and the Chicken" examines political accountability and just governance; and "The Tale of Hatim Tai" centers on generosity, self-sacrifice, and ethical leadership. Together, these narratives provide a representative corpus through which familial, religious, and political values may be examined within Moroccan oral tradition. While all three tales contribute to the article's exploration of moral authority and communal ethics, greater analytical attention is devoted to "The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit." Its combination of religious symbolism, family dynamics, gender relations, and psychological themes makes it especially suitable for an interdisciplinary reading that draws simultaneously on anthropological, sociological, psychoanalytic, and gender-sensitive approaches. This article addresses that gap by applying an integrated interpretive framework to stories concerned with moral responsibility, political authority, compassion, and family unity. In addition to textual analysis, the article occasionally draws upon limited autoethnographic observation to illustrate the continuing relevance of beliefs and practices referenced in the tales.

"The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit": Sainthood, Power, and Maternal Devotion

Synopsis of the Tale

"The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit," narrated by Moulay Mohamed el Jabri and published by Richard Hamilton in *The Last Storytellers*, centers on a devout young man named Jores who withdraws from the bustle of Marrakech and journeys to the foothills of the Atlas Mountains. Leaving behind his aging mother, he chooses a cave as his retreat, where he immerses himself in prayer and the study of religious texts. Gradually, word of his piety spreads, and people from near and far flock to him seeking advice, healing, and miracles. Even the sultan of Marrakech hears of his extraordinary powers. Summoned to the royal palace, Jores insists that his abilities are not magic but manifestations of God's power working through him. To test the authenticity of this claim, the sultan orders him to create a stream of water; with unwavering faith, Jores taps his staff on the ground, and water springs forth. Convinced of Jores' connection to the divine, the sultan grants his request to build a mosque atop a mountain, where he

continues his spiritual life. Once the mosque is completed, Jores settles there in seclusion. Meanwhile, his mother, longing to see him, undertakes the difficult journey up the mountain. She knocks repeatedly at the mosque door, but Jores, absorbed in prayer and study, does not hear her. Feeling abandoned, she returns to Marrakech in sorrow. Unaware of her visit, Jores remains devoted to his religious pursuits, unintentionally neglecting the mother whose love and sacrifices had sustained him. The narrative then introduces Rabia, a young woman who falls in love with Jores. After he rejects her advances, she becomes involved with a shepherd and later becomes pregnant. Fearing the consequences of her situation, she falsely accuses Jores of dishonoring her. He is imprisoned and sentenced to death. Before his execution, Jores asks to see his mother, who comes immediately, convinced of his innocence. At the decisive moment, a miraculous voice from Rabia's womb reveals that the shepherd is the true father of the child, thereby vindicating Jores. The tale concludes with Jores's moral and spiritual rehabilitation and his renewed commitment to family life and filial responsibility.

Type and Structure of the Tale

The tale is reminiscent of "The Three Green Twigs," collected by the Brothers Grimm and classified as ATU 753. In that story, a hermit lives at the foot of a mountain, spending his days in prayer. He carries water up the mountain as an offering to God, accompanied by an angel who counts his steps and brings him food. One day, seeing a criminal being led to the gallows, he remarks that the man is simply "getting his deserts!" (691). That evening, the angel fails to appear, and the hermit realizes he has offended God by presuming to judge another. After his prayer for forgiveness, a bird tells him that only God may judge human beings. The angel eventually returns and hands him a dry branch, instructing him to wander the world until it sprouts three green twigs, begging for food and never staying two nights in the same house. After many hardships, he finds shelter in a cave with an old woman who fears her criminal sons. He narrates the story of his penance to her and later to the sons, who are so moved by his humility that they renounce their wicked ways. The tale concludes with the hermit's death and God's acceptance of his penance: "Thus the Lord had once more received him into his favour" (693).

In structural terms, Jores's spiritual journey forms the exposition; the rising action consists of his growing reputation for miraculous powers; the climax comes with the sultan's challenge and his divinely assisted success; the falling action includes his imprisonment, miraculous vindication, and reconciliation with his mother, culminating in the establishment of a new family. Binary oppositions animate the narrative: Jores's solitude in the cave versus his interaction with the needy; his closeness to God versus his emotional distance from his mother; his imprisonment versus his final redemption. These contrasts heighten the emotional intensity and thematic resonance of the oral story. Through structural analysis, the roles and functions of the characters become clearer: Jores embodies the archetype of the spiritual seeker; his mother represents the neglected caregiver; the sultan functions as the worldly authority who acknowledges divine power; Rabia appears as both a figure of temptation and an instrument through which moral and spiritual truths are ultimately revealed. Repetition—especially the unheeded knocking at the mosque door—underscores the longing for connection and the devastating consequences of missed opportunities, while variation in the plot highlights character development and narrative complexity.

Analysis of the Tale

"The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit" foregrounds the profundity of maternal bonds. The tale opens with a familiar motif in Moroccan storytelling: the main character embarks on a quest, leaving the feminine figure alone in her abode. Here, however, it is the son who abandons his aging mother. His journey is not heroic in a martial or economic sense, but explicitly spiritual: he renounces the tumult of Marrakech "to find a quiet place to purify his soul" (70). Jores represents the hero archetype who ventures into isolation to seek spiritual solace, faces trials, and attains wisdom. The Atlas Mountains, described as "like a finger pointing up to God" (71), symbolize elevation, transcendence, and proximity to the divine. This image resonates with enduring Moroccan practices of spiritual retreat, where devout men withdraw from cities to seek refuge from worldly distractions. In such retreats, they engage in fervent prayer, Qur'anic recitation, and preaching, forging intimate communion with Allah and with one another.

The tale also invites psychoanalytic interpretation. From a Freudian perspective, Jores's withdrawal from society may be understood as a retreat from the complexities of ordinary social life into a spiritually idealized realm. Freud was often skeptical of religious experience, regarding it as a form of wish fulfillment that helps individuals cope with anxiety and uncertainty. Jores's quest for purity and transcendence can thus be read as an attempt to escape worldly obligations, including his responsibilities toward his aging mother. Jung, however, offers a different interpretation. Rather than viewing spirituality primarily as illusion, Jung understood religious symbols and experiences as potentially meaningful stages in the process of individuation. From this perspective, Jores's journey initially represents an incomplete form of development. Although he cultivates spiritual discipline, he neglects familial and social obligations. Only after enduring false accusation, imprisonment, and public humiliation does he begin to integrate these neglected dimensions of life. His eventual transformation into a devoted son, husband, and father suggests a movement toward psychological wholeness rather than mere ascetic withdrawal.

Jores's extraordinary powers attract visitors seeking guidance and healing: "If a blind man came, he would find his sight restored; if Jores touched a sick man, he became healthy; and if a cripple visited the cave he would discover, to his astonishment, that he could walk again" (70). These miraculous deeds align him with the archetype of the sage-healer who possesses supernatural knowledge and the ability to cure afflictions. The sultan's summons further underscores the interplay between folk narrative and religious belief. Jores attributes his powers entirely to God: "I'm working with God. Only Allah can do these things; I simply use his powers" (71). In Morocco, the belief that healing originates in divine power rather than human magic remains deeply ingrained in many regions. As a limited autoethnographic observation, I encountered similar beliefs firsthand while seeking treatment for a sciatica-related condition. For instance, Mohammad of Tamazouzte is reputed to cure sciatica through foot cupping. Patients often testify that they were once unable to walk comfortably but gradually recovered after several sessions. As he works, Mohammad lectures on religion and piety, constantly insisting that only God heals and that true faith is a prerequisite for recovery. Significantly, he has no fixed fee, allowing patients to pay what they can—or nothing at all. Similarly, many flock to Sheikh Mohammed Larbi Samadi, a young religious figure from Zaouia Samadia Mchichia in Tangier, seeking baraka and spiritual healing, often considering him a descendant of the Prophet (Morocco World News).

Jung's concept of the persona is also a useful tool for understanding Jores's development. As his reputation grows, he becomes increasingly identified with the social roles of saint, healer, and miracle worker. The persona, drawing on Jung's insights, is the mask through which individuals meet the expectations of society. Jores's public identity as a holy man gradually overshadows other aspects of his life, particularly his obligations as a son. The tale, therefore, exposes the danger of identifying too completely with a socially admired role. Although revered by strangers, Jores fails to recognize the emotional needs of the person who sacrifices most for him. His later suffering functions as a corrective that dismantles this one-sided identification and compels him to integrate spiritual devotion with ethical responsibility.

Against this backdrop, Jores appears as a paradigmatic man of piety whose healing abilities are understood as a direct consequence of his devotion. The quintessential figure of divine healing in religious tradition is Jesus, who, by God's permission, healed the blind and leprous and raised the dead, as mentioned in Surah Āl 'Imrān 49 and Surah al-Mā'idah 110. Similarly, in the Qur'an, Pharaoh accuses Moses of sorcery and summons magicians to challenge him, but they eventually recognize Moses as God's true messenger. Through divine providence, Moses performs miracles that authenticate his prophetic mission and compel people to acknowledge it. Jores's ability to summon water echoes these prophetic miracles; it serves as a sign of divine favor awarded for his unwavering devotion. Water here symbolizes divine intervention, prosperity, growth, and collective well-being. The spring Jores produces may be read as a metaphor for spiritual nourishment flowing into the Moroccan community; its emergence suggests that adherence to religious guidance yields abundance and blessing.

The narrative takes a critical turn when the sultan recognizes and honors Jores' connection to the divine. By building a mosque for him, the sultan acknowledges both the saint's spiritual authority and the centrality of religious institutions in Moroccan society. The mosque functions as a sanctuary and as a communal hub where believers gather, worship, and seek solace. It stands as a physical representation of shared faith and communal unity. Yet, this episode also illuminates the intricate relationship between political and religious power. Susan Gilson Miller and Rahma Bourqia's *In the Shadow of the Sultan: Culture, Power, and Politics in Morocco* (1999) traces how Moroccan political authority has historically intertwined with culture, religion, and social structures, emphasizing the monarchy's remarkable continuity since the ninth century and the cultural practices that have sustained its legitimacy (1–4). They argue that political legitimacy in Morocco was consistently anchored in religious doctrine and the consolidation of spiritual authority. The Almoravids grounded their rule in Maliki Sunnism and Abbasid endorsement, while the Almohads broke with earlier models by claiming a radically unitarian caliphate. The Marinids later combined Maliki Sunnism with Idrisid Sharifism, reinforcing legitimacy through the construction of Sunni madrasas, and the Sa'dis expanded these strategies by forging powerful Sufi alliances and cultivating the Sharifian cult to secure widespread public support. Throughout these dynastic transitions, jihad—whether directed inward or outward—functioned as a recurring symbol of divine mandate, reinforcing the ruler's sacred authority. While earlier dynasties depended on strict doctrinal claims, later powers such as the Sa'dis adopted more flexible and pragmatic approaches to legitimacy, demonstrating how Moroccan rulers continuously adapted religious and political strategies to maintain cohesion within a fragmented society (17–26).

Within this historical context, Jores can be understood as a saintly figure. Mohamed El Mansour notes that "the core of popular piety becomes the saint as a charismatic figure. The saint is venerated for what he is and what he does in terms of miracles" (13). Leo Africanus, cited by Westermarck, similarly emphasizes that a person may become a saint through extraordinary piety: incessant prayer, diligent fasting, abundant charity, and strict avoidance of forbidden acts (Westermarck 44). Westermarck also observes that retreating to a sacred

mountain is a common path to sanctity—he cites Jbel Lakhdar in Dukkala, renowned for its hermits (45). Jores' retreat to the Atlas Mountains thus conforms to a recognizable model of sanctity.

El Mansour further stresses that the saint's power, derived from God, is incommensurate with the ruler's worldly authority (20). Saints could intervene in political matters, especially to protect people from unjust taxation or conscription. Even after death, their tombs became sites of intercession. In late-nineteenth-century Fez, for instance, Mawlay Idris was invoked to oppose oppressive fiscal policies. Through baraka, saints could challenge abuse: rulers who imposed unjust taxes might suffer inexplicable illnesses understood as divine retribution (20–21). Within this framework, the sultan's treatment of Jores becomes especially significant. By honoring him and building a mosque, the sultan avoids antagonizing a potentially powerful spiritual figure whose baraka could destabilize his rule. The tale thus subtly reveals the negotiation between spiritual charisma and political authority in Morocco.

Yet the narrative's most salient moral precept lies less in politics than in the interplay between filial ties and maternal devotion. The proverb *ربيتو كيف لكليب, عطيت نخالة أو دكيك أو ملي كبر هرنن فيا* / *"I raised him as a pup, with bran and flour provided, yet when he grew, at me he yelled"* encapsulates the bitter truth that a mother may lavish care on her son only to face abandonment once he attains adulthood. The tale mirrors this proverb, dramatizing the heartbreak of a mother who, having sacrificed everything, finds herself turned away—literally unheard—at her son's door. Another proverb, *ما حلا عيطت مي كيف لعسل في فمي* / *Calling 'my mother' is as sweet as honey in my mouth,* emphasizes the sweetness and comfort associated with maternal presence. Together, these sayings reflect the cultural conviction that the mother–son relationship is central to Moroccan family dynamics.

This moral emphasis is echoed in other Moroccan narratives. Harry Stroomer's "A Story about a Man and his Mother" tells of a man who attempts to repay his mother for past suffering. Convinced that children owe their parents, he devotes a decade to serving her. Even carrying her on his back during the pilgrimage to Mecca is declared insufficient to repay the immeasurable depth of her sacrifice. The story concludes with her forgiveness and his continued journey, reinforcing the idea that maternal love can never truly be repaid. Similarly, "The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit" insists on the unpayable nature of a mother's devotion and the gravity of failing to honor it. Jores "was so wrapped up in his prayers and scholarship that he completely forgot about his poor old mother" (71). This forgetfulness is deeply paradoxical: outwardly, he is the model of devoutness; inwardly, he violates one of Islam's fundamental ethical obligations—kindness and care toward parents, especially in their old age.

As Khalid Amine observes, "storytelling becomes Shahrzād's means of survival" (72). Similarly, female figures in folktales often rely on intelligence, rhetoric, and strategic cunning to negotiate power within restrictive social contexts. Although women are frequently confined to marginal roles in Moroccan folktales, certain narratives depict them as cunning figures who can manipulate events and challenge established social hierarchies (Rouichi 70). In this tale, Rabia's entrance further complicates the moral landscape. As an alluring feminine figure, she attempts to seduce Jores, who resists her advances through extreme self-discipline:

> He took a deep breath, went back into the room, where he lit a fire, and then placed his hands in the flames until the skin was scalded. "How this little fire burns," Jores thought. "I better not do anything with this girl, for if I do, I shall surely burn in hell." So deciding that he should resist the temptations of the flesh, Jores, whose hands were still burning, leant out of the window of the minaret again and told Rabia that she must leave immediately. (73)

This scene clearly evokes the Qur'anic narrative of Prophet Youssef (Joseph) and Zuleikha. Both Jores and Youssef resist illicit desire; both are subsequently victims of false accusation. In Youssef's case, his rejection of Zuleikha's advances leads to imprisonment and prolonged suffering; yet his unwavering faith in divine justice eventually results in vindication. In many Islamic renditions, Youssef's innocence is confirmed through a sign—a torn shirt read as proof, or in some narrative traditions, the speech of a child.

What might reasonably complicate Rabia's role in the narrative is a gender-sensitive reading. Firstly, she appears primarily as a temptress and false accuser whose actions threaten the devout man. Yet such a reading risks overlooking the social pressures surrounding female sexuality in the Moroccan community. An unmarried pregnancy could expose a woman and her family to severe shame, social exclusion, and reputational damage. From this perspective, Rabia's accusation against Jores may be understood not simply as an act of malice but also as a desperate attempt to navigate a social order that offers women limited avenues for survival once their honor has been publicly compromised. While the tale ultimately condemns her deception, a feminist interpretation reveals the structural constraints that shape her actions. Rabia thus emerges not merely as a plot device but as a figure whose predicament reflects broader anxieties surrounding gender, sexuality, and social respectability.

Jores successfully resists temptation but is unable to defend himself against Rabia's false charge. When condemned, he utters the plea, "My last wish is to see my mother" (74). Here the proverb ما حلا عيطت مي كيف لعسل في فمي gains concrete narrative form: calling on one's mother becomes both a spiritual and emotional refuge. Other proverbs—لي عندو مو لا ترفد همو/ *Do not worry about he who has his mother*, and زيزون ما يفهمو غير مو/ *A mute can only be understood by his mother*—emphasize that a mother is the supreme guardian and interpreter of her child.

This maternal devotion appears in many Moroccan tales, including Elisa Chimenti's "Mother, Mother…" in *Tales and Legends of Morocco* (1965). In that story, a jealous wife gradually expels her mother-in-law from the household and ultimately demands her liver as a cure to save her own unborn child. Under emotional pressure, the son kills his mother and brings home her liver, only to hear it speak tenderly to him when he stumbles: "Are you hurt, my child?" The liver, in Moroccan oral tradition, symbolizes instinctive, visceral love—much as "the apple of one's eye" in English.

In Jores' tale, he remains largely passive and silent throughout his ordeal; he neither argues nor justifies himself. His muteness can be read as a sign of internalized helplessness, a psychological paralysis in the face of communal judgment. It is only the presence of his mother—her unwavering belief in his innocence—that restores balance and leads to his vindication. When the sultan places his finger on Rabia's stomach and calls upon the unborn child to speak, the miracle of embryonic testimony recalls not only extra-Qur'anic elaborations of Youssef's story but also the Qur'anic description of Jesus speaking as an infant in Surah Maryam 29. The use of miraculous speech as a narrative device—whether the speaking baby of Youssef's tradition, the infant Jesus in Maryam, or the voice from Rabia's womb—serves to externalize divine justice. For believers, such miracles confirm God's ultimate control over truth and falsehood. At the same time, the tale subtly interrogates reliance on miracle as a resolution: how often in real social life is such vindication experienced? The narrative's skeptical undercurrent becomes a way of exploring faith in divine justice amid human injustice.

Psychologically, Jores' story dramatizes the tension between outward religiosity and inner moral integration. At first, Jores' identity is anchored almost exclusively in ritual practice and seclusion; prayer and scholarship give him a sense of certainty and superiority. Yet the experience of injustice—false accusation, imprisonment, and public humiliation—forces him to confront his vulnerability and to re-evaluate the nature of true piety. Through this ordeal, it becomes clear that spiritual maturity requires not only vertical devotion to God but also

horizontal responsibility toward parents and community. His mother's unwavering support functions as the emotional and ethical core of the tale. Surrounded by doubters, she alone refuses to believe the accusation, embodying the deeply rooted psychological need for familial love, validation, and protection. Her presence enables Jores' eventual transformation from an isolated holy man into an integrated figure who is, at once, a devoted worshipper, husband, father, and son. The final line—"He became a good husband, father and son, since he remembered how his mother had saved him, and he looked after her too" (76)—confirms that the story's resolution lies not only in his acquittal but in his reorientation toward his mother.

Moroccan proverbs further underscore this conclusion. The saying *إذا مات لبو توسد ركبا وإذا ماتت لوم توسد لعتبا / If the father dies, make your knee your pillow; if the mother dies, make the doorstep your pillow* conveys the idea that a mother is the ultimate shelter, whose loss leaves one exposed to the world. The proverb *لوم دجاجة او لبو عجاجة / The mother is a chicken and the father is a dust storm* symbolically contrasts maternal stability and care with paternal unpredictability; the hen broods her chicks beneath her wings, protecting them, while the father, referred to as the dust storm, is directionless and potentially destructive.

The moral message of "The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit," like many other narratives, is thus deliberately ambiguous yet profoundly suggestive. Jores emerges victorious, but only after rethinking both his religious outlook and his social obligations. The tale insists that true piety cannot be reduced to ritual practice or ascetic withdrawal. Rather, it must include care for one's parents and responsiveness to human relationships. A parallel moral appears in another of Chimenti's tales, "Abdullah the Highwayman." In this tale, Abdullah, a brigand in the Atlas Mountains, vows to kill a hundred people in revenge but is moved by a pilgrim's plight and eventually repents. In stark contrast, a saintly scholar who has spent a lifetime in religious practice is condemned to hell for deceitfully disguising his wealth from a needy pilgrim. God declares to the latter:

> "I am not unjust to those who serve me," He [God] said. […] "You are well learned in the ways of religion and yet you did not hesitate to pretend to the pilgrim that you had no other bread than black bread and no other grapes than those of inferior quality. Your place is with the demons in Hell." For the justice of Allah has no parallel. (140)

Abdullah is granted entry to paradise because of his repentance, whereas the pious scholar, despite a life of religious observance, is punished for ethical failure. The message is clear: piety without sincerity and compassion is incomplete. In exactly the same way, Jores learns that solemn prayer and asceticism alone are insufficient. True religiosity lies in the devotion of the heart—embodied in his renewed relationship with his mother and his assumption of familial responsibility. "The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit" therefore operates on multiple levels: as a story of miracles and sainthood; as a subtle commentary on the relationship between saintly and royal power; as a powerful affirmation of maternal love; and as a psychological narrative of spiritual growth. It suggests that the highest form of worship is not mere withdrawal from the world, but the ability to harmonize one's spiritual aspirations with compassionate care for those who have given one life—first and foremost, one's mother.

Moral Authority in "The Vizier and the Chicken" and "The Tale of Hatim Tai"

Moroccan narratives also imagine what a ruler should be, how he should act, and how power should be exercised. Just as oral tales insist on fairness, responsibility, and compassion within the household, they project the same expectations onto the figure of the king or sultan. The ruler, like a parent, is supposed to care for and guide his people with wisdom and restraint. When this care is absent, social order collapses—whether within a family or within a kingdom. The connection between household and state is not accidental; it reflects a shared symbolic logic in which power is understood through everyday relational structures such as parent–child or husband–wife. As the tales suggest, moral authority is what holds family and community together. A just ruler bears the responsibility of preserving social order, preventing chaos, and confronting challenges with both equity and firmness.

Two tales especially illuminate these expectations: "The Vizier and the Chicken" and "The Tale of Hatim Tai." Both explore the ethical obligations of political rule and the standards by which rulers are judged. Many Moroccan narratives convey lessons about just kingship, often presenting righteous sovereigns who strive to govern with fairness and integrity. At the same time, other tales warn against tyranny and depict divine punishment inflicted on rulers who abuse power. In this sense, "The Vizier and the Chicken" and "The Tale of Hatim Tai" can be read as complementary reflections on justice, generosity, and leadership in the Moroccan storytelling tradition.

Synopsis of "The Vizier and the Chicken"

"The Vizier and the Chicken," narrated by Ahmed Temiich and published by Hamilton, is set in Marrakech under the rule of a fundamentally good sultan. Although he is well-intentioned, his court is populated by sycophantic viziers who constantly flatter him and present an unrealistically positive image of his reign. Suspicious that he is not being told the truth, the sultan decides to disguise himself as a beggar and orders his grand vizier to do the same. In this humble disguise, they can move through the city anonymously, observing directly how people live. This moment of dissembling constitutes a turning point in the tale: it allows the sultan to see the stark poverty of his subjects and exposes the lies and self-interest of the viziers who had painted an image of prosperity and contentment.

As they wander, they encounter a merchant named Mohamed. When asked how he is, Mohamed responds cryptically, "The tree is falling." When asked if he can pluck the feathers from a chicken, he replies that he can—"if you hold it steady." The sultan, baffled by these images, commands his grand vizier to explain their meaning within three days or lose his position. The vizier then negotiates with Mohamed, eventually paying him twenty gold coins for the interpretation. Mohamed clarifies that "the tree" symbolizes his own mind and body, weakened and declining with age, while "the chicken" represents the vizier himself, whose "feathers" (his wealth) have been plucked by Mohamed in exchange for the explanation. When the sultan learns how the vizier has been tricked, he recognizes both the merchant's cleverness and the vizier's incompetence. Dissatisfied with his courtiers' inability to perceive reality—and their willingness to exploit their positions—he dismisses them and resolves to surround himself with honest advisers who will put the welfare of the people above flattery and self-interest.

Variations of the Tale

Moroccan oral tradition contains many such narratives of wise rulers whose concern for justice drives them to investigate the true condition of their subjects. A notable figure in the broader Arabic and Islamic narrative world is the Abbasid caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, who appears in numerous tales in *One Thousand and One Nights*. Aicha Rahmouni, for instance, presents three stories featuring the fifth Abbasid caliph: "Haroun ar-Rashid and His Three Viziers," "Harun ar-Rashid and the Swindlers," and "Harun ar-Rashid and the Three Thieves." In these narratives, Harun al-Rashid repeatedly disguises himself in order to walk among his people and test whether his decrees are being obeyed, a motif that underscores themes of justice, surveillance, and accountability.

In "Haroun ar-Rashid and His Three Viziers," the caliph issues a decree banning nighttime wandering. When he himself ventures out at night in disguise, he is caught, beaten, and exiled under his own law. He finds refuge in a house where three men share fantastic tales: one has been turned into a dog by a woman, another serves invisible beings in a magical realm, and a third regains lost wealth with the help of a ring and clever animals. Harun's experience shows how authority can be undermined by its own mechanisms and how anonymity can both protect and expose the ruler. In "Harun ar-Rashid and the Swindlers" (also published as "The King and the Kofta-Seller" in Harry Stroomer's *An Anthology of Tashelhiyt Berber Folktales* (2001)), the sultan and his vizier are captured by a butcher who sells human flesh. The vizier sacrifices himself for his master, but the sultan devises a plan for escape: he proposes sewing beautiful items that the captor can sell at high prices. Thanks to this craft, the sultan is freed and reflects that "If a handicraft does not make one rich, [it] sustains [him], and perhaps saves life" (253). In "Harun ar-Rashid and the Three Thieves," the king again ventures out at night in disguise, joins three thieves, and ultimately brings them to justice. Across these narratives, the ruler's disguise highlights the tension between his formal position and his moral responsibility to know and address the reality of his people's lives.

Other Moroccan stories also stage encounters between rulers and divine justice. In "The Sultan and the Gazelle," published in *Tales and Legends of Morocco*, a Moroccan sultan dreams of an angel who tells him to travel east to meet the Prophet and receive Allah's Law. At the end of the tale, he recognizes the Prophet through an act of mercy and humbly asks for guidance on the path to salvation. The ruler's legitimacy is thus tied to his ability to recognize divine compassion and submit to God's law.

Tahir Shah, in *In Arabian Nights* (2008), describes hearing "The Tale of Hatim Tai" from a Moroccan storyteller named Fouad (229). The story portrays Hatim Tai as a beloved and extraordinarily generous king of Arabia. Under his rule, the kingdom thrives, and tales of his kindness circulate widely. Jaleel, a neighboring king, becomes envious of Hatim's fame and threatens to invade unless Hatim submits to him. To save his people from bloodshed, Hatim voluntarily relinquishes his throne and goes into exile as a dervish in the mountains. Jaleel takes control of the kingdom and offers a large ransom to anyone who can capture Hatim. Despite hardship, Hatim lives in obscurity and remains cherished by his former subjects. One day, he overhears an old man and his wife speaking affectionately of him and lamenting Jaleel's tyranny. Revealing himself to them, Hatim insists they hand him over to claim the reward. They are arrested alongside him and brought before Jaleel. In keeping with his character, Hatim's first concern is for the poor couple; he urges the tyrant to reward them. Moved by Hatim's generosity, Jaleel releases him, restores his throne, and promises to protect him thereafter. Hatim's self-sacrifice and magnanimity exemplify an ideal of kingship grounded in concern for the people rather than personal power.

These stories—"The Vizier and the Chicken," the Harun al-Rashid narratives, "The Sultan and the Gazelle," and "The Tale of Hatim Tai"—are linked by a shared vision of what political leaders should embody. The recurring motif is that of a ruler animated by a strong sense of justice and an earnest commitment to his subjects' welfare. They portray the complex interplay between authoritarian power and moral responsibility in Moroccan and broader Islamic imaginaries. While the sultan or king possesses formidable political authority, his legitimacy is ultimately measured by his ability to restore order, avoid oppression, and align his rule with divine justice.

Analysis of "The Vizier and the Chicken" and "The Tale of Hatim Tai"

Classical Islamic political thought provides a conceptual framework for this moral vision. In *Kitab al-Aḥkām al-Sulṭāniyya* (1996), al-Māwardī discusses the qualities of *al-imām al-ʿādil*, the just ruler. He emphasizes justice over injustice, the capacity for informed legal reasoning (*ijtihād*), and the physical abilities—sight, hearing, speech—necessary for effective leadership (19–20). The just ruler must be nimble in decision-making, lead with wisdom for the benefit of the community, and exhibit both courage and compassion in defending the community and confronting enemies. These traits ensure not only his success in governance but also the protection of the people's well-being.

Ibn Khaldūn's *Al-Muqaddima* (1377), a foundational work in sociology, cultural history, demography, theology, and political theory, provides a further lens. Ibn Khaldūn argues that humans are naturally social and require political authority to prevent chaos, conflict, and bloodshed. The king's role is to safeguard stability through protecting borders, collecting revenues, and organizing military campaigns. His authority must be comprehensive; if he cannot defend his territory or maintain fiscal and social order, his rule is incomplete (360). A crucial concept in Ibn Khaldūn's analysis is that of *al-raʿiyya*, the entrusted subjects. The value of the ruler, he argues, does not rest on his appearance or individual talents such as intelligence or calligraphy, but on how he manages the affairs of his people. If he is kind and attentive, the state benefits and remains stable; if he is harsh and unjust, he breeds moral corruption and destabilizes the polity (362).

Seen in this light, "The Vizier and the Chicken" and "The Tale of Hatim Tai" center on the sultan's characterization as a conscientious ruler who honors the ethical demands of his position. In the first tale, the sultan corrects his own distance from his people by disguising himself and ultimately purging his court of sycophants. In the second, Hatim Tai willingly sacrifices his throne for the sake of his subjects' safety. Both embody moral accountability, even when their choices run counter to self-interest.

Historical exempla reinforce these ideals. Umar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, often regarded as a unique model of *Amīr al-Muʾminīn* (Commander of the Faithful), is celebrated for his extraordinary sense of justice and concern for the poor. In *ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz wa Siyāsatuhu fī Radd al-Maẓālim* (1987), it is noted that the caliph distanced himself from the entangling influence of his social circle, even giving his wife the choice of staying with him under his austere conditions or returning to her parents' home (112–117). He dismissed his personal bodyguards, decisively distinguishing his rule from prevailing Umayyad practices. He also removed a number of obsequious political figures from power, echoing the sultan's dismissal of sycophantic viziers in "The Vizier and the Chicken." ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz dismantled many Umayyad political habits and revived the simplicity of the first four caliphs—Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, ʿUthmān, and ʿAlī—who chose to live as poor men (111–17). Biographical accounts stress that he feared being held responsible for every hungry person in his domain. These historical and hagiographical narratives feed into Moroccan storytelling, which presents

the true ruler as one who resembles the early caliphs in modesty, justice, and concern for the vulnerable.

To understand psychologically why so many tales present the sultan in disguise, one may turn to Carl Jung's notion of the persona. In Two Essays on Analytical Psychology, Jung explains that the "persona"—originally the mask worn by actors—signifies the social face an individual presents to the world (157). It creates the impression of individuality, but is shaped by collective expectations and roles. For Jung, the persona is a vital component of the psyche, alongside the ego, the shadow, and the collective unconscious. It is a "compromise between individual and society as to what a man should appear to be" (157).

In both "The Vizier and the Chicken" and "The Tale of Hatim Tai," the sultans are men of power concerned about their people. Yet in the first, the sultan is surrounded by courtiers who maintain their positions by offering only flattery and withholding uncomfortable truths, whereas Hatim Tai voluntarily abandons his throne to protect his subjects from war. In Jungian terms, the persona corresponds to the official role—the king as seen on the throne, surrounded by ceremony, titles, and institutions. The sycophantic viziers cling to their personas; they maintain a façade that aligns with the sultan's preferred image rather than the actual condition of his kingdom. Over time, the sultan begins to doubt the authenticity of their praise and decides to step outside his persona by disguising himself as a beggar and walking the streets of Marrakech. Hatim Tai, similarly, strips away his royal persona by dressing as a peasant and living as a dervish in order to spare his people.

Jung remarks that when we analyze the persona, "we strip off the mask, and discover that what seemed to be individual is at bottom collective" (157). The persona is "a semblance, a two-dimensional reality" (157). In the tale of the sultan of Marrakech, the act of disguise symbolizes his willingness to remove his mask and confront the underlying reality of his kingdom. Without his royal garments, guards, and entourage, he is able to see the conditions of his subjects as they truly are. At the same time, his viziers' personas—built on deception and flattery—are revealed as empty performances.

Jung adds that even when a person is highly identified with their persona, the unconscious self "is always present and makes itself felt indirectly if not directly" (158–59). When the persona cracks or is shed, a period of psychic disequilibrium may occur, allowing previously repressed truths to emerge. The sultan's journey into the city's poor quarters, where "some people slept out in the streets in nothing but rags," shocks him into awareness; he "realized that all was not well in Marrakech and vowed to help his people in the future" (109). This realization represents the integration of previously suppressed collective truths into his conscious governance.

In "The Vizier and the Chicken," the encounter with Mohamed crystallizes this process. Mohamed's statement that "the tree is falling" symbolically refers to his own declining health, the inevitable decay of the body. His metaphor of plucking the feathers of a chicken alludes to his ability to strip the vizier of his wealth in exchange for knowledge. The vizier's failure to discern the meaning of these metaphors reveals his inability to see beyond surfaces—beyond the persona—to deeper symbolic truths. The sultan's anger—"Then why are you my Grand Vizier, if you cannot explain what this man says?" (109)—exposes the uselessness of advisers who refuse or are unable to confront uncomfortable realities. Recognizing Mohamed's insight and the vizier's cowardice, the sultan dismisses not only the grand vizier but all obsequious members of his court. This act signals his decision to surround himself with truthful counsellors, thus reshaping his political environment to align with moral responsibility.

Moroccan tales not only promote the image of a just ruler; they also vividly warn against tyranny. "The Vengeance of Allah," another tale published by Richard Hamilton, describes a

cruel leader named Rashid who orders his horsemen to annihilate a Berber tribe. Two children, Abdul and Malika, survive and hide under a laurel tree, where they encounter a forest spirit that grants them a magical stick that produces food when tapped on the ground. With the help of supernatural beings, they rescue their imprisoned mother. Soon after, a catastrophic natural disaster destroys Rashid's town and palace. He ultimately repents and dies, but the narrative's title foregrounds divine retribution. The tale dramatizes the principle that rulers who misuse power to oppress the innocent invite God's punishment. Qur'anic verses reinforce this warning: Surah al-Ḥijr 92–93 suggests that all, including kings and sultans, will be judged for their actions, while Surah al-Ḥadīd 57 reminds believers that wealth belongs to Allah and must be spent rightly.

Taken together, these narratives suggest a coherent moral philosophy of governance within Moroccan storytelling. The just ruler is one who actively seeks the truth about his people's conditions, removes corrupt or sycophantic advisers, accepts personal sacrifice to protect his subjects, and aligns his rule with divine justice. Tyrannical rulers who exploit their power face severe consequences, whether through rebellion, supernatural punishment, or divine judgment. Moroccan oral tales thus serve not only as entertainment but as a continuous ethical commentary on political leadership, insisting that true sovereignty is inseparable from moral accountability.

Conclusion

In her book *We Need New Stories* (2019), Nesrine Malik argues that both individuals and societies rely on narratives to create meaning and social order, since stories provide frameworks through which communities understand their values and collective experience (6). Moroccan folktales are far more than imaginative narratives or remnants of a fading oral tradition; they function as repositories of cultural ethics, psychological insight, and social philosophy. Through a combination of anthropological, sociological, psychoanalytic, and gender-sensitive perspectives, this article has shown that Moroccan storytelling sustains a moral discourse that unites familial responsibility, political justice, and communal well-being. The tales examined—"The Girl Who Fell in Love with the Hermit," "The Vizier and the Chicken," and "The Tale of Hatim Tai"—demonstrate how moral authority operates simultaneously within the household and the state, reflecting shared expectations concerning both personal conduct and public leadership.

Beyond the interpretation of individual tales, the interdisciplinary framework employed in this study reveals dimensions of meaning that would remain less visible through a single disciplinary lens. Anthropological approaches illuminate the cultural values and collective memories embedded in oral narratives; sociological perspectives reveal their role in reinforcing social norms and communal cohesion; psychoanalytic readings uncover symbolic tensions surrounding spirituality, authority, and family relations; and gender-sensitive analysis highlights the ways stories negotiate questions of female agency, vulnerability, and social constraint. Considered together, these approaches demonstrate that Moroccan folktales operate simultaneously as ethical instruction, psychological expression, social commentary, and cultural memory.

It is important to note that the findings also point toward promising directions for future research. Further studies might examine Amazigh storytelling traditions through similar interdisciplinary methods, compare Moroccan folktales with related narratives from elsewhere in the Maghreb, or investigate the role of women storytellers in the preservation and transmission of oral culture. Such inquiries would deepen our understanding of Moroccan folklore not merely as a repository of traditional narratives but as a dynamic site of ethical

reflection, social negotiation, and cultural creativity. By continuing to transmit stories that celebrate compassion, justice, responsibility, and communal solidarity, Moroccan oral tradition remains a vital source of cultural meaning in the contemporary world.

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