

[INNER VOICES]

# The Little Black Bags

Plastic bags, the staple of Moroccan shopping for decades, are now an emblem of the country's marred urban landscape.

by *Karima Moual*

“**B**A LINA HUTA JAB, JAB BA LINA HUTA.” This was my nightly chant when I glimpsed the arrival of my grandfather who carried with him two heavy black plastic bags. “My father brought us a fish, my father brought us a fish.”

I'd await him joyously at one corner of the door to the house. He had a wool hat, a white beard, and walked slowly and arduously after a long day's work, most of which he'd spent under the hot sun, his back arched over fishing nets. The whole of his daily fatigue was summed up by what was in those black plastic bags, including “huta,” the fish, but also vegetables, milk, cheese, expensive French Kiri cheese, and fruit. He bought everything his meager money allowed. His family came first.

“You know what all Moroccans have in common, from the poorest to the richest?” my grandfather Mohamed would ask me. “It's these black plastic bags, Karima. You'll find them everywhere, whether in the Zeng slum or the one in Hay Moulay Rachid, and even at the villa with pool on the Corniche in Ain Addiabe.”

At age five, I was too young to understand what Mohamed was getting at, but he was right. Morocco a quarter-century ago had only one kind of bag. Whatever a person's social status, they all had black bags, like hand-me-downs. My grandfather got his from the esteemed Marché Central, in central Casablanca.

But the black bags were on sale everywhere. “Kahla Mika, Mika Kahla, 20 riyals,” cried the bag vendors, most of them children. In the souk, their chants resounded like nursery rhymes. Twenty riyals and you had what was necessary to collect what you'd bought and take it home.

As soon as you lined up in front of the grocery store, or any other kind of store, children would run up to



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Garbage dump near the Moroccan city of Rabat.



you, an assortment of black bags in their small hands, waving them at you. As always, they cost 20 riyals. Not even a dirham, basically pocket change, but enough to satisfy these small merchants. Then as now, the black bags are still on sale, and children remain their most avid salesmen.

My grandfather's words led me to watch these bag-sellers as they wandered through the souks. I see them among the jostling crowd that pushed from shop to shop. They slipped into every crevice of the market. The chicken-sellers, "moul addjaj," parked by the smelly coups, would drop in their offerings into the newly bough bags. The small shops, lined up in a row, emitted such an odor so pungent that I'd turn head my head away, reaching out to clasp my grandfather's hand harder.

Grandfather would buy a bag and in it went a chicken, one that had been freshly slaughtered in front of the customer in accordance with Islamic traditions, with people gathered around to watch the lethal ceremony.

First the customer would pick out one of the imprisoned hen. He'd them watch as its throat was cut and it bled, unconscious, before dying, afterwards cleaned in hot water and tossed into the black bag's waiting darkness. The bag seemed to me to consume the horror endured by the animal. It sat in that bag until it reached the kitchen.

Every time we'd walk down chicken alley, where the vendor had their coops, I'd be seized by fear. The stench was the least of it. I knew what lay ahead and what I'd have to witness, again.

The bags were lifesavers of a sort. They covered over the worst of it. Or we'd head in another direction, this time toward the tables where fruits, vegetables, spices, and olives of all colors lay heaped on tables for the taking.



A. Semma/AFP/Getty Images

Macaque amid refuse in the central Moroccan city of Azrou.

We'd finally wander toward the "moul enna," the mint seller. There, my grandfather would mull over the best mint for his tea while I would grab a stick of mint, push it up to my nose, and breathe in its soothing aroma. It helped me cancel out all the rest and it always worked.

Once the mint smells calmed me down, I focused again on the dancing movement of the black bags, which soon obsessed me. I fantasized about the hands that gripped them, opened them wide, and then closed them up again.

I was sure the bags went everywhere. I imagined them ending up in the lavish homes of Casablanca elite. Maybe the bags even made it to the king's palace. My daydreaming wouldn't end. How wonderful to be a bag, what a privilege! Sometimes I wanted to become a black bag, so that I could go anywhere and everywhere in the world, without obstacles. Or, as a bag, I could delight in the smiles of those who opened me and saw what I contained, so many wondrous goods. They could learn from what was inside me.

When I think about it now, those filthy black plastic

bags, their job done, were something of a metaphor everything we made and consumed, without regard to social distinction. Maybe that's why I liked them so much, or the idea of what they represented. The bags were all equal. When it came to bags, everyone in Morocco was on a level playing field. We were all alike.

Now, 25 years later, the bags have changed, at least a little. Many now come in colors. There are white, brown and purple bags. Lilac-colored bags are in favor, especially for clothes.

But the black bags still rule the roost. People like them because they're discreet and blend in. A black bag means no one knows what's inside, a dead chicken or bottles of alcohol, illegal if you're Muslim. A black bag can help hide religious transgressions. Again, it's discretion.

Unfortunately, there's no discretion when it comes to discarding the bags.

On my last trip from Casablanca to Fez, I wanted to recall as many images of the past as possible. I wanted to go after those sights my memory had preserved. I wanted to soak in my country of origin based on what I



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Rabat's coastline is lined with landfills.

remembered as a child.

I decided to take trains, so I could look out over landscapes. It's relaxing, it's not frantic, and it affords a length of time that seems to accompany a deeper notion of travel. Train travel helps you think, memorize, and cherish that which you see and feel.

I arrived in the country filled with enthusiasm. The color and light impressed me immediately. At the same time, I was pained by what was happening to the environment. Discarded plastic bags lay everywhere I looked. I saw them stuck to the branches of trees, of palm plants; I saw them flattened on sidewalks, blowing

around through fields with goats knocking them away to graze.

The land was stained black, and so was the trip. My perfect postcard turned black. I began thinking the black was so inescapable that train travel wasn't to blame. Maybe if I'd flown over the country I would have seen the same thing. Black bags everywhere. They seemed all at once like a form of violence.

The memories I had of my grandfather and the black bags, and of watching him come home, much of it began to fade away.

What unites Moroccans now, poor or rich, as my grandfather said, are those bags, only that now they've become a symbol of the worst of the country. Now, the black bag I once wanted to become stands for haphazard environmental devastation that's affecting all parts of the country.

Every Moroccan consumes an average of 900 bags per citizen year, compared to 117 in Algeria. That's a total of 26 billion bags (six billion of which are blacks). Morocco is second in the world behind the United States in plastic bag use (the U.S. uses 380 billion per year). The French average is 17 billion, the Algerian six billion.

On Jan. 1, 2011, Morocco finally introduced a law banning the local distribution of non-degradable and non-biodegradable bags. The laws are intended mostly to change marketplace habits. Now banned is the manufacturing, importing, and possession of plastic bags for the purpose of sale or free distribution.

Reading this bureaucratic lingo made me smile. The black bag they banned was mine. But they don't have to know that. Any law that can help with the country's environment and create a common consciousness about ecological values is one I applaud.

The bags I can do without, but not the memory of my crying out "Ba lina huta jab, jab Ba lina huta!" when my grandfather came home.