

Listen and learn

Autobiographical storytelling is bridging divides in Beirut

Storytelling events are both reviving a traditional practice and promoting social cohesion



Prospero

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MARAM, an eloquent 14-year-old from Ain el-Hilweh, Lebanon's largest Palestinian refugee camp, stood behind the microphone and began her story. After a minute she faltered, flushing as she turned to a lady in the front row for her hand-written notes. The audience burst into a round of spontaneous applause, calling out words of encouragement. One of five storytellers to speak on the theme of "Borders, Frontiers and Road Blocks" at the June edition of the Hakaya Storytelling Night in

Beirut, Maram shared her feelings on the stigmatisation she faces growing up as a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon.

Hakawatis—storytellers—have historically been an integral part of Middle Eastern culture, orating popular myths and fables to audiences in cafés and public squares. In Beirut, where the tradition of public storytelling has faded in recent decades, a new phenomenon is drawing crowds: autobiographical storytelling events where participants share their experiences on a theme such as “love”, “transition” or “roots”.

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The worldwide popularity of The Moth Radio Hour, run by a non-profit in New York, has revealed a hunger for personal storytelling. In Beirut, gatherings devoted to sharing true stories are promoting tolerance and social cohesion, breaking taboos and allowing marginalised voices to be heard. “As a journalist, I felt like the best stories I came across never made it into the

paper. There are such powerful examples of humanity and kindness and lessons

learned,” says Rima Abushakra, a former journalist, who founded Hakaya in 2016 with three of her friends.

Beirut is often lauded as a cosmopolitan city and in many ways it is—people from myriad political backgrounds, confessions, classes and ethnicities live within the city limits. They rarely mix, however; most events and spaces are dominated by a specific segment of the population. Religious and political divides, legacies of the 15-year civil war that cleaved the city in two from 1975 to 1990, still linger. Yet at Hakaya and Cliffhangers, another storytelling group, Lebanese of all backgrounds—foreigners and former fighters, Syrian and Palestinian refugees and people from the LGBT community (who are usually forced to keep a low profile as homosexuality is criminalised in Lebanon)—tell their stories. The common ground they discover far outweighs their differences.

In both groups, scheduled stories are followed by an open mic session, allowing audience members to respond spontaneously to what they’ve heard. Storytellers choose whatever language they are most comfortable in—Arabic, English or sometimes a typically Lebanese amalgam of the two.

Having grown up listening to informal stories told by her parents and grandparents, Dima Matta, a Beirut-based writer, professor and actor, wanted to bring the tradition back into the public sphere. She founded Cliffhangers in 2014. “I’ve always had this love for storytelling as a way of documenting what happened, especially since here we have no actual documentation of what happened during the civil war,” she says. “It was a way of finding out my own history and the history of my family.”



She speculates that the popularity of Cliffhangers’ monthly events, which often attract audiences of more than 100 people, lies in the opportunity they offer of being heard. “We’re often oppressed and bullied and silenced by the state and by people telling us that our stories don’t matter and that we’re not important,” she says. “So to reclaim our voices and know that we matter—I think there’s something very powerful there.”

In May, during the first ever Beirut Pride week, Ms Matta was worried that no one would show up to an event celebrating stories from the local LGBT community.

Security threats had caused a similar event to be cancelled. The audience on the night totalled more than 400 people.

At Cliffhanger's June meeting, the theme was "growing up". A doctor gave a hilarious account of her experiences during her first residency as a gynaecologist. Another woman explained how her love for her dead uncle had inspired her to study performing arts at the Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts. During the open mic segment, one man bravely shared an account of his sexual assault at the age of 14. Shattering taboos, he described the rape and how his father's insistence that "real men" know how to defend themselves left him feeling responsible. "I am a man whose childhood was raped. I am a man who cries," he finished, to applause and calls of support and admiration.

Beirut's storytellers are not yet as polished as those who appear on The Moth, but their stories are just as moving. In a society where people are defined by their differences, these stories of vulnerability and strength are advancing the search for a common ground.