

## Jessica El Mal, *The Water We Seek* (2023)

### Spoken Audio Sources

A conversation between Jessica El Mal and Mbarek Benghazi which took place at Mhamid el Ghizlane, Morocco on 10/11/22 excerpts of which appear in *The Water We Seek* (2023)

**JESSICA EL MAL (JM):** *Tell me a little bit about who you are, where you are...a little bit about you.*

**MBAREK BENGHAZI (MB):** Hello, hello. Hello. So my name is Mbarek Benghazi.

I live in a small village, south of Morocco it's called Mhamid El Ghizlane, it's the last oasis before the desert and I do the work of a local guide. First I want to thank you for having with me this conversation.

**JM:** *No thank you Mbarek! Can you tell me what is your favourite place or favourite thing in M'hamid?*

**MB:** You're welcome, Jessica, you're welcome. So about the favourite place, where I live... It's to be in a place far away from the civilisation, and connected with the nature. And, yes, that's what we have here, that's why we live in M'hamid. It's a place very quiet and very spiritual and for sure, my most favourite place is mostly when I go in the desert and in an area very isolated and far away, that is the most important to me. My most favourite time is sundown. We see an amazing and magical colour between the sand and sky, the colour of the sand changes, you see every second it changes as the sun goes down... really I can't explain, it's so hard to explain you know? You really have to be in the desert to feel that. It's really something touching. The sunrise also, but the sunset? The sunset is more wow. Also in the night, late in the night when you can see the stars. It's like therapy for me. I watch the stars, in the galaxy, how they are moving, shooting stars. It's very very very beautiful. Every time in the desert is beautiful.

**JM:** *Can you tell me a little bit about the history of M'hamid? You mentioned it's the last oasis before the Sahara. So what does that mean in terms of history and society?*

**MB:** Great question. So M'hamid is the last oasis before the desert, yes, so the desert starts directly when you are in M'hamid. It was the meeting of the caravan crossing the desert, and other caravans coming from the atlas and the others coming from the north of Morocco too. Mostly they were coming for commerce, passing through to trade things from across the Sahara - Mali, Timbuktu, Algeria, and many places. They would bring things from here to North of Morocco, and they would bring things from north to here. And, before, it was a very very important place because of the climate. It was very green, the oasis was very green and there was a lot of date trees. People could stop here, have a break, have water from the river because before the river always had water in the valley, so it was very very important place. It's an old story. People also had animals and land for agriculture,

vegetables and grass for animals. And other, nomadic tribes would have animals too - camels, goats. So this is the story of M'hamid.

*JM: And what is it like now?*

**MB:** It's kind of, life has changed because people, the people now they had to be able to change, they have no other choice because the first reason is the Border the second reason is climate change. The climate changed a lot, and we can really see that and feel it. Now there's not enough water anymore, no rain, and the nomad people who live in the desert they are able to come to the town and do other jobs, and also the people living in the oasis in M'hamid we don't have enough water to cultivate, for agriculture, so we had to be able to change the way of life. So it's very different than before, now people have another way to live, developed tourism, making a camp in the desert to have people have experience in the desert at night with camels. A few hotels and guest houses, the economy now of the town turned into tourism. If no tourism people would have no job because nomadic life has finished, agriculture is finished, no caravan any more, no water. So only this chance.

*JM: So when, when would you say it changed the most in terms of the water and not being able to do agriculture? Like, how long ago was that change?*

**MB:** About 15 years ago, there was still a little bit of water. I mean to, to do something. So people who had a well, they could have water..they could have water even if it was not so good...so good for agriculture. It was salty water, but it's okay. If, at least, I can have some water to do something, you know, like, if it's not functioning for this plant it can function for another...it's better than nothing.

But, I mean, after this time it was very, very hard because now the salty water is going very deep. Very, very deep. So people have no chance anymore to have water. And the tree of the dates, they have very long roots, very long, so they're looking for water in the ground, under the ground. And now it's very, very long. Very long, very deep.

They don't have any water anymore because it's very, deep, too deep. And very dry, very dry, the soil now, so we can see that, well, here in M'hamid, they are on the way to die. It's like a cemetery in some places. It's like a cemetery, really. A lot of palmaries are dying. Yes. And the reason is the water from the river, because Dra Valley, in the past time, there was always water in the river, so there was water under the ground, but still water always, because there is water in the river.

But when they built the dam, the water stopped. Not any more water in the river, and with no rain. Water comes only with, like, a big system.

And year by year the water underground went very dry, and today there is not any more water and no rain. It's very hard time that we have for the earth and for the agriculture and also for the plant in the desert. And we feel that, and we touch that, it's very difficult.

For our oasis in M'hamid it's very difficult, very difficult. Because the desert will advance more. The sand will come more and not only stop here in M'hamid because M'hamid is only like a barrier. We have a barrier, now, yes, but when this barrier is disappeared, also, because it will disappear because if no water, if no water anymore it will disappear. So, like, very very near it will disappear and then the sand will move very deep; to the atlas and to the big city and maybe to Europe. Maybe. But we hope inshallah the water will come back. That's our wish.

*JM: 15 years ago is not very long ago, really. And now it's like everything is looking for water; humans, the roots of the date palms, the plants in the desert. And, just so I understand, how much does rain affect this? Like can the issue be solved with rain?*

**MB:** So I mean, yeah, a little rain would help, but not for a long time. I mean it will be helpful yeah, but what we need more is the river, water comes for us from the river. Because a little rain can not give the water going under or really deep. But the river always brings water, a lot of water also goes under the ground and then we have a lot of water then in the wells and oasis.

So, yeah, if we have a river that's a sign of a good year, we say. But also the rain, it helps. The most that we hope in future is if the dam can be opened. Then the water can come back and restore the river. Because water comes from different areas, like from the mountains, from the snow in the Atlas Mountains and from other rivers. So yeah. So we hope it rains and water comes in the river, this will help lift a bit. Yeah.

*JM: So, the rain and snow starts in the mountains, and comes down the rivers, down the valley and all the way to M'hamid, to the river and the underground rivers too. And now, there is not so much snow yet in the mountains.*

Yes, exactly, it's very sad. Very sad. But that is the only way that I will see things can improve for us, I think, with the rain coming from the mountains, because otherwise, with so little water it will be difficult and cost a lot of money to go so deep underground with machinery and a lot of things and, you know? So it's the only way, we must be careful for the nature and have the balance, to have the rains and the seasons, that's it. Otherwise, it's difficult. Inshallah, the water will come back.

*JM: Inshallah*

## Field Recordings:

Conversation on weather detection machines between Jessica El Mal, Chahine Fellahi and Kais Ayouch (Kimia Collective) and Omar Ouchaaou in English, French and Darija

At the MOSS Observatory, Oukaimeden, Morocco on 08/11/2022.

*A Place for Rain* by Jessica El Mal, translated and performed for *The Water We Seek* by Noussaiba Roussi in English and Classical Arabic (Fusha)

I want to find the perfect place to wait for the rain  
to see leaves drink and roots swell,  
lakes take a big inhale and open themselves.  
I want to see the first drop awake the riverbed  
so I follow the curve of the rivers body  
all the way to the desert,  
past oasis' and date palms still hot from summer.  
The sand holds the sunset high on the dunes.  
Is this the perfect place to wait, together?

أَتُوقُ لِإِجَادِ خَيْرِ مَكَانٍ لِانْتِظَارِ الْمَطَرِ.  
أَرَى فِيهِ أَوْرَاقَ الشَّجَرِ تَرْتَوِي  
وَالْجُذُورَ تَنْتَفِخُ أَوْدَاجُهَا  
وَرِنَاتِ الْبَحِيرَاتِ تَنْفَرُجُ بَعْدَ نَفْسٍ عَمِيقٍ.  
أُرِيدُ أَنْ أَرَى أَوَّلَ الْقَطْرِ يُوقِظُ مَسِيلَ النَّهْرِ  
فَأَتَّبَعُ جَسَدَهُ الْمَائِجِ  
إِلَى أَنْ أَصِلَ الْفَيْفَاءَ،  
حَيْثُ وَاحَاتُ بَائِدَةٌ وَأَشْجَارُ نَخِيلٍ لَا تَزَالُ سَاخِنَةً بَعْدَ صَيْفٍ،  
وَكُفُوفُ الرَّمَالِ تَحْمِلُ الْغُرُوبَ عَالِيًا فَوْقَ الْكُثْبَانِ.  
أَهَذَا خَيْرُ مَكَانٍ نَنْتَظِرُ فِيهِ...مَعًا؟