My Cultural Heritage (described by an object)

O Q Raúf, Pause for Thought, Early Morning Breakfast Show (Aired 16th April 2024)

Last year, I had the honour of being invited to the Dhaka Literature Festival in Bangladesh, to speak about my books.

I touched down in the land of foremothers and fathers – feeling both excited and to be honest, a little apprehensive.

For Dhaka is akin to London – a heaving, busy city, filled with shopping malls and dust and skyscrapers – not to mention traffic jams that last for hours for no apparent reason.

It was never my cup of chai – not even when I was a child.

I preferred the countryside, where mangoes grow as commonly as the English apple; rickshaws haven't been replaced by monster trucks, and where birdsong makes the ears and soul ache alike with joy.

So heading into the city, I feared it would feel an alien, isolating space – which it did, until a gift changed everything.

For after my very first talk, just as I was leaving the stage, I suddenly heard a voice call out my name.

I turned to find a young student, bright-eyed and red cheeked – holding something out to me.

It was an ektara – a traditional instrument I hadn't seen since I was seven.

'I got you a mini one so you could take it home with you,' she explained.

Ektara, literally means one-string. Ek – one. Tara – string.

And it sounds like this! *(Play ektara!)*

Small but mighty, this one-stringed gem forges the baseline of many an ancient song, still sung across the planes of Nepal, Bangladesh and India.

On returning to my hotel room with it, I began wondering about the stringed instruments of my other ancestral roots – like the baglama of Turkey and the Yemeni *qanbūs* – which my great-great grandparents would have grown up listening to prior to moving to the then India.

In the qu'ran, I am told that God's creation of all the different tribes and cultures of humankind is rooted in love – a love that shows itself in many forms.

Whilst Nobel prize winning Bengal poet Rabindranath Tagore once mused: 'Music fills the infinite between two souls.'

I don't think the student in Dhaka had any idea of what her gift would mean to me.

But via this single, powerful string, she not only handed an emblem of my Bengal ancestry back to me, but bridged my soul with the city's own, with a music I had long forgotten.