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You Can't Go Home Again **Morocco Edition**

By K.A. Dilday

SEPTEMBER 2007

PARIS— Abdellah Taia was performing a typical Moroccan ritual of hospitality this July — making mint tea — when I asked if he was planning to travel to Morocco in August.

“Oh, I can't go to Morocco,” he replied. “I'm too famous for that.”

In May 2007, *Tel Quel*, one of Morocco's two excellent French-language newsweeklies (the other is *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*) ran a cover story about Abdellah. His face, a vision of sadness, peered out under a cover line reading: “Homosexuel, Backwards and Against All”: The poignant tale of the first Moroccan with the courage to publicly acknowledge his difference.”

It is a poignant tale that I have heard in drips and drabs from Abdellah since it began a little over a year ago. I met Abdellah in February of 2006. Three months later I went to Morocco and read a very short article about Abdellah in the arts section of *Tel Quel*. His novel “*L'Armée de Salut*” (The Salvation Army), had just been released in Morocco and France. The article compared two recent portrayals of coming of age in Morocco, by two young novelists from very different backgrounds: one from a wealthy family, the other by Abdellah, who comes from a poor family. The excerpt the magazine chose from Abdellah's book was sexual and provocative. Most people reading it would probably guess that the writer was gay and Abdellah confirmed as such in the interview that accompanied it. There it was in print in Morocco — Abdellah Taia confirming his homosexuality. It was buried in the culture section in the middle of the magazine but it was there and that is how Abdellah's long, hard year began. It wasn't an “*annus horribilus*,” but an *annus intense*. Abdellah became infamous in Morocco at the same time that he became famous in Europe.



*The Tel Quel cover that made
Abdellah Taia infamous.*

In May 2006 when I returned to Paris, Abdellah and I took a walk through Pere Lachaise, the famous cemetery in the 19th arrondissement of Paris. We stopped for a while at Marcel Proust's grave, one of Abdellah's favorite places, and then wandered on to the Muslim section of the cemetery where Abdellah pointed out the grave of a favorite Arab poet and helped me pick out the Arabic

letters I'd recently learned in the ornate calligraphy on the tombstones. It was only when we sat for a cup of tea that he suddenly spilled out that he had had a very difficult week. Al Jarida Al Oukhra, an Arabic-language paper had run an interview with Abdellah under the headline, "Abdellah Taia, gay novelist." The members of his family who could read had seen it; their community had seen it. Those who hadn't seen it had heard about it and it had caused shock waves.

"But I read an article about you early in May in Tel Quel," I said, confused.

"That's different," he said. "It's different if it's in Arabic."

I've written over these last months about Morocco's two worlds, one bilingual in Arabic and French, the other strictly Arabophone and often illiterate, but it still surprised me that it was possible for something to be published in a national magazine and for most of the country to be completely ignorant of it. Printed French is a secret language for the elite, a private club, an invisible ink.

After the article appeared, Abdellah's mother called him to ask if the things people were writing and saying were true. His mother, matriarch of the family, is very close to Abdellah, the youngest of her ten children who was born when she was in her early 40s. He told her it was true. They both cried.

Abdellah's experience is probably no different from



that of many gay people world over even in what we consider the sophisticated cosmopolitan West. Few religions smile on homosexuality. Most parents aren't happy to learn that their child is gay, even if they do grow into acceptance and warmth. But gay people are visible in countries like the United States and France and Spain. There are openly gay people in the public eye, many of whom have been elected to national government and there are gay rights movements. By contrast, Tel Quel identified Abdellah as the first Moroccan to publicly acknowledge his homosexuality even though the homosexuality of many prominent Moroccans is well known — yet it remains publicly unspoken. There are gay clubs and bars in Morocco, but in public life, there is only Abdellah, a community of one.

Traveling through Morocco I've seen many people clutching a copy of "The Sheltering Sky," the American writer Paul Bowles' most famous novel. Bowles lived in Tangier when it was an international city during Morocco's colonial period. While France "administered" the rest of the country, Spain, England and France shared administration of Tangier. The city had tens of thousands of foreign residents and a reputation for liberal attitudes and licentiousness. Now Tangier is fully part of Morocco, the number of resident foreigners has decreased tenfold and the attitudes that reign are Moroccan. One evening at the Tangier Inn (a bar that was a legendary hangout for the beats — William Burroughs wrote the Naked Lunch in one of the Inn's rooms) an acquaintance told me of a scene he had witnessed the day before in Le Minzah, Tangier's most expensive hotel.

A giant of a man, more than six and a half feet tall, came down the stairs accompanied by a woman; he argued angrily with the hotel employee who accompanied him as another followed with their luggage. When the couple left, the concierge revealed that the hotel had asked them to leave. The man was Spanish and his female companion Moroccan. Because they were unmarried, they were not permitted to share a room, although had both been foreign it would have been allowed.

Paul Bowles and his wife, Jane, lived in Morocco for many years. Both were bisexual and had several homosexual relationships with Moroccan lovers. Yet all of their companions insisted that the relationships were not sexual. Even though it was an obvious façade Moroccans preferred to accept it. Paul Bowles is still a legendary figure in Morocco, his name constantly referenced by Moroccans. When Abdellah starting attracting notice, the Islamist Party, PJD, which gained a parliamentary majority in this month's elections, complained in their official newspaper that the news media gave Abdellah too much coverage. One of their leaders told a journalist that they contemplated asking Parliament to ban him (from the press or the country) but decided that he didn't sell enough books to make a ban worthwhile.

Abdellah loved *The Sheltering Sky*, both book and

film. Mohamed Choukri, a Moroccan storyteller who Paul Bowles discovered as a writer — Bowles recorded his oral stories and encouraged him to write — is one of his idols. Even as Abdellah has become notorious for his sexuality in Morocco, Abdellah has become famous for his literary work in Europe and his publisher in Holland is the same one who published Choukri. Abdellah's novels, most of which are autobiographical, have been translated into Spanish as well as Dutch and he has been invited to present them in Madrid, Barcelona and Amsterdam.

In Paris he has received the most attention. Shortly after Abdellah's family stopped speaking to him, he appeared on a popular radio show with Frederic Mitterand, an eminence grise of France's cultural scene and nephew of the former French president. Abdellah was presenting "L'Armee de Salut." Impressed by Abdellah, Mr. Mitterand invited him to collaborate on a book about Morocco, "Maroc 1900-1960, Un Certain Regard." Together they chose photographs from the archives of the French Government. Each wrote a paragraph-long caption for each photo.

Abdellah gave me a copy of the book and sat with me as we turned the pages. "Look," he said excitedly, "this could be my grandparents. My grandfather worked in these mines in the countryside. I had never seen photos like it before." Meanwhile in the year since the article revealed his sexuality to Morocco, he has not spoken to anyone in his family save his mother who calls periodically to tell him that she is praying for him to return to the right path and then they both cry.

Mr. Mitterand is a powerful and well-known figure in the French cultural scene. The French Cultural Institutes in Morocco feted him and Abdellah when the book was published. The two authors traveled to Morocco to promote the book at the Casablanca Book Festival and the Tangier Book Fair. Abdellah stayed in hotels or with friends and didn't visit his old neighborhood, the poor section of Sale, a city across the river from Rabat, Morocco's capital. He spent his time with Morocco's wealthy elite, a world he never wanted to join ("Make sure you don't spend all of your time with rich people," he always warns me before I go to Morocco) but Morocco's wealthy Euro-focused world is, at least on the surface, more welcoming than his old one.

He never sees his family on these trips and the estrangement haunts him. "Read Liberation on Saturday," Abdellah told me in late spring of this year. He had written for the daily newspaper's regular feature in which a well-known person writes a summary of their week. Abdellah's diary was called: "Return to Melancholy."

He wrote that he had returned to Paris from a book

tour in Spain and had a panic attack on reentering his real life. It had been almost a year since he became "Abdellah the Maudit," a year since the Arabic-language article "Abdellah Taia, gay writer," was published. Even before the article came out, Abdellah believes that his family had been well aware of his homosexuality but chose not to speak of it and as a dutiful son, brother, Muslim and Moroccan, he should have left his sexuality in the shadows. On the week of the anniversary of the publication his mother called to ask him why he did it. "Have you lost your mind, saying these things that are not said?"

"I wanted to address Moroccan society," he told her, crying.

"And what are we to do in Moroccan society," she asked him. "We are not poor people far from the world."

Abdellah has always said that Moroccans are fearful. When I mentioned that some political analysts speculate Morocco might be on the brink of an Algerian-style revolt, he dismissed it. "Moroccans will never revolt. They are too timid."

They are fearful, he says, of being different, fearful of individualism. And he

moved to France because he knew that to fully be himself, he would have to live far away from the loving regard of his mother, his favorite sister and the sanction of his family.

"Moroccans are the greatest comedians in the world," Abdellah once told me, using the French word for actor that Graham Greene used for his classic novel. I had asked if Moroccan men had particularly close friendships. Every time I go to Morocco I marvel at the amount of time men spend in each other's company without the presence of women. With employment low and coffee cheap, every Moroccan man seems to have a café where he takes his coffee and smokes cigarettes and watches the world in the company of the other regulars. Men in Morocco often walk hand in hand, something they would never do in public with a woman.

"They must have intimacies," I said.

"No," he said. "They talk about other people, and other people's lives. They are gossips, and then they go home where the women rule the house. Moroccan women rule at home—didn't you know that?"

Abdellah was always thin but in the past months he has grown thinner and more intense. This summer he was feted in Amsterdam, which was exciting for him. He also spent a few weeks at Frederic Mitterand's house

*The Ben
Youssef
madrassa in
Marrakech.*



in Tunisia with French glitterati: famous actors and writers. He's invited to fancy dinner parties. But he also cancels plans more often these days and I know that he spends a lot of time alone in his tiny apartment, writing, watching old movies, sleeping and cutting the photos of people he admires out of the paper. Abdellah was very taken by the story of Lord Browne, the head of BP, the gas company, who resigned over admissions of perjury surrounding the circumstances of Lord Browne's relationship with his gay lover.

When I told Abdellah that my fellowship would end in December and I would leave France, he didn't react but wrote me an email later to tell me how sad it made him. I am part of his urban family — the alliance one makes with some of the other strays and transplants who moved to a place far from home seeking adventure, anonymity or freedom. That family is the only one he has now.

Since the *Al Jarida Al Oukhra* article came out, Abdellah has not spoken to any one of his relatives save his mother. When the *Tel Quel* cover story was released he became notorious: the only "zamel" (an Arabic slur for gay people) in Morocco. But recently he received a text message from one of his sisters. She is illiterate so he knows that she must have asked her daughter to type it. "How are you Abdellah? Are you still so skinny or have you gained a little weight? Greetings to you."

"I have good news," Abdellah told me the last time I saw him. "I finished my next book."

Abdellah loves Morocco. "I'm so happy that you like my country," he told me after the first time I visited Morocco. He's not sure though, when he will be able to go home again. □

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.

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