

# ICWA LETTERS

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## Institute of Current World Affairs

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**KAD-16  
FRANCE**

*Kay Dilday was an Institute Fellow studying relationships of the French and North African immigrants in France – and North Africa.*

*Transcript of a speech delivered at the Members and Trustees meeting  
of the Institute of Current World Affairs, Cosmos Club,  
December 8, 2007 in Washington, D.C.*

By K.A. Dilday

Salaam Alaikum, Bonjour, Hello.

I can't believe that more than two years have passed since that June weekend when I was a just a potential fellow. I was far too nervous to eat breakfast, lunch or dinner and collapsed when I got home. The next day I played my answering machine to hear a message of congratulations from Peter Martin. I was so excited I started to hyperventilate. I promise that I've eaten today and that I won't hyperventilate, although I am very happy to be here. So first let me say, thank you. The ICWA fellowship changed my life.

Now, mushiness aside, I want to begin by bringing up Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist whose work has had a tremendous effect on my thinking. I've mentioned Mr. Geertz's name several times in my newsletters and reports over these many months. Mr. Geertz called the work he did "interpretive anthropology," a new name for a new way of studying cultures.

He had begun his academic career intending to be a journalist and a novelist, and switched to philosophy studies before finally ending up as an anthropologist, but his early training never left him. He wrote beautiful evocative stories about other cultures and made trenchant but compassionate philosophical insights about intercultural relations and morality. Mr. Geertz, who had studied the Islamic communities in Indonesia and Morocco, spoke about the battles between what he called the "anti-ethnocentrists," scholars, anthropologists and other philosophers who believe that different cultures have different values and ideas of right behavior, which we should strive to understand, and those on the other side of the debate—the ethnocentrists who are quite pleased with their culture and don't care to have it disturbed overmuch by outside influences.

This was a battle that was raging in the academy and also in public life, although with less awareness and less fire. In the halls of universities and think tanks it was a death fight. Mr. Geertz brought empirical evidence to the debate — it gave his perspective grounding and separated him from the academics who had shaped their perspective about the world from their university offices. As he said, "If we wish to be able capaciously to judge, as of course we must," he warned, "we need to make ourselves able capaciously to see."

I want to discuss some of the same questions that Mr. Geertz and his fellow academics grappled with, chief among them the place of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism and identity have become the themes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are the central questions of my fellowship, which has been an exploration of the axis of Moroccans and other immigrants with France. In today's world we no longer have innocent theoretical or academic discussions about cultural congress, reciprocal admiration, curiosity and tolerance. These questions are fundamental to the direction that European states are taking as they work out their boundaries in an increasingly borderless continent.

France as it is so often invoked is a timeless entity with a fixed identity. And in that way it can stand for all of the countries of, "old Europe" as Donald Rumsfeld so infamously described those once mighty Western European nations. In these countries, national histories and global migrations have produced rapidly mutating demographics. The question of judging cultures and repudiating cultural practices seems vital to the continuation of daily life, as citizens of Western Europe's liberal democracies know it. Or rather as they think they know it because, as I've learned during my fellowship, unbeknownst to their fellow Frenchmen, there are many people living in an Algerian hamlet in the French banlieue of St. Denis or a Moroccan mountain town in Marseilles or a Malian village in Paris.

When I wrote my ICWA proposal I was sitting at a windowless corner desk on the 10<sup>th</sup>

floor of the *New York Times* Op-Ed office. The lack of a window to see the world outside is an apt analogy for the situation I was in. Vast quantities of information poured into the op-ed office from all over the world. It was the kind of data input that could make a girl from Mississippi think she was getting an all-encompassing perspective. But I'd stepped outside of that office and the country often enough to know that there were many, many places where people had never heard of New York or even the mighty, paper of record, *The New York Times*. Those people weren't sending in op-ed pieces, so how did I know what they were thinking or feeling?

It was three years after the September 11 terrorist attacks and the United States was struggling to figure out "how," and "why?" Many of the analyses decided that Muslims hated the West because they knew nothing of it; they received a skewed perspective from an anti-Western propaganda campaign. And many of the pundits who espoused these theories were self-styled experts who had spent little time among the people they were talking about. But I knew that 18-years earlier in France I'd met Muslims who were reared in Europe yet found France's promises of egalite, liberte and fraternite to be, well, faux.

Clifford Geertz thought that the understanding of the other's motivations was essential to forming human values. And by that



*Kay Dilday (right) with her sister, Erika Dilday*

he meant understanding in the "I have heard what you are saying and comprehended it", not necessarily the "I agree with you understanding." And only from this would we be able to make wise judgments in plotting the course of humanity. From what I know of ICWA's founder Charles R. Crane, I think he would have echoed Geertz's prescription of "seeing capaciously" with a resounding "hear, hear." Because of these two men, and thanks to more than a few other women and men here, I went out into the world two years ago, wide-eyed and voracious.

One of the hugest tasks of this fellowship is figuring out what exactly it is we are doing as fellows. We aren't *made* to do anything, other than write a newsletter. That sort of freedom is both heady and daunting, and the ICWA fellowship is a moment where you discover almost as much about yourself as you do about the country and the people you've come to meet.

So how *does* one see capaciously? Is it a skill that can be learned? I think so.

I arrived in France at the end of 2005, just before the country exploded into 14 days of riots sparked by the death of two boys in Clichy-Sous Bois, one the desolate French suburbs that is home to many 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation immigrants. I am leaving on the heels of last month's riots which, were sparked by the death of two more boys, this time in Villiers le Bel, another desolate suburb. In 2005 the slain youths were of Malian and Tunisian origin; the young

teens that died last month were of Moroccan and Senegalese origin. They lived in suburbs that are physically close to Paris, but meta-physically, they are a world away. These neighborhoods are ugly, with large concrete tower blocks, and filled with unhappy, aimless, underemployed youth who do not believe in the French promise of Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite.

When I lived in France as a college student I never saw these barren suburbs. I spent most of my time in central Paris, which is exquisitely beautiful. It's a jewel, perfectly preserved, polished, gleaming, exquisite even in its studied insouciance. Now I live in one of the city's outer arrondissements, right on the edge of what Parisians call little Africa, Chateau Rouge — the "worst neighborhood in Paris" according to a landlady who warned me against moving there. But I think Chateau Rouge is one of the most vibrant neighborhoods in Paris alive with unofficial street-corner commerce, art galleries, imported African foods, hair salons, halal butchers and little shops open at all hours. It's an array of French people in all of their hues and phenotypes.

Once, like every tourist, I walked along the banks of the Seine in central Paris, among the colonnades of the Pantheon, through the perfectly manicured gardens of the Jardin Luxembourg, marveling at the city's loveliness. But during this year I came to see the preservation of Paris as a symbol of a certain mindset that refuses to allow citizens whose phenotype differs from the traditional French one to ever feel truly French. *Paris comme maintenant, toujours*, for those fortunate enough to be insiders, and woe be to those who threaten to interrupt that good life. Many of France's newer residents, have ancestors who toiled on distant plantations, or fought in far away wars so that life as the French knew it could continue.

These people aren't really welcome in the crown jewel of Paris. For them, direct routes to the city don't exist. And during times of tension police lay in wait at train stations in the outer districts and prevent the unwanted outsiders from entering central Paris.

During my time as an expat in France, I learned that I could no more shake off the first three decades of my life than other any other immigrant. I hustled off to Paris's one decent gym dressed in tennis shoes, exercise pants and a baggy t-shirt, attire that no self-respecting French woman would ever be seen in by their families, much less the people in the streets. I ignored the disapproving stares and accepted that if I stopped at a shop on the way to or back from the gym, I would be the last person helped.

But France after all is still a Western democracy, the kind to which I am accustomed and workout gear is not a djellabah, a North African caftan. My clothes while unappealing weren't so strange. I could whine about Parisians' infamous chilliness. I could whine about the hostile stare a French person offers rather than apologies if they bump into you. I could complain about the French doctor's habit of asking you to disrobe and then conducting a 15-minute medical history while you sit there completely naked. But these things didn't really bother me. Different, yes, pleasing, depends, shocking, no. There was a difference between the mutual bemusement the French and I felt at one another's curious habits of the natives and the goggle-eyed wonder I experienced in Morocco. At first glance, everything in Morocco looks familiar to anyone who has spent time in the Mediterranean, except an abundance of women in headscarves, but that I was already accustomed to. It's the unspoken rules that are the most daunting.

My first night in Morocco, I sauntered out by myself to have dinner and looked in café after café and saw only men or families. And women who do sit in a café should sit on the second floor. I was stumped. People-watching was essential to my plan but how

was I to people watch from the second floor, and even more problematic, if I did sit downstairs, the very strangeness of my behavior would alter theirs. In Morocco, I became a different person. I tried to fit in, covering myself from throat to calf in 100-degree heat. I dressed conservatively, I would say to blend, but in truth it was to ease my passage down streets, to deflect the burning gaze of critical eyes. And each time I re-entered France, I was relieved to be able to dress as I wanted, to sit by myself downstairs in a café if I wanted and not feel like a spectacle.

But not everyone morphs as they cross the 12-mile strait of Gibraltar that separates Europe from North Africa. The rich do as they like in cities like Marrakech or Tangiers or Casablanca. There are many people who live in Morocco as they do in France, wearing sleeveless tops, their hair uncovered, form-fitting jeans or short skirts. But in Morocco's poorer areas djellababs replace western wear and foulards are ubiquitous. And this happens in St. Denis in France as well as in Sidi Hacem, Casablanca's largest slum area.

In France's poor immigrant areas the freedoms of both sexes, but especially women are far fewer. At first it was difficult for me to figure out what I thought about this. As long as no crimes are being committed, invading other people's homes or their person is anathema to liberal democrats. If a Moroccan woman in France is trapped in the kitchen, forbidden by her husband to leave the house or talk to men, covered entirely save her nose, what right do I have to comment? She is a free woman in a country that will support her and shelter her if she chooses to leave. But I gradually came to change my mind. I became more what Mr. Geertz would call, ethnocentric, and what some would call, universalist.

In the field, ideology often runs up against experience. In the absence of omniscience, intellectual humility is crucial and this humility involves the willingness to change one's mind, even if it means contradicting ideas and perspectives we've publicly stood for, disappointing others' expectations and perhaps even the expectations we have of ourselves. I don't think I've done that, but I *have* shifted my way of thinking after two years in the field.

In this light, I want to mention the names of two writers whose autobiographical books were tremendously helpful as I grappled with these concepts. One is Fadela Amara, a French woman of Algerian ancestry who was recently appointed France's minister of urban affairs. The other is an apostate Muslim, Somalia-born Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a former member of the Dutch parliament.

Ms. Amara was born to Algerian immigrants in an industrial town in a southern mountain region of France. She grew up in a housing project populated by many north-African immigrants who had emigrated to work in the nearby Michelin tire factories. Ms. Amara wrote about life in France's large housing projects, called *cites*, and the increasing pressure on young Muslim women. They wanted to be free to dress and act as they pleased. More than their fathers, it was the young men who tried to control the women in their neighborhood, taking out their anger and frustration at joblessness and disenfranchisement on their sisters and neighbors. Ms. Amara founded the group *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* to give young women in the *banlieues* another model, one based on the feminist traditions that are strong in France.

Ms. Ali cast a light on a different group. She arrived in Europe as a young adult in 1992. An immigrant to the Netherlands from Somalia, she became famous when her filmmaking partner, Theo van Gogh, was killed by a deranged young Dutch man of Moroccan heritage. The murderer explained his actions with Islamic ravings. Her autobiography had a powerful effect and reverberated through Western Europe. It affected me, not because I always agreed with

her; often I didn't. But because she insisted that she knew something Western liberals did not know — that the world Muslim immigrants to the West lived in was an oppressive fortress in their midst, and I was just beginning to get an inkling that she was right.

When I read Ms. Ali's book, I'd recently been to the annual meeting of French Muslims and encountered hundreds of Muslim women, in full foulard, who did not sit near men, who either didn't speak French or pretended not to, who seemed sheltered and afraid of talking to me. Considering that I was conservatively dressed, female and black, there wasn't that much that set me apart from them — I couldn't have been that frightening yet I felt their fear. Through a fellow journalist's work, I'd been introduced to people like Mama Greou, a 64-year-old Malian woman who had been in France for a quarter of a century. She'd never learned French and had been convicted for performing clitoridectomies on young girls, a process she mistakenly believed was in the Koran. As she was illiterate, she could not read. In her little Malian enclave in a poor Parisian suburb, Mama Greou was at the mercy of an abusive, polygamous French-African husband.

Allowing immigrants to keep these private enclaves, Ms. Ali argued, produces Mama Greou's. It prevents immigrants from becoming a true part of society and keeps women in the prison that their cultural backgrounds constructed for them.

It's difficult for people like me, who feel that we've moved light years away from the path our backgrounds prescribed for us to understand that in a Western liberal country, someone might not find the ability to escape. But of course we know that situations like this are in our midst, for example, in a renegade Mormon sect on the Utah-Arizona border and in Amish and Mennonite societies in the Eastern United States. These religions with strict claims on their members, particularly women, exist in most countries. But what is true in France, or the Netherlands or Germany, is that the language barrier some of the women face make it impossible to escape.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali said that no one really knew what was going on in immigrant communities in Europe. The communities were so isolated that they managed to continue life as they knew it in their home country, deriving only economic benefit from living in the West. Women were imprisoned, unable to communicate, unable to move. And it is a prison of the mind as well as the body. Despite living in the West, they were so mentally cowed, that they could not see an alternative life.

I've had never specifically focused on women's issues, but the more I learned about these hidden worlds, the more I began to believe that it wasn't fair for the rest of the country to live in freedom while these women were essentially shackled. This was a marked change for me. In the early months when I met women in full veils and floor-length garments, I tried to be open-minded and think of it as a choice. By the end of my time, when I saw a woman in full djellabah and veil in France, my reaction was visceral: "No, wrong, bad, unfair, why?" "It doesn't have to be that way."

And as in Morocco, there is a great divide in France between social-economic classes. Veils, inability to speak French, lack of integration are hallmarks of the poor. But now I want to talk about the middle class and the wealthy. Immigrants from these backgrounds have different clashes with the Republic. Racism and prejudice in France harms everyone, but it most betrays those second- and third-generation immigrants who feel that they have followed the rules and acquired the elements necessary for success. Yet they are turned away because of their funny-sounding names.

I've written about Leila Laouati, a young woman born to illit-

erate Algerian immigrants in Dreux. She worked hard, did well in school and graduated from the Sorbonne only to be told repeatedly that she was not French enough. People like Leila are often the angriest. They've given up their old identities to become French with its promise of equality, and then realize that it's a false promise.

In fact a scholar who studies Muslims in French prison told me that the men who had joined al Qaeda were far better educated than those who were ordinary criminals. Many, he said, had acquired advanced degrees in French universities before they became angry, disillusioned and murderous.

The two years that I have spent in France and Morocco have affirmed my initial thesis about the confusion and betrayal many Muslims in Europe feel. In France, equality is *elusiv*e and racism isn't even *illusiv*e. It's quite blatant. I remember walking in the Marais, a popular quarter of Paris, with friends visiting from England. They asked about racism in France and I pointed at the little Black Sambo dolls set up as servants in a shop window we were passing. "You get a lot of that here," I said. But it wouldn't really occur to most French people that the dolls might offend someone. It is one of the most ethnocentric of cultures, immensely satisfied by its cuisine, its literature, and most of all by its revolution and declaration of the rights of man some two centuries ago.

A century after the revolution, in 1882, Ernest Renan, the French scholar gave a speech at the Sorbonne. The title was "Qu'est ce qu'un nation?" What is a nation? And it was intended as a definition of France, and of the modern nation. A century has passed since Renan described a nation, but his words still hold sway in France. This past year, the mainstream press cited him more than 100 times, so it is worth looking at what Renan told his audience at the Sorbonne that day.

In his speech, Renan said that the nation was a "spiritual principle." "Two things constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form." Race, he said, had nothing to do with it. When the speech was published, Renan wrote that first among all his writings he hoped it would be remembered "when modern civilization flounders as a result of the disastrous ambiguity of the words: nation, nationality, race." Although they cite him often, France is still floundering, because save a few small adjustments here and there, it seems to consider itself complete in the way that Francis Fukuyama described in 1989 when he wrote that we were at the end point of mankind's ideological evolution.

"One loves in proportion to the sacrifices to which one has consented," Renan said about citizens, "and in proportion to the ills that one has suffered." France is not a secular country; it's a Catholic one with a thin veneer of secularism and the veneer is patchy. As I've mentioned before, nine of the eleven national holidays are derived from the Christian religion. Schools in France still close on Wednesday because that was the day of Catechism class, and open on Saturday, although this is the holy day in Judaism, France's third most popular religion. For those who do not fit the traditional phenotype and habits of the French person as he was known in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, many sacrifices are asked.

They do not nor should they give up their essential values, but Western liberal democracies must evolve and adapt to the changing nature of their population. Johann Herder, the German philosopher who was one of the most vociferous proponents of nationalism and national identity still knew it to be mutable. The zeitgeist of the country he said, "adapts itself silently to classes of inhabit-

ants, to their needs, inclinations and insights."

Well, Herder was right about one thing: the zeitgeist of a nation is adapting. However, he must have been dealing with a much less boisterous population because in Europe it's not silent; it's a loud messy process. I am certain that this quest for identity, both personal and national, will be the leitmotif for the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The advent of European identity in the form of an increasingly powerful European Union, intra-European migrations and the influx of immigrants from Africa and Asia continue to alter the demographics of many Western European countries. Like most people covering these issues, I've focused on perceptions of difference and the sense of dislocation that many immigrants feel, factors that hinder their integration in the larger community. These aspects of immigrant life are salient and important. But there are many first- and second-generation immigrants like Fadela Amara who love their adopted homeland and what they think it stands for. They staunchly defend these values against encroachment. People like Ms. Amara will be at the forefront of the debate as nations like France remake themselves.

Will there be capacious judging? Yes, fast and furious judging if my time in the crucible is representative. "Seeing capaciously" must come before the judging capaciously that we ICWA fellows will inevitably do if, as we hope, we move into positions of influence on the regions and topics we've studied.

For all of your support along my journey, I want to thank you. I want in particular to thank my two avuncles, Julie Barlow, who isn't here today, and David Hapgood, who flew to France and checked in on me more than a few times in addition to reading my newsletters with a gentle but stern avuncular eye, Peter Bird Martin who got me to that exhilarating and terrifying June meeting more than two years ago, Lu Martin who fed me and mother-henned me, Ellen Kozak who put up with my last-minute email requests and Steve Butler who well just put up with me, supported me, handled things and taught me a great deal about writing. I can't begin to express my gratitude.

Thanks to my ICWA fellowship, and to more than a few others of you here, I have seen — if not capaciously — there is always more to see — much more than I could see two years ago when I stayed late after work typing out my fellowship application at my little windowless spot in a small room on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor of the *New York Times*, and I am forever changed. Thank you.

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4273) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4545 42nd Street NW, Suite 311, Washington, DC 20016. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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