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Street Life in Fes

By K.A. Dilday

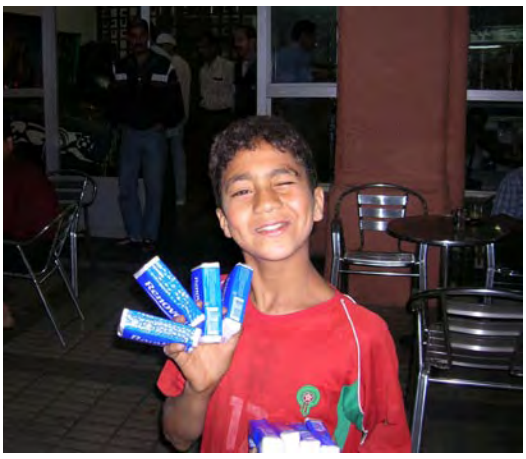
22 MAY, 2006

FES, Morocco – I've been having a terrible time writing this newsletter. When I'm deep in the midst of something it's hard to reach conclusions. Morocco, and more specifically the city of Fes, is swirling around me, and in my weakened state from typical digestive reactions to new bacteria, I can't quite see well enough to put words to paper accurately. I have impressions, false or accurate. I'll start by giving them, unconnected as they are and ephemeral as they may prove to be.

First and foremost, although I've never thought of myself as particularly prissy, for me, traveling in Morocco has meant transcending my American notions of cleanliness and hygiene. It means eating a sandwich although the street vendor stuffed everything in — the eggplant, the lettuce, the beets — with his hands, the same hands he used to take the money and do who knows whatever else. Morocco is a place where a store leaves a bucket of water with a cup attached outside on a hot day and everyone drinks from it. It's a place where the man in the market spits on the shoes he's trying to sell you and rubs in his spittle to show you that it's real goatskin.

But were I to try to describe Fes, the city itself, what should I say? I can begin by talking a bit about a visit I had in Paris from ICWA Trustee David Hapgood and his cousin Judith at the end of April. I wanted to take them around my neighborhood, one that is bordered by Barbes — a street that is synonymous with "Arab" in the Parisian lexicon, and a trendier, artsy neighborhood.

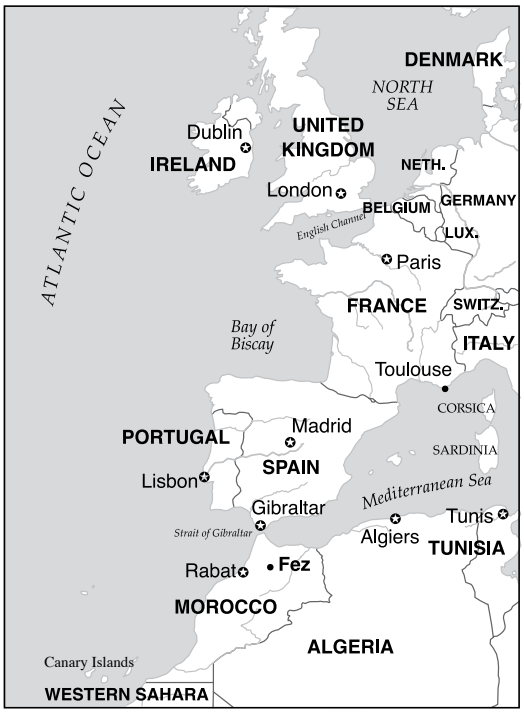
I wanted to show David and Judith that part of my neighborhood, but as we walked around at 7 pm when the shops were closing, I realized that what gives my Barbes neighborhood its distinctive other-nationness is the spirit of commerce. In addition to the actual shops selling inexpensive goods from Bangladesh or China or Morocco, independent entrepreneurs prowl the streets, thrusting watches in your face or bottles of perfume; offering a "bon prix."



Young Entrepreneurs

That constant commerce is what, by and large, you first see as a Westerner in Fes. Be it the taxi driver from the airport who promises a discount if you hire him to tour the surrounding cities, or the men carrying homemade wooden boxes filled with nail clippers, packages of tissue, scissors, shoe-shine equipment or cloves of garlic from café to café, the people of Morocco are relentless entrepreneurs.

To many Fassis (people from Fes) Westerners are consumers who will pay far more for anything than any Moroccan would — for a carpet, perhaps enough



to feed a family for a month. In one of my favorite moments, I saw a Western man ask a vendor if he had a razor in his wooden crate. Then I watched the vendor walk 50 feet to a small shop, buy a razor, and resell it to the man with a 500-percent markup. That's the superficial Morocco, the one that greets most people when they first arrive in the *ville nouvelle*, the newer part of Fes.

The old city, while still ruled by the spirit of commerce, is more otherworldly. I saw that otherworldly quality when I first walked through a gate of the medina. Medina is a complicated term: in Arabic, *medina* is a city, but at some point, seemingly during the colonial period, "the medina," came to be known as the old city, distinguishing it from the new city, constructed by the colonialists during the years when Morocco was a French protectorate. Fes is reputed to have one of the most distinct medinas in Morocco and one of the oldest, dating from the year 780. It was once the center of activity in Morocco, although it has ceded that place to larger cities like Rabat, Casablanca, Marrakesh and Tangier. The *ville nouvelle*, where I was staying, is less charming, but has more amenities such as reliably running water, large boulevards and modern buildings. It was once predominantly French, but wealthy Moroccans moved into the *ville nouvelle* as the protectorate came to an end, leaving the medina to the poor.

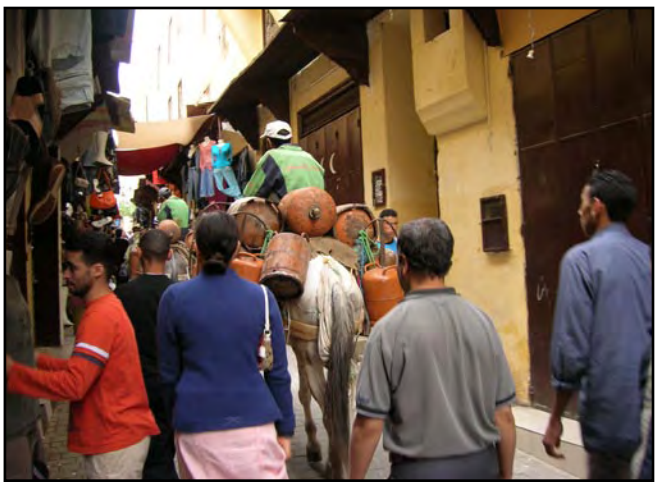
I went to the old city alone one Friday morning. I started off walking, since that's my favorite way to see a new city, but each time I asked the way, someone would tell me it was too far and suggest I take a cab. Finally I relented and the driver dropped me off at *Baab er R'cif*. *Baab* means door in Arabic and this one goes into the center of the medina. I had decided to take the walk even though I knew that it was likely to be quieter as it was Friday, the most observed prayer day in Islam. Prayer is quotidian for Muslims, and the call to prayer rings out from each mosque five times a day. But Friday morning is the most important time for prayer, so when I walked through the gate, commerce was on hold and observance in order.

The mosques were likely full, but the streets, if one calls them that — slender and walled, they are not like streets that I know — were eerily quiet and cool; the relentless summer heat would not begin for a few weeks. Even though I'd been warned, I was unprepared for the closeness of the walls, the mules and donkeys being led down the narrow streets to make deliveries, the thatched coverings that keep the relentless sun out, the labyrinthine streets — not prepared for the fact that all of this would make me feel claustrophobic and trapped. After twists and turns down a few streets, jumping out of the way of overladen donkeys, I left quickly, deciding to come back when the medina came alive. This slumbering empty medina was daunting on my first entry, and the emptiness made me stand out. I jammed onto the crowded bus with all of the medina residents traveling to work in the *ville nouvelle*, and resolved to try again the next day.

On my return, I noticed that women work behind the counters of the shops in the medina rarely and when they do they are less aggressive than the men. Street-corner entrepreneurs are not women. The only women I saw approach men were those asking for change.

That situation is just one of the many aspects of Fes and Morocco's complicated gender dynamics. During my first week in Morocco, *Marock*, a controversial film opened. About the love life of a young woman, barely more than a girl, the film opened several months earlier in France, but was banned in Morocco until last week. I had seen it on the cover of *Tel Quel*, a weekly newsmagazine written in French that is sort of a cross between *Time* and *The New Yorker*. The coverline read: "Marock: the film with all the taboos."

Marock was directed and written by Leila Marrakchi, a 30-year-old, Paris-based filmmaker from Casa-



Don't get too close to the back of the donkey in the medina.

blanca — or Casa, as I now know Moroccans call it. Ms. Marrakchi emigrated from Morocco in 1993. She's from a wealthy class of Casablancans and has said in interviews about the film that she wanted to show what life was like when she was growing up.

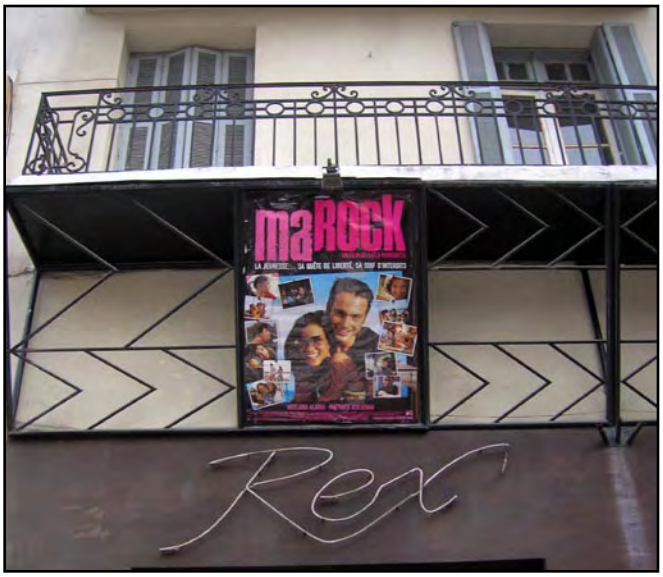
I went to the Friday-evening showing the day after it opened. Since it had generated so much press and controversy, I was wondering if I needed to buy tickets in the afternoon to make sure it wasn't sold out. Both the Moroccan woman in my theater-going group, Zinab, and Brian, an American doctoral student who's been in Fes for nearly a year studying social movements through music, found that proposition amusing. Zinab seemed surprised that anyone would ask such a question. Brian, a New Yorker, understood but said that in all the times he'd been to the Rex, the large theater in the center of the *ville nouvelle* he'd never seen more than 20 people there.

When we got there, roughly five minutes before the film began, only about seven other people had entered the theater. Zinab, who was leading, marched in and sat us directly in front of two of them. Her rudeness surprised me. Why sit right in front of people and block the view? Brian said that one of his friends had told him the difference between Moroccans and Americans is that in a theater with only a few people, the Americans will sit far away from others, and the Moroccans all in a cluster. Did they say why? I asked. "Because life is where people are."

By the beginning of the film, or at least after about five minutes into it, 25 people sat in the audience, although the number continued to expand and decrease throughout the evening as people entered and exited. No one seemed to feel bound by the possibility that seeing a film from the beginning might aid in understanding it, and perhaps they were right. The old idea that only a few stories exist in the world applies to Marock, which is definitely borrowed from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. It tells the tragic tale of Ghita and Youri, teenage lovers across Morocco's religious divides. Ghita is from a rich Muslim family, Youri from a rich Moroccan Jewish family.

The article in *Tel Quel* named five taboos that had made Marock's path to Moroccan screens difficult. They are, and I use their words: 1. The Jew and the Muslim; 2. The arrogant bourgeoisie; 3. Lack of respect for prayer; 4. Parties with alcohol; 5. Eating during Ramadan; 6. Love transcends time.

Interestingly though, the article made no mention of gender taboos, and I am still trying to work through those in my head. Ghita wears very few clothes in many of the scenes. The film opens with a kissing scene, and is followed by several more, as well as frank talk. Tame stuff by American standards, but the kissing scenes were too much for one woman who wore a veil to cover her hair. She left during the first intimate scene, and even though she worked up the courage to return, she lowered and covered her eyes during the rest.



Marock, still playing at the Rex

Zinab, the 32-year-old Fassi woman in my group, a firecracker of a woman who wears a headscarf (although she didn't for many years; her story is one I am still hoping to hear) insisted that a Moroccan could not have made the film. "Those were not Moroccan values," she said. Yet, the director is in fact of Moroccan origin. In the film, Ghita says to her beau: "If you come to Paris we can be together every day, we won't have to hide." "What will you tell your parents?" he asks. "They will be far away," she replies, skirting the question.

The film is obviously autobiographical — but to what extent I don't know. The director has lived in Paris since the early 1990's when she went there for school, and according to articles about her, she is married to a Sephardic Jew.

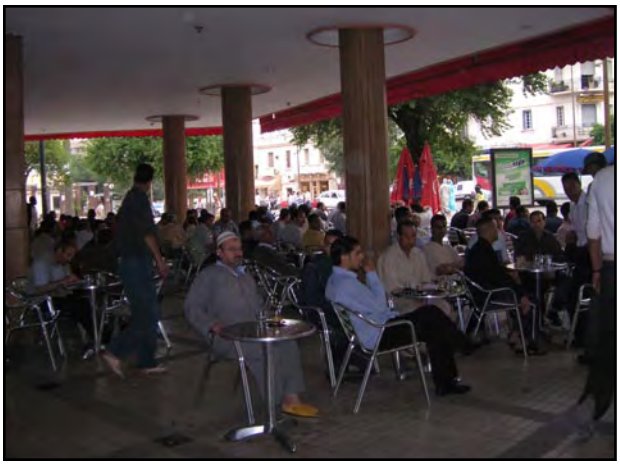
The subject of my last newsletter, my friend Abdellah Taia has promised to introduce me to Ms. Marrakchi when I return to Paris. I'm hoping she will help me start to decipher what it's really like for women here. On the one hand, many Moroccans insist there are no restrictions for women, that headscarves and conservative dress are a matter of personal choice and that conservative and liberal Muslims live comfortably alongside each other. Indeed, the king's wife does not cover her hair, which is a definite statement about gender and Islam as she is the wife of the "spiritual leader of Morocco."

I had asked someone how I should dress in the country and he said, "as you do in Paris." It's true that many women dress in sleeveless blouses and knee-length skirts, while other women cover their heads and some leave only their eyes unveiled. Perhaps a man just looking about would think women can dress however they please. The semblance of complete liberation can easily lead men to think that women in Morocco move about freely. But, I and many other Western women I have met

find that dressing in long sleeves and long pants or skirts is the easiest way to ensure a tranquil walk across town, free of whispered solicitations. As the weather gets hotter I become more furious about this. Growing up in Mississippi, I am used to heat and I usually weather it well, to pun badly. Yet dressed in my long-sleeve shirts and long pants, I was hot. Hotter than I have ever been, and the sight of the abandoned, short, sleeveless summer dresses in the bottom of my bag makes me furious.

Despite claims by Fassis of a liberal attitude, at cafés and restaurants, women are almost invisible. When I first arrived in Fes, when I was staying by myself in a hotel, I didn't know quite what to do or where to go. I have often traveled by myself and usually I sit with a coffee at a café, watch the people go by and try to figure out my day. But where I was, all inviting tables at all inviting cafes overflowed with groups of men, making the cafés not so welcoming. Women, if they do go to cafés alone, tend to sit inside and upstairs if there are two floors. How would I see the world that was Fes from there? How would I see anything? I wondered. I finally found one café that I made my own, not a particularly pretty one, but the proprietor beckoned to me and each time sat me at an outside table in the corner near where he sat as if I was in a tiny protectorate.

I've had coffee several times with a young man who helped me find my way when he saw me looking through my guidebook on the street. Abdou is a former officer in the Moroccan army who's now studying to be a hairdresser. Do men and women go out to "*boites*" (nightclubs) together? I asked. "Of course, Morocco is a very progressive place," he replied. Yet every Westerner I know who has gone to a nightclub says that most of the women there are prostitutes. Morocco is not quite as progressive as people would have you believe. Something complicated is going on in the Moroccan psyche and people are reluctant to admit it. There's a disconnect in Morocco between what people say about gender roles and what they do, what life is really like.



Men only at the Renaissance cafe

Marock showed the sexual side of a young woman, her body scantily clad in a manner that seemed almost aggressive in presentation. The director definitely had something to say about women, and sex, and religion. Why was Zinab so certain that a Moroccan could not have made that film? Are attitudes so different in Casablanca compared to Fes? That would be normal; most large cities have more latitude in the range of behavior. Could it be that behavior among the moneyed class differs from that of people from more modest circumstances?

I think meeting Leila Marrackchi, who chooses to live in France yet writes and films about Morocco, will be instrumental in figuring out this divide — the secret code of conduct that Moroccans seem reluctant to reveal to outsiders or perhaps are not even certain of themselves. There's no key that will unlock this door, I know, but perhaps this first trip to Morocco is like my first visit to the medina, when I turned only a few corners of the labyrinth. On my second attempt I took a map and wound my way around and around. I still don't know the complexities of the medina but I made my way across it, turning as many corners as I could. And I discovered that at many points the thatched roofs stop, and from deep in the confines of the many thousand-year-old walls, when I looked up, I could see the sun. ❑

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