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KAD-6
FRANCE

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To Be or Not to Be African

By K.A. Dilday

September 1, 2006

PARIS –"*Afrique, Afrique,*" the man standing in a doorway in the medina of Tangier called to me. It wasn't the first time I had been called that in Morocco and I decided to turn and say what runs through my mind each time: "Like you. We are both Africans," I said in French. "No," he said, gesturing with his hands, "lower," meaning lower geographically in Africa, countries where the people generally have darker skin than Moroccans, skin a hue more similar to mine. We were not the same he was telling me, albeit good-naturedly or lasciviously — I didn't stay around long enough to figure out which. His "No" has centuries of history behind it, but in its current form, it exemplifies the importance Moroccans place in setting themselves apart from the rest of the continent's inhabitants.

The number of people who have made their way to Morocco from places like Gambia, Nigeria, Mali and numerous other countries south of the Sahara desert, is impossible to count as most enter the country illegally and then live in the shadows of the cities or in the forests on city outskirts. Usually they are not planning to settle in Morocco permanently. It is the final African leg of a journey to the edge of Europe. These sub-Saharan immigrants are not the only ones in Morocco dreaming of emigrating. On a precipice at the edge of the Kasbah in Tangier is a spot where Moroccan boys and men sit gazing across the Strait of Gibraltar, the slim 8.7-mile-wide body of water that separates Morocco from Spain and therefore Africa from Europe. On a clear day the silhouette of the Spanish port city Tarifa is easily visible on the horizon.

Although less apparent, sub-Saharan Africans are also gazing at Europe from Tangier. A few days after sitting at the edge of the Kasbah with Moroccans, I stood

The view from the Kasbah, the faint outline of Spain is visible in the distance

in a less picturesque spot, looking at the same silhouette with Kara, a Gambian man who hoped to steal onto a boat that night and enter Spain. We stood at the top of a dilapidated stone staircase, high in a quiet spot near the center of the city as he pointed out Spain, a place he had been trying to reach for four years. He'd made it four times, Kara said, but each time he was caught and sent back by the Spanish authorities who carefully search each boat arriving from Morocco.

I was in Tangier in August, the month when Moroccans living abroad return for holiday. Tangier is the northern-most major city in Morocco. It's a common point of arrival when traveling from Europe and it has recently become a popular destination for vacationing Moroccans from southern regions of the country. At night, the main street in the *ville nouvelle* was so packed that I could barely walk down it. Yet the North is only now becoming a full part of Morocco. During colonial times Tangier was something unique, an international city shared by Spain, France, England and later, Italy. With its large international population — 60,000 in the early 1950s compared to the 3000 today — it had a racy reputation as a place where spies and exiles regrouped and sexual libertines indulged. Since Morocco won its independence in 1956, Tangier's status as a banking capital and tourist destination had been in a steady decline.

Just east of Tangier, yet a world away, the people of the Rif mountains historically have been similarly estranged from the rest of the country. Fiercely independent, they successfully staged a revolt against Spanish rule and the Rif was sovereign for five years in the 1920s before being subdued by a joint force of French and Spanish troops. Once colonialism ended, they were resentful at the idea of distant federal control and resisted being part of greater Morocco. It is still considered a lawless, unmanageable zone, notorious for drug cultivation and smuggling. King Hassan II rarely visited the north of the country, claiming that the air made him asthmatic. Since assuming the throne after Hassan II's death in 1999, King Mohamed VI has made efforts to bring Northern Morocco into the fold. One of the largest construction projects in Morocco is the Tangier-Mediterranean port, a $1.3 billion project to create the largest port in the Mediterranean. It's the centerpiece of an economic development project for the region.

I was probably looking at evidence of this project one afternoon as I sat at the edge of the Kasbah with the Moroccan men gazing across the Strait. Far below, the ocean lapped at the concrete blocks resting in the shallow water. As we sat, a man rolled a large trash can up to the edge and emptied it onto the rocks where, just beneath the dreamers, the cliff was littered with months and perhaps years of refuse from moments like the one we had just witnessed. "Is this supposed to be where you put your garbage?" I asked the man near me with whom I'd been chatting. He shook his head in disgust, embarrassed I think, that a foreigner had seen that:

"No, but many things don't function well in Morocco."

In a way, the scene at the Kasbah encapsulates the paradox of Morocco. Shortly after he became king, Mohamed VI announced that he wanted to be "king of the poor," probably a response to critics who during the last years of Hassan II's reign, began attacking the royal family for amassing a billion-dollar fortune while most of Morocco's citizens languished in poverty. Mohamed VI has been instrumental in developing the grand construction projects that are underway in many parts of the country, often with foreign investment and the goal of attracting tourists; but the appearance of booming industry is in sharp contrast to the scarcity of jobs and the dysfunction of basic essential services like waste disposal. Although the government reported that employment rates jumped slightly in the most recent quarter, for many poor Moroccans, all of their economic hopes are in the dream of reaching Europe, which seems so near but logistically is so far. Recent news reports have been focusing on the sometimes fatal sea journeys southern Africans take to get to Spain and Italy, but about half of the people Moroccan police prevent from illegally immi-

Dreaming of Europe

grating to Europe by boat are Moroccans. This factor has been missing in the context of the Euro-African negotiations over patrol of the routes from Morocco to Spain. Moroccans are just as eager and desperate to leave their country as the sub-Saharans and the proximity of Europe is tantalizing.

In addition to holding the little part of Europe in Africa — as a legacy of colonialism, two Spanish enclaves, Melilla and Ceuta, are still on the continent, sandwiched between Moroccan cities — Tangier is the part of Africa that is closest to mainland Europe. The city is one of several points in the north of the country where Africans who want to immigrate to Europe gather. For Moroccans, these desperate journeys are relatively new: until the early 1990s they could travel easily to Europe. Moroccans needed only a passport to enter Spain and Italy. But as the Schengen agreement — the treaty among some Western European nations allowing people to travel freely across their borders without showing passports — was about to come into effect, the parties to it demanded that access to each individual country become more difficult. Thus Morocco lost its special status, and was lumped in with the majority of African nations whose nationals must apply for visas to go to Europe. In addition to being costly, as the years progress, visas have become increasingly harder to get. A friend told me of a renowned pianist, a veteran of concert halls across Europe and the Middle East, who was recently turned down for a visa to France, and of another well-known Moroccan writer who was denied a visa to go to France for medical treatment although he had done so many times before.

At the end of August, the European Union granted 67 million euro for Morocco to control the flood of African immigrants trying to reach Europe. Morocco is caught in the middle of competing interests of the two continents as it acts as the designated policeman for Europe. While African governments don't advertise it, remittances from people working abroad often help sustain their country's economies. In Morocco, for example, remittances through formal channels alone were 6.4 percent of the gross national product in 2002, six times the amount of development aid paid to the country that year, according to a report by the Migration Policy Institute. Most African countries profit in some way when their nationals are able to work abroad. Morocco's position as the Europe-paid border guard for all of Africa has the unsavory scent of colonial times when European governments would choose a local leader from an elite social group to enforce their policies, thus dividing the local population and creating a hierarchy on which they sat atop.

In "Fortress Europe," as the continent is often called these days, Africans are widely perceived as a group of people who, left to their own devices after colonial rule, have proven unable to self-govern, feed themselves and after protesting it during colonialism, are clamoring to

abandon their countries and resubmit to European governance. Despite statistics that prove that Moroccans are just as keen to quit their country for Europe though, they are eager to separate themselves from this gross lump negative assessment of Africans — that may be sub-Saharan Africa, but they are something different. And it is true that for much of the 20th century, Moroccans were invited to Europe.

In the early part of the 20th century, many Moroccan workers went to France to fill labor shortages. In the latter half their European destinations became more varied: during the 1960s, Morocco signed labor recruitment agreements to fill shortages in West Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. From 1960 to 1990 the population of people of Moroccan descent in Western Europe increased nine fold, from about 140,000 to nearly one and a quarter million in 2004.

This immediate history is part of the reason Moroccans seem to want to set themselves apart from sub-Saharan Africans. They are quite definitive about their difference and can be prickly and defensive about the advanced development of Arab culture. This latter sentiment, in particular, seems most strong in the thin upper class in the country and among the Moroccans who live between Morocco and France, the European country where North Africans have been present for long enough to have developed a bourgeoisie, a settled middle class that feels as much French as Moroccan.

Although he spends most of his time in Paris and other parts of Europe, the writer Tahar Ben Jelloun is Morocco's most famous living novelist. Just a few days before I met him in Tangier, a short story he had written was published in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, the international monthly of the French daily newspaper, *Le Monde*. In the wake of France's very visible expulsion of immigrants and the approval of tough new immigration laws (see KAD-5), Mr. Ben Jelloun had written a fable called "The Last Immigrant." It describes a scenario as the last Maghreb immigrant leaves France and gaps begin to appear in the French language as the last immigrant seems to have taken all of the Arabic-derived words in the French language with him. It's a reminder to France and the world that the relationship between the Arabic world and Europe is a symbiotic one, and not least, culturally.

During our conversation, Mr. Ben Jelloun was expansive on the subject of discrimination in France, and on French policies that created a lost generation of Arab-French boys and girls who turn to radical Islam because they have no identity. Yet when I asked him about the situation in Morocco, and about the differences between life in France and Morocco, he was less forthcoming. I had already been told many times that I was getting a false glimpse of Tangier, that the city is much dirtier and more sinister at other times, that the women I saw in sleeveless shirts and jeans, or occasionally having tea in cafes, were expatriates returned for vacation. I asked Mr. Ben Jelloun about the situation of women; changes in legal and social status for women is a prominent topic in Morocco since the 2004 reform of the Moudawana, the civil code that encompassed family law dictating women's status. Women made huge gains in rights and are beginning to approach equality before the law. But I'd been told anecdotally that rather than a liberalization of attitudes, since the reform, more women had begun to wear veils and that fewer sat in cafes. Mr. Ben Jelloun brushed the question off saying only, "Look around: you see people wearing all sorts of things."

Yet we met at the Café de Paris, the spot for gathering and people watching in the ville nouvelle and I only saw one other woman in the room. When the waiter gave us the bill he spoke first in Arabic and then quickly switched to French. When Mr. Ben Jelloun answered him in Arabic, he admitted that he had thought that Mr. Ben Jelloun wasn't Moroccan. Something about him, perhaps it was his carriage or that he was sitting with a black woman in a café — I never saw anyone else doing that who wasn't with me — marked him as foreign to the Moroccan waiter.

I'd had a similar experience in Paris talking with Leila Marrakchi, the director of the film Marock (described in KAD-3.) The film sets a cross religious—Muslim and Jewish—love story among young, wealthy and dissolute Casablancans. Ms. Marrakchi had problems with Morocco's censors, something that was well documented in the independent media. But even though I had been in Morocco when the film was finally released and watched as the controversy played out, she downplayed her struggle with the censors and the controversy. It didn't seem to be something she wanted to discuss with a Western reporter.

I saw a slightly different side of the complicated relationship upper-class Moroccans have with their country when I met Samir, a 19-year-old man from one of Casablanca's prominent families. He insisted that he didn't speak Arabic well, which I simply couldn't believe. "French is my native language," he said repeatedly, "My parents always spoke it at home." "But you live in an Arabic-speaking country," I said incredulously. Following independence from France 50 years ago, Morocco went through an "Arabization" (although French still holds strong in business and government). The official language of Morocco is fusha Arabic, often called media or modern standard Arabic. Far more of the population speaks the colloquial Moroccan Arabic than speaks French. To be born and live in Morocco and not speak Arabic would be very strange indeed. I eventually won the hard-fought admission that he spoke the Moroccan dialect but wasn't proficient in fusha Arabic, the common tongue that educated Arabs from the Middle East to southeast Asia to North Africa speak. As we talked more he said that he thought Arabs alienated themselves by speaking Arabic. Yet Samir has never been to

Beginnings of construction for the Tangier-Med port with the city in the background

France. He will make his first trip this fall to study film at a university in Paris.

Aspects of this complicated pride seem to drive the uneasy relationship between Moroccans and sub-Saharan Africans, one that has an ugly, fairly recent history behind it. Historically, like many other societies, Islamic societies were slave owning (and continue to be in some places, notably in Mauritania and Sudan). Well into the 20th century, it was an accepted and legal practice to keep west and southern Africans, dark-skinned Africans, as slaves in Morocco. The slave trade was not outlawed until Morocco became a French protectorate in the 1920s.

When I spent an evening with the Gambian man, Kara, much of his conversation was a denouncement of Moroccans. He was angry that they dared to condescend to him on his continent. "They aren't even Africans," he said, "They came here from Yemen." This concept of the authentic African kept coming up in Morocco. In Rabat I had tea with a Moroccan academic who drunkenly told me that I was a real African and he was a real African as he was Berber (an ethnic group believed to be indigenous to North Africa that was in the region long before Arabs arrived) but his wife, of Arab descent, was not.

A Berber from the Rif in Tangier

There were times when I was included as African, either formally or casually and times when my Western origins stood out. One midday, a Moroccan man in Tangier approached and asked if I was American. "What gave me away," I asked. "It was your color and the way you wear your hair." But I think it was more likely the fact that I moved about freely during the day. There are many sub-Saharan Africans in Morocco, but they tend to be fearful of the authorities, and live in the shadows, coming out only at night. This particular month, increased police presence made movement for them even more daunting.

But they were there. One afternoon as I walked down a quiet side street in the medina, a black woman called to me from a window. I remember feeling that she was imprisoned behind bars, but it must only have been the ornate ironwork that protects many Moroccan windows and her palpable desperation that made me think that. I was walking down a street that few tourists chose, passers-by were scarce; she obviously spoke only the dialect of her country because she could only gesture with her hand to indicate that she could braid my hair for money. There was nothing I could do to help her.

There is little work in Morocco for these southern Africans; they are unwelcome when jobs are already scarce. One Moroccan newspaper referred to them as black locusts. Kara, the Gambian man who had been drifting around North Africa for four years, had done many odd jobs. Kara was a tricky conversationalist, saying one thing and then letting a fuller more accurate version slip a moment later; but his most regular work, it seems, was as a prostitute. Kara was one of the few

sub-Saharan Africans I saw in Tangier, although they are there but living nocturnally. He was intelligent and sophisticated and with his perfect English, he managed to slip around Morocco without drawing too much unwanted attention.

But in August, most of Tangier looks smart and prosperous and so do the expatriates who return in large cars to motor around the city, year-round residents tell me disdainfully. Usually there is more garbage on the streets, and more Moroccan children and dark-skinned Africans loitering around the port attempting to sneak onto boats. The dreamers cliff and unofficial garbage dump I saw at the edge of the Kasbah wasn't a place where most tourists go. I only found it because a local had drawn the route to it on a map for me. The rest of Tangier had been cleaned up for the return — a French resident of Tangier told me I was seeing a Potemkin village. This is a well-known occurrence in Morocco: the France-born Moroccan artist Yto Barrada made an animated model of a Moroccan town in which everything is broken, there are no trees and beggars line the sidewalks. Then, as a Mercedes sedan approaches, the scene flips to reveal trees, parks and strolling families, only to flip back once the car is out of sight.

Yet the poverty and dissatisfaction is there even if just barely submerged for the vacation month. And just as in sub-Saharan Africa, it is propelling a mass attempted exodus. As one Moroccan expatriate told me, in Morocco, one of the country's grand jokes is that in a few years, the only person left in the country will be the king. ❑

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A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Philosophy at Rutgers, Iona College and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Rick Connerney is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

Kay Dilday (October 2005-2007) • FRANCE/MOROCCO

An editor for the *New York Times*' Op-Ed page for the past five years, Kay holds an M.A. in Comparative International Politics and Theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam* in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*. She has traveled in and written from Haiti and began her jouralistic life as city-council reporter for Somerville This Week, in Somerville, MA.

Nicholas Schmidle (February 2006-2008) • PAKISTAN

Nicholas is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion and politics in Asia. He is spending two years in Pakistan writing on issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he has reported from Central Asia and Iran, and his work has been published in the *Washington Post*, the *Weekly Standard*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and others. Nick received an M.A. in International Affairs - Regional Studies from American University in December 2005. He lives with his wife, Rikki.

Andrew J. Tabler (February 2005 - 2007) • SYRIA/LEBANON

Andrew has lived, studied and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a Master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. Following the Master's, he held editorships with the *Middle East Times* and *Cairo Times* before moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria and working as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the *Economist* Intelligence Unit. His two-year ICWA fellowship bases him in Beirut and Damascus, where he will report on Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • GERMANY

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

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