

# *Atavism and Civilization: An Interview with Paul Bowles*

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**P**AUL BOWLES, the American novelist, first visited North Africa in 1931 at Gertrude Stein's behest, and has been living permanently in Tangier, Morocco, since 1947. Among his publications are four novels and three collections of short stories, most of which are set in North Africa, particularly in Morocco. He also wrote many travel essays in the 1940s and the 1950s; these are mostly about North African culture and geography. Since the early 1970s he has turned to translations from the "Moroccan oral traditions." He has taped, edited, and translated from Moroccan Dialectical Arabic the tales of some illiterate Moroccan storytellers, such as Mohamed Mrabet, Larbi Layachi, and Ahmed Yacoubi. His other literary collaborator is Mohamed Choukry, a self-educated Moroccan novelist whose autobiographical novel, *For Bread Alone*, has been translated into many languages and has gained international fame. Some critics have considered Paul Bowles as the guru of the Beat Generation. Jack Kerouac, Alan Ginsburg, William Burroughs, and Peter Orlovsky, among many others, joined him in Tangier in the late 1940s to experiment with new methods of writing, drugs, and marginal living. Elghandor visited Bowles in Tangier in April 1993 and had an extensive interview/debate with him, the first of its kind between a latter-day American Orientalist and an "educated Moroccan," the representative of a class that Bowles, in his cultural bias for atavism and primitivism, avoids and even despises. The purpose of this interview is to hear a non-European voice debating Paul Bowles on some pertinent, cultural questions that have always been left unasked by all previous interviewers of Bowles.

*Mr. Bowles, when you write, do you have a particular readership in mind?*

No, no, myself, my wife. I always gave her everything to read; she did not criticise; she always wanted to read everything before I sent it out, and I did the same with her. I did not have a particular mentality in mind, no.

*Did you ever consider that one day Moroccans would be among your readers also?*

No, I did not. I did not believe that anyone would ever translate me into Arabic. They have done, yes. This one, for instance, *Albustane* ["The Garden"]; it is a Moroccan translation by Ibrahim Al Khatib.

*Where do you place your writings within the nineteenth- and twentieth-century tradition of Orientalism?*

In the first place, I don't really know what Orientalism is. I think it's a kind of romantic association with what goes on in the Far East. I would not want to be called an Orientalist under any circumstances because I'm not.

*Why is that?*

Because my interest mainly is to describe what I thought was interesting here and what's interesting here is that which does not exist elsewhere. It's of no interest to describe a bus line, an apartment house, or a modern city. I would not mention Casablanca because that's not Morocco; it's a false Morocco, it's French, so that does not mean anything to me, no. My interest was not in explaining Moroccan culture; it's just in writing stories, writing novels which would be realistic but which would also contain material which would not be found in another country—that which is strictly Moroccan.

*Can we consider your writings also as an attempt at validating or valorising the atavistic side of this culture?*

Atavistic? Well, I am not sure I know what you mean by "atavistic."

*The primitive, the mythical, the intuitive, the instinctive, as opposed to the modern, the rational, the analytical.*

Well, are there other sides? Of course, I don't consider Morocco a primitive country at all—it isn't, and myths exist everywhere. I don't know. I wouldn't know how to answer that. Would you mind asking that question again?

*Is your focus on the mythical, the irrational and the spiritual in this culture meant to provide an antidote, a cure, an answer to the so-called "ills of Western civilization and progress?"*

Is this for the readers? An antidote? Well, not really, no. . . . Perhaps something of interest, that which interests a reader in New York or any world capital, but the word "mythical" bothers me. What are the myths? What myths are there in Morocco?

*No, not in the sense of mythology. Mythical in the sense of irrational, intuitive, and spiritual, as opposed to logical, Cartesian thinking.*

The West could do with some of that, yes. . . . Intuitive thinking, rather than Cartesian. That wasn't my purpose. I never had any purpose at all. I was never trying to show anything or prove anything. I am trying to write narrative. That narrative took place generally here in North Africa, often Morocco, not always. And obviously one looks for realistic details. One has to provide them in one's narrative without even thinking they would be there. And those realistic details might have to do with beliefs as well as actual situations. Like *Aicha Kandicha*<sup>1</sup>—How many men are married to her in Morocco? Thirty-five thousand, I believe, no?

*I'm not sure about that either.*

How do you mean? Do you think it's fewer?

*I don't believe in Aicha Kandicha.*

Naturally, you don't [laughs]. I've met people who are married to her, and many people have met her around here. I don't know about the South, but here in the North and the Rif, the *Jbel*, thousands of people, not only believe in her, they have seen her and know people who have married her. I've had them point out:

"Do you see that man walking? He's married to *Aicha Kandicha*." Well, he'll be walking. . . . They're always walking all alone, looking down.

*Are they serious when they say these things about Aicha Kandicha?*

Oh, they believe it thoroughly, oh, naturally, yes.

*What kind of people are they?*

Well, they're almost always illiterate, never studied, probably are quite religious. At the same time also, I would say, a little abnormal in their behavior—asocial—they don't want to be with people, but there are a lot of Moroccans like that. They sit in a café by themselves. They won't talk. Then, they suddenly get up and go out.

*Would you consider your non-fiction writings about Morocco anthropological in any sense?*

Well, they could be considered so. I don't mean them to be, but they could be.

*After such a long stay in Morocco, you must have witnessed a major transformation of Moroccan society and culture, especially after Moroccan Independence. And the result is this acculturation, this hybridisation of culture, of which you clearly do not approve . . .*

I don't approve of any hybridization, naturally.

*All right, why do you think, then, that Westernization and hybridisation are not in the best interest of this society?*

Oh, I don't know whether it is or not. It may be. I doubt it, because the result would be that people would be neither Moroccan nor European—in between. That's not a very good situation. They're not sure which culture they really belong to. It's better to stay where one is than to try to be someone else, I think. Yeah, although you asked me if I think it has been for the good of society? Is that it? I don't care about society, I'm afraid; it doesn't matter. No, I don't think in those terms. I think in terms of people, individuals but not society, because "society" implies "people together," people living together. I don't believe people

do live together, or have any connection with each other. Everyone is by himself, as he finds out when he's on his death bed that he's always been by himself. But of course, I'm someone with no family and no friends, so it's a little different. I've never been part of, never considered myself part of any society. . . . Not American, and certainly not here—not Moroccan. How could I be? I'm a tourist. A tourist never becomes part of a society he's visiting. No, he may think he is, but he's not. So I know that I'm an American, but I don't like America. I never go there. I haven't been there in 26 years, and I hope never to go again. That's enough. I mean I was born in New York and brought up there, and the city has gone completely to pieces. It would be better if it didn't exist at all, and a nice atom bomb would finish it off. I would be pleased, except that my money is there in a bank [laughs]. And it wouldn't be so good.

*Have the North Africans misunderstood or misused the attributes of Western civilization, progress and development, as you often claim?*

Well, they're inclined to approve of that which is least admirable in European culture. What they like is gasoline stations, television, airplanes. But those are just gadgets. They have nothing to do with life. I don't think so. They're a nuisance in the world. . . . Even the telephone. I won't have a telephone. I have no television [laughs]. I don't want any connection with the outside world. Yes, it's subjective, of course, but you're interviewing me, so my answers are going to be subjective, of course.

*But in your writing, sometimes you say that Moroccans are misusing the attributes and constructs of Western civilization, like they haven't grasped its essence, and they have, therefore, misused it.*

Well, I don't know if they misused it. How does one use it properly, whatever it is one is using? I don't know really what the word "misuse" means in this context.

*You claim that they only go for its surface, its veneer, façade, and decor.*

That's necessary, obviously. It has to be. How are they going to approach it any other way since it's not their culture, although they consider it their culture. I mean, Moroccans consider that

gasoline and automobiles are perfectly, naturally Moroccan, but they're not.

*Your ignoring of Arabo-Islamic institutional, written culture—its poetry, its prose, its philosophy, and its scripturalist theology, and your exclusive concentration on the oral, the folkloric, the visual, the mystic, the intuitive, and cult orders have created in your writings a biased, incomplete, sometimes even a lopsided and erroneous view of Arabo-Islamic culture.*

Yes, but Morocco is not part of Islam. Morocco is not Arab, is it? It's Berber.<sup>2</sup> It's a Berber country invaded by the Arabs, ruined by the Arabs, I think. I think it would have been much better for Morocco if the Arabs had never come here at all and just left the Berbers by themselves, and not try to hybridize them. Of course, it's true, I mean, thousands, millions I suppose, of Moroccans are *mestizos*.

*Do you think that Berber culture had been faring very well before the advent of the Arabs?*

Before the arrival of Moulay Idriss? I have no idea: I wasn't here. I can't imagine what it would be like, what it had been like before they arrived. It was not very advanced. It wasn't very evolved, no. But then what difference does it make?

*But you have always favoured Berber culture, music, and their so-called "pre-Islamic rituals and practices," which you term as "the Cult of Pan," over the more recent institutional Arab culture that, you think, has been imposed on them.*

Well, who can write? It seems that Berbers have never been encouraged to write anything—even if they knew how, because they didn't use the language of the Koran. All religions drive me crazy. I hate Christianity; I don't like Islam; I don't like Buddhism; I don't like any orthodoxies. And what the Berbers had before I don't know what it was, really. I suppose it was anarchy. That's all right. They used to kill each other from village to village. That seems natural to me. In fact, it went on in the Rif up until the twenties, probably even up until 1956. The concept of anarchy still had a certain amount of power. Now, I'm afraid not; now it's under Rabat [the Moroccan Capital]. What can we do?

Morocco has become like any other country—yeah, any other third-world country. Obviously, any writer who believes as I do is bound to write what you've called "lopsided" versions [laughs] of the culture, because I don't consider the Arab culture of any importance at all. I don't think Morocco is an Arab country. I know it's not an Arab country. It's a country where Arabic has been forced onto the culture. Also Islam was forced onto the Berbers. You can't do anything about that.

*Well, saying this is like saying that North America is not a European country, culturally speaking of course.*

It's not; it's an Indian country, of course. I hope some day the Indians will take over.

*But the present mainstream culture of Morocco now is Arabo-Islamic, and that in North America is European—so to speak.*

Is it? European?

*Isn't it? Undeniably, American society is mainly an amalgam of ethnic cultures that trace their roots to a dozen European groups—the Italians, the Irish, the Germans, the Scandinavians, etc.*

Oh, yes. All those immigrants, including the Indo-Chinese, people from Vietnam, God knows where, but that does not make it a European country at all. I hope it won't become one.

*Isn't culture defined by the rules and dictates of the majority? In other words, aren't the dominant ideologies and cultural constructs what give a country its cultural identity?*

Well, that's an idea. It's an idea of someone who believes in democracy, but I don't believe in democracy. It's all wrong. It's not human. And if one [laughs] thinks that the majority of any place is an important part of it, then, obviously one is someone for whom democracy is an ideal. But what is democracy? I don't know. It's a society where the desire of the majority overcomes the desire of the minority. Well, might makes right, yes?

*Is not democracy praiseworthy, at least in the sense that it brings order instead of anarchy?*

Is order better than anarchy?

*Very often it is, I think.*

It can be. I agree with you, sure. Where there is no order, there is no progress, but who wants progress?

*Also, whenever there is anarchy, there is instability and violence.*

There is, but violence is what the human race is based on, what it consists of. It always has been. I don't know; it's a point of view.

*Between your life and your writings, I personally find an unmistakable inconsistency—if not a downright contradiction.*

But, what is my life? It's of no interest. Sorry, go on.

*While you advocate primitivism, spirituality, myth, intuition, and atavism, at the same time, you criticize what you see as the illogical inconsistencies and absurdities of the collective and individual, North African mind. In other words, you speak highly of magic, cults, paranormal phenomena, and any other pre-Cartesian pattern of thinking. However, in your life, you prefer to lead a totally different existence, one constructed around the complacent world of music, painting, publication, travels, and the cultured circles of expatriates. How do you rationalize this inconsistency, Mr. Bowles?*

I don't see that there is any particular contradiction. You think it's wrong for a writer to approve of a primitive situation unless he partakes of it, is that it? No writer can. In other words, if you write at all, you are not primitive. There is of course an enormous disparity; it's a necessary one if one is going to do anything, like music, painting, writing. . . . What shall we do? In other words, there shouldn't be anyone writing about primitive society? No?

*But you prefer it to an organized, developed society, and at the same time you keep your distance from it. While you valorize marginal subculture, recommend it, write about it, record and translate it, you remain outside it, an enchanted, distant observer who never fails to pass his strictures on it whenever its illogic or inconsistencies touch his organized personal life.*

In other words, you connect the writer with what he writes. But for me, there is no connection at all. I have always tried to keep my life absolutely separate. But I have always become annoyed when people say: "but is this at all autobiographical?" And I



always say: "absolutely not; I am not in it; I don't exist." I always believe that. I am not a person; I don't exist, but I am a machine.

*In other words, you don't practise what you preach and praise. You've chosen to lead a life different from what you write about, or recommend.*

Of course, naturally. That seems quite natural to me; otherwise, I would not write at all. But I don't know what connection a writer's life has with what he writes. I don't see that there is any.

*Let me rephrase my idea. You seem to be saying that mysticism—this magic, these cults, these beliefs in something like Aicha Kandicha of which you have always spoken highly and extensively—is good.*

No, it's not good, and it's not bad either; it exists. Is there any difference between good and bad? I don't know, I don't think so. Between good and evil, desirable and undesirable? There is a difference between life and death, yes. Beyond that, I don't see any of those opposites existing. What is good? Maybe you should say it again. I'm not sure. You use the word "good!"

*Well, you have always written about the mythical, the mystic, cults, magic, and so on, about Moroccan culture, and you have given the idea that this is preferable and desirable to any rational, logical systems of thoughts of Western culture. Yet, you have lived here, and you have sometimes been bothered by what you see as the "inconsistencies and the illogic" of the Moroccan mind. When the air conditioner in a hotel room didn't work, you didn't like it. If the service at a restaurant was not good, you were bothered by it. When you heard a Moroccan say that an airplane works by magic, you didn't like that either. You took great exception to all of this.*

No, no, no. And besides, it has really nothing to do with Morocco. When I write about Thailand or Sri Lanka or India, I express the same ideas in regard to the entire world. It's not that I believe that Morocco is different from some other place. No, I don't. I live here. That's all. Unfortunately, I don't want to live here, but I'm here, and I haven't the energy to go somewhere else. Besides, I wouldn't know where to go. I think life here is just as good, much better than Europe, infinitely better than America. What

else is there? I lived in Mexico several years. I don't think I'd want to go back there, so there's really nowhere I want to go. But that's personal; it's got nothing to do with my writing.

*Mohamed Choukri says that for you, Morocco has ceased to exist ever since 1956, the year of Moroccan Independence. Is this true?*

I think that's a strange way of putting it: "ceased to exist?" No, no.

*Ceased to be of importance?*

To whom?

*To your way of life, to your philosophy.*

I don't have a philosophy, no. I don't know. You see, I've never considered I'd live in Morocco. Tangier is not part of Morocco. It's international. I've lived here for many years. I came in 1931, went through all the thirties and the forties, part of the fifties, living in an international city which had nothing to do with, or very little to do with Morocco. Now, I'm living in Morocco. It's very difficult. It's no longer international. Naturally, I wish it were international again, of course, but I can't get out, not really. It's impossible, so I'll stay here, living a non-Moroccan life until I die. We don't know when that'll be. It might be very soon. It might be later; it doesn't matter. That's all. I'm trying to make it clear that I didn't live here because it was in Morocco. I like to visit Morocco from Tangier. Yes, I did, of course. I went all over, many times . . . and Algeria . . . until 1954, I began at Tiziouzou . . .

*Choukri also made a comment that for you Morocco doesn't go beyond being a land of exotica and curiosities, and that everything else that came into this culture after Independence is not worth one's attention.*

After Independence? No, no, since the ninth century. That's what I'd say. It's got nothing to do with 1956. No, it's ever since the invaders from the East came and ruined the Berbers. It's the same thing as in the United States: When the Europeans arrived, they ruined the culture, destroyed everything. They did this all over America, not only in the United States, all the way down to Argentina. They ruined everything, but that's just what Europeans do.

*Haven't the French also tried to destroy this culture?*

No, the French tried to preserve it. It was the Moroccans who went ahead and destroyed what the French had done. What the French did was building fairly good roads for their tanks so that they could get them out fast, and they built hospitals in front of which Moroccans would not even walk. They went all the way around, a mile, so as not to pass the hospital because they believed that people were waiting there to pull them in and then torture them. People have told me that again and again, well, 50, 60 years ago. But it's the same thing. They don't believe that now, I don't think.

*Mohammed Choukri accuses you of taking Morocco only as what it offers in terms of exoticism and curiosity and the decor that comes with it.*

Well, this is Choukri talking, yes? He's been ruined by something brought in by European culture and that's Whiskey, but apart from that [laughs], he accuses me of all sorts of things. Some woman came here from Canada. She edited a magazine called *La Tribune Juive*, and in that Choukri wrote a long criticism of me saying that I was a thief, that I had stolen from everyone, that I had stolen from him, that I was a vampire—incredible accusations! He has no reason for them. We were on perfectly good terms, but he must have been [laughs] inebriated that day when he told this Jewish lady all that, and, of course, she published it all, and then she brought it to me from Canada. And she said: "In the next issue, we would like a rebuttal. We would like you to answer Mr. Choukri." I said: "I haven't any intention of doing that. No, I don't want to be involved in a confrontation with Choukri because he makes no sense. Why bother?" I think he is a very good writer. Yeah, he has an enormous talent, but [laughter] he also has a talent for inventing.

*Does Morocco have anything to offer a person like you except exoticism and curiosities?*

I don't know what you mean by "exoticism" and "curiosities," really. "Exoticism" is that which is not of one's own country. Well, it is exotic in that sense, so is England very exotic, so is all of Europe, so is the entire world. . . . It's all exotic for an American. "Curiosity," what does that mean?

*I am talking in terms of what is marginal, what is not established, what is not institutional, what is not mainstream culture.*

What is left from the past, that is "curious." Well, what interests me is that which doesn't exist in America. There are parts in France, where you have tremendous importance of magic in the society, where people kill each other with the magic, the *Bocage*, no? Yeah. But there's not much magic left in the world, I'm afraid. Yes, here in Africa, yes, some in Asia. There's a little left in south-western United States, but wherever there is any, the organizers, that is society, will do its best to stamp it out. Well, they're trying to stamp out that which is human, that's all, in favour of the intellect, which is not very human. It has grown since we started walking on two legs, of course. I don't think it was very important when we were going on all fours, but I suppose going on all fours is a natural way for human beings to live. In other words, let's go back to non-existence, that's my idea, to the past. That's what the readers who object to my writing mean, no?

*Are magic and myth necessary in man's life?*

Necessary? I don't know. It's like religion. Is it necessary? It's an invention. What is God? It's an invention of man. Magic is an invention of man. Everything is an invention of man, but man didn't invent God when he was going on four legs.

*But is it a necessary "invention"?*

Apparently, because he did it. Whatever mankind does is necessary for him, so God is necessary for mankind. Religion is necessary because it is an invention of his, yeah.

*Do you mean that modern man, because he has lost this spiritual anchorage, this belief in religion, he has lost meaning and purpose to his life?*

Because life is more difficult without it, and because it was easy for him while he believed in God, but once he doesn't, I think, existence becomes more difficult for he takes everything on his own shoulders. There's no Father in Heaven to appeal to. There's no one watching. No one cares. No one gives a damn what anybody does, so it's more difficult.

*Mr. Bowles, you have pretty much avoided the Moroccan cultural elite and their world, and for that reason, I think, they have avoided you . . .*

Naturally.

*And have even said some harsh things about you . . .*

Absolutely.

*And you about them.*

No, never! I've never said anything harsh about the Moroccans. Why should I?

*Do you think that both you and/or they are justified in exchanging criticism?*

Well, I don't, so I don't think the question is valid. They have criticised me in print. I've never criticised them in print, never. Perhaps in conversation, but not in print.

*Well, you have referred to them as the educated Moroccans who don't mean much to you.*

Don't mean much? First of all, I'm ignorant of their language. That means a lot. I'm illiterate. I would expect them to object to me and to my point of view, and they always will, of course.

*Have you ever reconsidered, or recanted what you had said earlier in your career, in your non-fiction works mostly, about Oriental and North African cultures?*

I don't know. Should I? I don't know what I have said. I don't think I have ever attacked the culture. You think so, obviously.

*No, I don't think you have ever attacked it, but I know that there are many aspects of the Other's culture that you did not approve of, that you criticised, like Westernization and the drive for progress. Have you ever reconsidered your views on such matters?*

No, why should I? I still think that the Europeans are ruining Morocco and have ruined it, so I know I won't take that back, why should I? What is a Moroccan? I think if it's someone born here and educated in Paris, therefore, I don't want to know him—you

understand this. I would not want to know him simply because I would not understand him, and he certainly would not understand me. He will disagree with me. It's a lack, of course, in me, but since I am not a sociologist, I don't care about Moroccan society. I don't care about any society in the world [laughs]. Since I am not a sociologist, and I am only a fiction writer, that's all that interests me while I write. Whether it is true or not, it does not matter. Sometimes it is, sometimes it is not.

*I was just thinking that if you could not read Arabic, you certainly could read French and Spanish, and there is so much material written in these languages about Morocco and also by Moroccans in fields like literature, philosophy, or cultural history. My question is that you have always had the opportunity to complete the picture you have developed of North Africa and its culture, but you have never showed any interest in the autochthonous written heritage and standard culture. Why such proclivity?*

Well, the written culture is a completely different matter; it's a *terra incognita* to me, and I have never made any effort to familiarize myself with what educated Moroccans knew or did. I could not write about it; I can only write about what interests me, and what interests me always is that which does not exist elsewhere.

*In other words, what interests you does not go beyond the visual, the oral, and the ritual in this culture—not its written side.*

Yes, in any language and not because it's Arabic. I have always been anti-intellectual, and I still I am. I am ignorant and uneducated in all those things that I don't share with educated people, Moroccans or Europeans, or anyone else. They have had experiences that I have not had, but that does not invalidate what I say when I write. It just makes it, as you said [laughs] "lopsided." Well, it is, true. My view of the entire world is lopsided. I don't want that which is good; I don't want progress; I don't want order. All those things bother me, yeah, personally. They may not bother the next man, probably they won't. But they bother me. It's that simple.

*Among the criticism levelled at your views is that you have always considered the North Africans as a mass, a collective consciousness, and,*

*accordingly, you have denied them their individuality, subjectivity, and their humanity. Is not this strategy the same mistake that nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and French Orientalists have made?*

What you say I do about Morocco is what I do about the entire world, so, it is not restricted to North Africa or Morocco. I can say the same thing about America; I deny them individuality, but I don't really. You can't deny individuality to an individual that you've met and that you're talking to. It's impossible, but if you consider them *en masse*, you don't bother to give them individuality. How can you? I mean, you speak of 30 million people; how can you give them individuality? You can only give it to one person—one at a time.

*When you talk about culture, you generalise and say this is the Moroccan culture, or this is the Arabo-Islamic one; whereas, there are many trends, tribes, and cultural constructs within Morocco. For instance, you see "maraboutism" and brotherhood cults ("Issawa, Hmadsha"<sup>3</sup>) and their practices as mainstream Islamic practices.*

That's untrue. It's not Islam; Islam disapproves of all these brotherhoods entirely, I know that, and that's why I like them, don't you understand? [a long laugh]

*Maybe, if you didn't use the word "Islam," you used the word "religion," qualifying such practices as the "Moroccan Religion."*

"Religion?" Well, it isn't; it is anti-religion, except that the people who practise it believe it's religious, and do it in the name of religion. I find that interesting. In America, we have *Holy Rollers* and *Shakers* and God knows what, but no one is going to say that that is religion. There isn't any religion. Religion has almost died out in America. There are a few Catholics and Protestants left, yes, and a few Born-again people who should all be exterminated, but then I feel that orthodox, religious persons should be exterminated. That includes the Pope, that includes the Archbishop of Canterbury, that includes everybody. Yeah, all they do is confuse people, keep them from seeing that which is real. That's a personal point of view. I don't think it has anything to do with my writing. Of course, you could say writing comes out of the person.

*You believe a Westerner has a lot to learn from North African culture, its resignation, its belief in predestination, its simplicity, its contemplation of life and death, its mysticism. Don't you think the opposite is also true?*

What is that?

*Namely that the Other has equally a lot to learn from Western civilization—its logic, its rational thoughts, its technology . . .*

Well, if Moroccans learn all that, if all Moroccans learn all that, they won't be Moroccans anymore, will they? What does it mean to be Moroccan? It means to have been born, to live in this part of North Africa. Yeah, but I don't think Moroccans should learn anything about logic or the various things you mentioned here. I do think that Europeans could learn a good deal about the attitude to life from the North Africans—I am using now the "mass" sense [laughs].

*But if the Other stays the way he is, if he were to shun the attributes of Western civilization, as you suggest, don't you think he would remain mired in ignorance, disease, backwardness, suffering?*

Where is all this backwardness, disease, suffering? You say that as though you thought that was the case. Not now.

*Well, I am speaking hypothetically, of course. If you don't have access to education, if you are illiterate, if your system of thought doesn't follow causal patterns, you are bound to stay trapped in ignorance, and misery. You don't build hospitals; you don't build networks of communication. In general, you don't improve your conditions of life*

I don't want to say that I hope Moroccans will live in poverty, squalor, disease, suffering, certainly not, no, but I don't think that that is the alternative. Is it?

*Well, at least, if one is educated and if one follows a healthy system of thinking, one would lead a comparatively comfortable life, free of squalor, and misery. Don't you think so?*

Yes, probably. The entire situation is so impossible now; there's no helping it. The entire world is going downhill and soon will go out. There's no future for anything on earth, and now I don't think one can stop Moroccans from becoming logical, no. They



will become logical because they want to. Yeah, and of course logic isn't strictly a European ability, quality. I'm sure plenty of people here in the past knew what logic was and thought according to its laws, no? I think so.

*In your fiction, the North African element and character seem to be portrayed more out of romantic inspiration than realism; Amar and Slimane ["The Spider's House" and "The Time of Friendship"] are larger than life, and are given roles incompatible with their social, educational, and cultural milieu and dimensions. The desert and a "medieval" city like Fez are depicted in the most romantic of terms. Is this a fair criticism of your style?*

Romantic? I don't understand the word, really. *Fez*? I wouldn't want to live in Fez, but that is a bullet for you to use against me. I wouldn't want to live in Fez. I'd lived there often, but always at the Palais Jamai, which is a good hotel. So, naturally, I think it is an unhealthy city, unfortunately. I love to look at it. I love to wander. I love to spend months there, but I always get out in the end and come back here.

*Your portrayal of the native character is done more out of romanticism than out of reality, isn't it?*

No, I don't think so. I don't know what is romantic about my characters or my situations, and what is unrealistic. You tell me.

*Well, when I read those texts, I saw that a person like Amar or Slimane, street waifs, urchins and strays, have been given thoughts and mind sets incompatible with their realities and their conditions.*

Amar was the son of a *faqih* [Muslim religious scholar], and Slimane the son of a soldier, and that's what they got from their fathers. Amar, of course, I was writing a novel about him. Did you say they have been given roles bigger than they are?

*Well, I think, they have been given a philosophy and a way of life incompatible with the persons that they are, being the illiterate kids that they are. For one thing, you have put in their mouths sophisticated utterances and highbrow ideas about religion, life, and death that do not match their intellectual capacities.*

In the case of Amar, he was not an ordinary kid off the street. His father was extremely strict, often did not allow him out into the street. . . . Slimane was just a person who did not express any ideas at all; he just listened to the Swiss lady.

*In your depiction of cultural encounters, you always tend to bring together educated, alienated, and more sophisticated, middle-class exiles — Stenham [“The Spider’s House”], Fräulein Windling [“The Time of Friendship”], Port and Kit [“The Sheltering Sky”], Nelson Dyar [“Let It Come Down”]—with native illiterate youths and strays. Is this a fair formula for cultural encounters? Was there no other possible alternative for this encounter across cultures?*

Well, the Moroccans that they meet are the kind that they would naturally meet. They would often look for them, for the European, in order to get something — money. It’s just realistic. How are these Europeans going to wander in the street and come across educated Moroccans? If they do, they won’t know who they are. They won’t talk to them naturally. The educated Moroccans won’t speak to the tourists, and vice versa. The tourists won’t know who is educated and who is not. But they ran up against dozens of hustlers in the street, and that’s who they are. It’s simply my way of thinking — a realistic encounter.

*Haven’t you ever thought of writing some kind of fiction where you bring together the usual educated, middle-class, European artist and, let us say, a Moroccan intellectual, theologian, or professor?*

No, but it would be a struggle; it would not be an encounter; it would be a war, naturally. There would be no friendship there. I don’t think it could be. I don’t think that the Europeans are educated, are they?

*Well, at least more educated than the native elements they meet in your fiction.*

Well, that’s because they come from countries where education is supplied, is given them, but that’s not a feather in their hat. If they are educated, they are educated only as anyone else is in a democratic country where everything is the same, where democracy means identity rather than equality. But democracy doesn’t

mean identity. You don't have to be like the next one. But these people I bring over here always are. They have the most, as you say, middle-class ideas. They're not educated at all, not sophisticated or cultured. I don't think so.

*Well, at least, you could have brought somebody on a par with them, on their level. You could have, for instance, in "The Spider's House," brought the character of Allal El Fassi [a Moroccan leader in the 1950s struggle for independence from the French, and also a voiceless character in this novel] to meet John Stenhem, for instance, and the debate might have taken a more interesting turn.*

But that would not provide action. I don't write books about discussions, no. I write books in which violence always erupts and takes over. It's the violent element, not just about North Africa, wherever, whatever I write about. Violence is there because that's what it is. That's what the world is, so I don't know whether I could write a book about it. I doubt that I could. It wouldn't be any good [laughter]. If I wrote a book about a native philosopher, or thinker, or whatever, he'd have no interest whatever. Therefore, I don't think I could do it.

*All encounters in your fiction end on a note of failure and separation or in total confusion and misunderstanding, mostly on the part of the Westerner. Do you generally attribute this pattern of failure to the "disorientation" of the expatriate mind or rather to the "abstruseness and the unfathomableness" of the native behaviour and culture?*

No, it's always the fault of the tourist or the traveller, of course. They get involved in situations they have no right to be involved in. They go to countries they should stay out of and about which they are completely ignorant. They don't even bother to find out about them before they go. They don't really know where they're going, or where they are. Of course, it's their fault. It's not the fault of the people who live there, no.

*There is also the element that the Western traveller comes here with preconceived ideas and wrong expectations of the native element, and that's why confusion and misunderstanding occur. It's like the case of Fräulein Windling and Slimane.*

Oh, well, that's just one little case, but besides that Fräulein Windling had been going there for many years, so she's scarcely a tourist any longer. Even in spite of that, she made a great error, no? There was something else in that question that I don't remember. What was it? Oh, I see, yes. You said they come here with high expectations of the Moroccan mind. But they come here without any interest in the Moroccan mind. It couldn't interest them less. No, no, they come here hoping to see the *Djemaa el Fana*<sup>4</sup> [laughter], hoping perhaps to see a *Jilala* performance, things like that, but the mind? I don't think they have any idea of the mind. I don't even know whether Moroccans, or Spanish or Italians have minds. They don't think in those terms. They want to see the leaning Tower of Pisa. They want to see St Peter's. That's really why they travel. It's certainly not to encounter the mind of the natives or of the "indigene."

*Do you also attribute this lack of understanding between these poles to the lack of balance between these two elements, the Western and the native? One being richer, more educated, and more sophisticated than the other?*

Well, of course, when there is confusion, when the visitors manage to escape alive. Yes, a lack of balance. In an ideal story, the visitors don't escape; they don't get out [laughs]—they're taken care of there. That's got nothing to do with the mind of the natives. It has to do with the mind of the tourist: what they expect and what they receive.

*How about outside circumstances, like the Moroccan and Algerian wars of independence in the case of Windling and Stenham, and the lack of trust between cultures in the case of the Professor? Do unfavourable social circumstances not play a role in the collapse of any possible syncretism?*

Naturally, they never trust each other. Why should they? They know that they are enemies. I mean, Moslems know that the Christians are their enemies, and vice versa, and they have been for centuries, and they probably will go on as long as there are any Moslems or Christians, which I hope [laughs] won't be long [a long laugh]. That's all I can say.

*Mr. Bowles, do you think you have given a fair, true, and correct picture of North Africa?*

No, I think what I have written is generally realistic, yes. I think I have left out a great deal, oh yes, an enormous amount, but I do that on purpose; it's not a mistake. I had no intention of giving a fair picture. You seem to think I meant to write serious and profound studies.

*What do you say to Moroccan critics who claim that you have portrayed Morocco in the most negative of terms, and that you haven't been sympathetic or sensitive or understanding of their culture, their social, political, or economic plights and their struggle? What do you say to them?*

I don't answer them. I have nothing to do with their economic plight or their society or their religion. I'm a tourist here. I'm outside all that. I don't want to be in it. How could I be even if I wanted. No, no. So, I don't answer if they say unpleasant things, like Tahar Benjelloun, I keep quiet. What can I say?

*Do you think you have been insensitive and unsympathetic to Morocco and its culture, as it is often claimed?*

No, no, I don't think so because it's my privilege to write what I want to write. I'm not writing about Moroccan culture. It's outside my ken.

*How would you like the North African people to judge you?*

Judge me? [laughs]. Well, I would like to be invisible to them. I'd like that they know nothing about me whatever. I've also tried to stay away from educated Moroccans. I know they'll have that reaction. So, why should I bother about them?

*What advice would you give to a Moroccan reader who is about to read your fiction and non-fiction for the first time?*

I would tell him not to read it.

*Why is that?*

Because he won't like it; he will object to it, of course. If he wants to read something that he will object to, that's his privilege, but I would not advise it.

*Do you think that the volumes you have translated from the so-called "Moroccan oral tradition"—those narrated by Mrabet, Layachi, and*

*Choukri—give a fair representation of Moroccan society? In other words, are they representative of this culture?*

No, it's just about like what I write, yes. They knew what I liked from the beginning. When they began to record things for me, they saw my reactions, they saw that I liked certain things, such as violence, and bloodshed and hatred, and so on. So they specialized in that, in general. I don't think Choukri did that, no. His long novel I translated, *For Bread Alone*, had enough of violence and unpleasantness to please me, and he knew that. I don't know whether he did it that way on purpose or not, because he started out by writing one chapter. It was a short story. My British publisher was here, and I had published it in a magazine in New York as a short story, and the British publisher did not know that, and he said, "I assume this is the first chapter of a novel." We were together, he, Choukri and I, and Choukri said, "yes" [laughs]. Then the British publisher said, "I would like to give you a contract right now," and he pulled it out. Choukri was pleased, naturally. Who would not be? So, he decided it was not a short story, and he was going to make a novel out of it. He came every day for a year while I translated it [laughs]. I was very pleased; I liked it. I thought it was good. I still think so, and I don't understand how he could do it, because, as far as I know, and if we believe him, he was completely unlettered up to the age of 20, and then he learned proper Arabic and how to write all in about two years, and the next thing I know he was teaching [laughs]. That's unusual. He is an unusual man, there is no doubt about that.

*In your fiction when the central theme is not cultural encounters, it is either Gothicism, or the psychology of predation, terror, and violence, or it is magic, cult practices, and superstitious beliefs. What is the reason behind this thematic pattern?*

Magic worked with me and my family, I must say. Of course it was not *Tseheur*. It's *Tseukal*,<sup>5</sup> and that's poison of course. Often I have Moroccans giving Europeans poison or putting them under spells, and so on, which is part of Moroccan life. It certainly is here. I don't know if it is in Casablanca, probably not. I don't know, maybe in the *bidonvilles* because it's obviously something to

do with the lower strata of society. Educated women I doubt very much if they give their husbands *Tseukal*. Maybe, if the husband is going to leave a lot of money [laughs].

*North Africa, you said once, still lacks a homogeneous identity, a national consciousness, being made of many trends and cultures, many languages, many ethnic entities, many ideologies. Do you still think that this diversity can only lead to a crisis of identity and national consciousness?*

Well, it is not national. It's three nations, very unfriendly one with the other. We know that Algeria would like nothing better than to foment a revolution in Morocco, and change the political system there. . . . It's well known . . . I would not say it could possibly be one nation, no. Why should it be? I don't see [laughs] any reason why it should be, any more than I see any reason why Europe should do what she is doing, trying to make one nation out of all of Europe, completely absurd [laughs], considering the hostility that each one feels towards his neighbour, and that of course comes from having nations. . . . So, I don't think that question makes much sense. I don't see that it's desirable that there should be a homogeneous mass. It isn't, and how are you going to make it that way? By insisting that everyone learn Arabic? But there are so many millions of people who don't know a word of Arabic in Algeria, in Morocco. Maybe they'll learn, I don't know. All you can do is put them into schools and make them stay there. But that takes a lot of money, and I don't think the government has it.

*Do you think Morocco has a national identity?*

It had. I don't know if it has now; it has become part of Europe, of course. Yes, I feel it there. It's rather like China or Mexico or India even; they have national identities. But of course it's losing it, day by day, very fast. What's interesting is that in Japan, for instance, where the people have Europeanised themselves to a great extent, people have remained Japanese. The businessman comes home from the bank, or wherever his office is, immediately undresses and puts on the national uniform, yeah, which is right. Yes, because they have retained their identity, culturally and in every other way. If other countries could do that, it would

be fine. I don't know why the Japanese were able and the Pakistanis were not.

*What do you say to the new criticism levelled at the tradition of Orientalism. People like Edward Said, Anwar Abdelmalek, Abdullah Laroui,<sup>6</sup> see Orientalism as a shortsighted tradition, full of generalities, over-romantic, sometimes even colonial and racist in its pronouncements on other peoples.*

I don't know, I don't really know who is Orientalist and who is not. I did not read that kind of literature; I have seen reproductions of Orientalist paintings, fairly absurd. Probably the writing is also absurd, I don't know. Certainly it is patronising and racist.

*Mr. Bowles, thank you very much for answering my questions.*

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Aicha Kandicha*: a she-devil in Moroccan folklore and superstition.
- <sup>2</sup> The Berbers: The first non-Arab natives of North Africa.
- <sup>3</sup> *Issawa, Hmadsha, Jilala*: Moroccan cult orders.
- <sup>4</sup> *Djema el Fana*: a square in Marrakesh, famous among tourists for its colourful public performances, folklore, and storytelling.
- <sup>5</sup> *Tsheiw* and *Tseukal*: The first is a form of black magic, and the second is a magical love potion among lower classes of Morocco.
- <sup>6</sup> Edward Said, Abdullah Laroui, and Anwar Abdelmalek (Anouar Abdel-Malek) are foremost Arab culture historians who have studied and "demythified" the various trends of the European tradition of Orientalism.