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SOCIAL THOUGHT & COMMENTARY

Forgive Me Friend: Mohammed and Ibrahim

Emilio Spadola
Colgate University

Abstract

This essay examines my accidental conversion to Islam and its discomfoting consequences for my fieldwork in Morocco. While my conversion and my subsequent efforts to grasp its significance represents an awkward extreme, I use the episode to challenge similar tropes of friendship and obligation, accident and rapport in the American reflexive ethnographic tradition, especially in Morocco—one of the tradition's classic fieldwork sites. Focusing on my friendship with Mohammed (a Moroccan) and his efforts to negotiate my ambivalence, I argue that what remains underexplored in this ethnographic tradition and its thinking on friendship is the act of forgiving. [Keywords: Reflexive Anthropology, Mistake, Friendship, Forgiveness, Islam, Morocco, Conversation]

In Morocco I tend—like many American anthropologists—to seek rapport with a smile. Fassi retailers refer to American tourists by the code word *miska*—chewing gum—all teeth and lips. (British tourists, by contrast, are *ad-dam al-barid*—cold blood.) Yet, a Moroccan acquaintance of mine characterized Americans as tragically sad friends. The US is so enormous, he said, and everyone so mobile, that “you Americans are always ready to drop a friend.” He’s right, in my experience. The friendly first steps of rapport are, if not the opposite of friendship, a firm defense against it. Defense against the long-term obligations and demands of friendship may be why so many American ethnographers have focused on these themes in Moroccan social life. Perhaps, this is also why my dearest friend, Mohammed, assures me in his inimitable English: “Ibrahim, I have no *interest* in you.”

“Rapport” is, perhaps, anthropology’s most cherished concept, the *sine qua non* of fieldwork. Without rapport one merely observes from afar; with it, one participates. “That mysterious necessity of anthropological field work” (Geertz 1973:416), rapport evokes not so much friendship as utility—an intentional spontaneity, suspended between levity and labor, sheer calculation and mere tolerance. Nevertheless, Clifford Geertz famously commented that he and Hildred Geertz established rapport in Bali only by mistake. The Geertzes were present and observing as armed police raided an illegal cockfight. Instead of “pull[ing] out our papers”—which is to say, instead of their acting properly—the Geertzes fled (1973:416). Before this they had been intent on establishing rapport, “wander[ing] around, uncertain, wistful, eager to please” (1973:412). Fleeing the police was, in contrast, spontaneous and unintended, and the hospitality it established entirely “accidental.” And yet, Geertz notes, “it led to a sudden and unusually complete acceptance into a society extremely difficult for outsiders to penetrate” (1973:416).

In the later essay “From the Native’s Point of View,” Geertz debunked rapport as a “preternatural capacity to think, feel, and perceive like a native,” and advocated instead a technical and “a bit less magical” emphasis on “experience-near” concepts of personhood (Geertz 1983:56, 58). Yet the Geertzes’ Balinese ineptness suggests the converse: rapport freely emerges when the ethnographer fumbles, abandons technique; the magic of rapport is its emergence from accident. And precisely because it is “not a very generalizable recipe”—not a formal element of fieldwork—the mistake may lead to deeper ethnographic intimacy: their “accidental host,” writes Geertz (1973:416), “became one of my best informants.”

Experimental or reflexive ethnographies, especially those written on Morocco in the 1970s and 1980s, intentionally (at times, infamously) stretched the boundaries of rapport, drawing in part on Geertzian themes of accidental or unintended connections.¹ Their motivations surely differed; reflexive authors emphasized fieldworker-informant relations as messy, muddling, and, at best, negotiated, chiefly to refute ethnographers' authoritatively transparent recording of society and culture. But like Geertz, writers such as Paul Rabinow (2007), Vincent Crapanzano (1980), and Kevin Dwyer (1982) sought to humanize rapport—even, however tentatively, engaging informants as a kind of “friend.” They did so with evident difficulty, emphasizing the agonies rather than affections of Moroccan friendships—the “brinksmanship,” “domination,” and “submission” (Rabinow 2007:47-48), the “scheming, intriguing, and manipulation” so “cloying...to the Westerner” (Crapanzano 1980:78). And they recorded their own mistakes, accidents, and general failures of authoritative fieldwork form. But like the Geertz's magical accident, these failures of intention did not so much discredit their work as distinguish “real rapport”—friendship—as a formal condition of ethnographic inquiry.

In this piece I look at fieldwork and friendship in Morocco, and more specifically, at my dearest friend Mohammed and me and our mutual affection developed over the past 12 years of my periodic fieldwork and social visits in Fez. I explore these themes of friendship and fieldwork, of mistakes and unintended connections, between Mohammed and me, and in Rabinow's and Crapanzano's exemplary works of reflexive ethnography. In doing so, I suggest that what links friendship with mistakes in Morocco is what may come after the lapse, in a friend's forgiveness.

Mohammed and Ibrahim

I met Mohammed in Fez Medina in 1998. I was living in a Moroccan household near Ayn Azlitan, using doctoral funding to study Arabic after a summer at Middlebury. I was also meeting with *faux guides* to discuss the regulation of tourist guiding, the rise of unemployment in the 1990s, the novel regime of official guide credentialing, and persistent arrests and police brutality. A fellow doctoral student recommended I meet two *bazaaris* he knew. The first was dour, smoking cigarettes, sitting on a stool at the sunny front of a tiny shop amidst the rush of medina foot traffic. Some talk—no rapport—nothing more. I went looking for the other man,

who, the student said, worked in an enormous carpet shop between Moulay Idriss's tomb and the Qarawiyyin.

The door is hard to find, the passageway cool and narrow, the walls sweating. At a small wooden door a grim young man, with a scarred face, black hair and eyes, looks me over, then leads me to a back room off the dark main atrium (the yellow lights reserved for the arrival of customers and thus display). A group of older men sitting on a semi-circle of low benches facing a loom. They are dressed neatly, but in working clothes, rough woolen *jellabas* hanging on hooks; they exude labor and piety. A murmur of Moroccan *darija*, and a weaver, with a fringe of gray hair under a *taghiyya*, passing a yarn spindle under and over the warp of an emerging woolen carpet.

The floor is laid with blue and white square tile, the lower walls with ceramic *zellij*. Carpets lie draped over banisters, and little birds chirp and sing in cages hung high and low on nails along the walls. The room is cool, and the air thick with smoke from the mens' *kif* pipes, an economical mix of strong black tobacco and mild marijuana common in working class northern Morocco. Mohammed stands slowly to greet me, handing to another man his pipe, a long wooden stem tipped with a tiny clay bowl. He is my height, about 5'9", but ten years older, and thicker, with short graying brown hair, a square face and close-trimmed beard. Mohammed moves calmly and deliberately to face me, no excess smiling, nothing casual about him. (Years later watching David Simon's *The Wire*, I start at seeing Avon Barksdale—Mohammed's darker-skinned doppelganger.) Other men nod to me, and soon I am sitting, observing. A cushion is passed my way, and a hot glass of mint tea, which I hold, rim and base, with thumb and forefinger. Discussion continues, and unlike my usual domestic introductions in Fez, no one talks to me or seems concerned with me. Every few minutes a pipe is lit and passed; the low voices blending with bird songs and the sharp flick of a lighter. I understand little of the discussion of something apparently serious; the seated men are attentive to Mohammed's words.

At dusk, Mohammed leads me up three dark flights within this enormous carpet bazaar to a terrace overlooking the heart of Fez Medina, where we listen to the echoing call to *Salat al-Maghrib*. He speaks in high Arabic and modest English on the state's interest in tourism, yes, but emphasizes its neglect of social services. He points down to several visible ruins among the intimate crush of buildings—this one burnt down; another one collapsed, filling with garbage. For ten years these have been

slated for rebuilding, Mohammed explains. The street entrances have been nailed shut, notices posted, nothing else. Mohammed walks me down stairs and out to the cobblestone street just feet from the Qarawiyyin mosque. I leave with a new name, Ibrahim.

After one meeting, Mohammed and I have rapport, or something like it. He speaks openly, it seems to me. But I am not at all comfortable. A week later, I return to the carpet bazaar. Mohammed is accusatory. "Where have you been? You have been gone fully a week." I am accustomed to the affable guilt of acquaintances—"Finik? *Fin hada l-ghayba?*" *Where have you been? Where'd you disappear to?*—but this is serious. His manner is both didactic and familiar, *reproachful* in the manner of my elder Spadolas. I picture my twin uncles (firefighters), my grandfather—I imagine my Italian great grandfather even—who know me and rightly expect better of me; as with them, the toughness, the sheer masculinity is intimidating. And what's more, he is not a Spadola, and I am not at home. This serious and pious man, born in the Rif Mountains and thoroughly self-educated in Fez, *frightens* me.

Informants and Friends

The conventional term for a longtime fieldwork interlocutor, one to whom one grows close enough to establish rapport, is *informant*. It is evocative of *informer*, and given the aims of research, irreducibly so (Crapanzano 1980:144). Rabinow's critique of ethnographic knowledge criticizes informants' "self-conscious" and "unnatural" positions as cultural mediators, who must stand outside their culture to objectify it for the researcher (Rabinow 2007:38f, 47). At times, Rabinow accepts this as the necessary condition of ethnographic exchange as an "art" (2007:38); at another, he faults his informant's skillful mediation of culture as "resistance" to "further penetration" (2007:38, 27). He dismisses his informant and language teacher, Ibrahim, as:

a packager and transmitter of commodities and services, a middleman, a government translator of official messages. He was packaging Arabic for me as if it were a tourist brochure. He was willing to orient me to the fringes of the Moroccan community, to the Ville Nouvelle [the recent colonial city] of Moroccan culture, but there was a deep resistance on his part to any further penetration. (Rabinow 2007:27)

Rabinow's attempt at rapport with Ibrahim occasions a reference to friendship, but only as its opposite, as a Moroccan cultural practice of manipulation. Responding to his informant's scheme to prise money from him, Rabinow writes that Ibrahim "was simply testing the limits of the situation. Within Moroccan culture this is a standardized and normal thing to do." "I had been conceiving of him as a friend," he writes, whereas Ibrahim "had basically conceptualized me as a resource" (Rabinow 2007:28-29). Of course, given his criticism of ethnographic power, Rabinow's disavowal of interest seems doubly unjust. Is not the two men's relationship mutually—blatantly—instrumental? What of Rabinow's explicit aim of language skills and field data upon which to establish his research, and eventually himself as a scholar? The episode is nevertheless worthy of comment for its evocation of friendship as a disinterested relation, and more specifically, as the effect of accidental intimacy.

Rabinow engages with another young man, Ali, who, like Ibrahim, "tests" Rabinow, "pushing and probing" and launching "testing thrusts" to establish dominance over him (2007:38-39).² Yet over time, he writes, "I had established real rapport with [Ali], more as a friend than an informant" (2007:46). This is accomplished, however, not by following fieldwork norms, but by transgressing them, through committing "a grave professional mistake" (2007:45). Rabinow, still struggling with Arabic, still learning the cultural ropes, accompanies Ali to a wedding, mainly as chauffeur. Driving home, his resentment toward Ali overflows and Ali, feelings hurt, walks the remaining miles home.

Rabinow credits his transgression for the renewed intimacy. Rabinow (2007:49) apologizes to Ali; Ali forgives. And "from that point on, we got along famously." Moreover, his mistake permits Rabinow a deeper entry into prostitution and Sufi culture (2007:49). Rabinow credits his misstep for its "fortuitous congruence [with]...Moroccan cultural style," that is, with "brinksmanship" (2007:49). But, of course, its success also rests on Ali's gesture of forgiveness. Rabinow might have examined the messiness of fieldwork in terms of his friend's forgiveness. But Ali's gesture itself remains absent from his narration: "He began to come around...it was clear that we had reestablished our relationship" (Rabinow 2007:49).

In a subsequent chapter titled "Friendship," Rabinow (2007:142) describes befriending Driss ben Mohammed—who "had consistently refused to work as an informant"—"casually...almost accidentally." This very refusal, however, occasions Rabinow's most cherished insights into

Moroccan culture. Because ben Mohammed is not an informant but a friend, sharing “a certain trust” and “mutual respect” (2007:142), Rabinow freely expresses his troubled feelings on Islam and Muslims’ assertion of supremacy (2007:145). Rabinow’s previously dismissed axiom of fieldwork—“The informant is always right” (2007:45)—once again becomes true, for ben Mohammed’s “flustered” admission to such a feeling offers Rabinow pure, disinterested access to “*the* fundamental [Moroccan] cultural distinction, the Archimedean point from which all else turned”—“the division of the world into Muslim and non-Muslim” (2007:147). Reaching a point of “fundamental Otherness” (2007:162) with ben Mohammed, there is nothing left to exchange, and no reason to forgive. Kevin Dwyer rightly notes that while Rabinow considers ben Mohammed a friend, the man himself “disappears behind a number of cultural generalizations” (Dwyer 1982:278). This seems to be Rabinow’s point, however, since culture is friendship’s aporia, its condition and limit. And friends, like cultures, remain fixed and separate: “I had a strong sense of being American. I knew it was time to leave Morocco” (2007:148).

Like Rabinow’s work, Crapanzano’s (1980:144) writing calls our attention to the informant relation as a research construct, a formulaic relation that, bound to the fieldworker’s research “intention,” leaves the fieldworker “entrapped.” His view of friendship in the field likewise rests on the accidental transgression of these limits, and here too forgiveness plays an unexamined part. Like Rabinow (1975, 2007), Rosen (1984), and Eickelman (1976), Crapanzano (1980:78-80) ascribes to Moroccan friendship all the intention, compulsion, manipulation—in short, domination and submission—of fieldworker-informant rapport. If, for example, Crapanzano disagrees with Eickelman’s view of Moroccan affection as a continuous battle for domination, he complements it to show, like Hammoudi’s (1997) “master/disciple” framework, that intimacy involves a desire for subordination as well (1980:80). There simply is no pure friendship amongst Moroccans.

Crapanzano’s evident friendship with his informant, the sad and marginal Tuhami, works because he conscientiously enters into this exchange.³ More poignantly however, *Tuhami* (1980) ends with an evocation of their bond that rests on the Crapanzano’s failure to satisfy the demands, his failure of intention, and on, what seems to me, a silent plea for forgiveness.

Crapanzano (1980:173) has returned to New York. Tuhami has written to him, the letters conveying little content but a desire to exchange. Before Crapanzano travels again to Morocco, however, a letter from

Tuhami's half-brother informs him of Tuhami's death, and "asks for a work contract." The final lines of the book evoke Crapanzano's sadness and sense of failure.

Arriving in Meknes, I went to the factory where Tuhami had worked and learned that Tuhami had been dead for about a year. His boss was away, and the worker who told me about his death had not known him. The worker thought that Tuhami had perhaps had a bad liver. He died on the way to the hospital. I tried to find his stepbrother [sic], but no one at the address he had sent me had ever heard of him. I did not know his sister's address.

Oh, Tuhami, that is the way it is with men. (1980:173)

Crapanzano struggles with arriving too late. Tuhami has been dead for a year; the image of his death on the way to the hospital compounds a sense of Tuhami's marginality. Crapanzano's presence seems intended simply to make up for his absence, to touch Tuhami, by way of his family, by way of someone close. He cannot, however, and his last line—addressed *to* Tuhami—acknowledges his own awful human weakness, his arriving too late, not knowing enough or giving enough. Crapanzano's words to Tuhami end the book, leaving implicit Tuhami's impossible response. The effect is an unwritten plea that no Moroccan, no cultural being, but Tuhami alone can satisfy: "Forgive me."

Mistakes

By the end of 1998, I spend more time with Mohammed at his home, a spacious but by no means fancy Fassi *dar*. I meet his four-year-old, Oussama, and his wife, Nadia. Oussama jumps and pretends to make karate moves; he has just started lessons at a local club. Nadia is *muhajaba* and polite when we meet; Mohammed hands her a copy of *Al-Quds*, a Jerusalem-based newspaper I had brought with me to the bazaar, and I don't see her for the rest of the evening. When, in the last days of my stay, my older sister Meema visits, she meets Mohammed, Nadia, and Oussama, and she and Nadia speak French in the kitchen.

My four-month stay in 1998 is just a stint of language study; but the experience touches me. Returning home, I dream that I am riding a train to my death. Other people step off the train, but I stay on, thinking, "so

this will end in death.” Through 1999, Mohammed and I exchange letters in which a soft and gentle tone appears, one admitting of fault:

Dear Brother Ibrahim, First, I thank you for your kind letter. This means you still remember me. I pass you the *salamat* of my small family, Nadia and Oussama.

...Brother Ibrahim, I hope we meet again in Morocco, because, as you know, I love this country very much.

...Please forgive my tardiness in writing. I am always working, and when I return home I am very tired. Chalk it up to life's difficulty. The important thing is that you are on my mind....Thank God who makes our pens speak for our fingers, and makes the postal service erase the distance...Your friend, Mohammed.

In 2000-2001, I return for a year of pre-dissertation fieldwork focusing on mass media and national subjectivity in Morocco, living in Rabat but visiting Fez for weeks at a time. Back in Fez, Mohammed is no less concerned with my social skills, my bearing, my being. I make mistakes, but I am indisputably learning. One day, he examines and corrects my physical pronunciation of the Arabic alphabet. I am dubious, but then discover to my amazement that *Qaf* and *Kha* emerge from the same point in the throat. He notes that my gait is uneven—I am wearing out one side of each shoe—and I should walk more carefully. I should dress more neatly, more professionally—I needn't provide ammunition to critics. We are walking in the medina and I pause to give money to an old woman crouched against a wall. "Ibrahim," he sighs, "with the *right* hand. We give with the *right* hand."

I am Emilio to everyone else, Ibrahim to Mohammed, his workmates, and his family. A Muslim name. Mohammed asks me nothing about my religion. But he does hand me a photocopied handbook of *salat* instruction from the UK. As we look through it, he notes with irritation several mistakes, or at least cultural differences regarding the Prophet's and Ibrahim's titles, and writes them correctly in the margin. I am finding Islam compelling—or, more precisely, Mohammed's emphasis on right behavior, right speech, heedfulness. This suits my engagement, from age 16 on, with Zen Buddhism, sitting meditation and my aspirations to self-mastery. Mohammed's lessons feel akin to this in a way quite distant from the Abrahamic melange of Christian and Jewish cultures of my childhood. The warmth of Christmases at my grandparents; hilarious seders with my moth-

er's Jewish lesbian community, and with my father and stepmother's friends in rural Maine. (At one such occasion, as we welcome Elijah to the table the doorbell rings—it is a Girl Scout selling cookies.) Here I find my Zen master; he happens to be Muslim. Of course, with Moroccan etiquette and language comes a habitual and more comfortable invocation of God, but Mohammed's lessons are more precise, more to do with skillful bearing.

He works on my lack of attentiveness to other people. As an American liberal, I believe in "listening to my feelings," which is good...but demands continuous self-absorption, endless attention to each emotional shift. It makes socializing an exhausting ordeal. Mohammed recalls me to a basic and obvious tenet of ethnography, to carefully watch others.

"Ibrahim, you talk too much. When someone asks you something, say, 'Oh, I don't know anything about that.'"

The point hits home several times in the next week. I am with my Fassi household in Ayn Azlitan, and the father's Casablanca business partner asks me about Moroccan soccer players in the US. I pause. I know truly nothing of professional soccer. But my usual inclination—American *miska* that I am—is to find a connection, something. I begin thinking of foreign players in the NBA, but stop. "I don't know anything about that," I say. The man, disinterested, turns back to my host father. I just listen and smoke a Marlboro.

A day later, Mohammed, his workmates, and I are sitting in a back room of the carpet shop; Fez is depressed, tourists are scarce, and money is tight. A black and white television is showing *Tom and Jerry* cartoons, but the sound is off. Instead, the room is bright with finches chirping and singing. Mohammed has finished cleaning their cages, carefully scraping dung and feathers off the floor, rinsing, refilling food and water. A manic young man comes bounding in. "I'm going to the US next month!"

"What are you going to do there?" I ask.

"I'm marrying an American!"

"What are you going to do for work?" I ask, now concerned.

"I don't know."

"Do you speak English?"

"No."

I begin hurriedly looking for a piece of paper and a pen. *He's in trouble*, I think, *I must teach him some verbs!* I ask Mohammed for a pen.

“What for?” he asks. I explain. “Ibrahim, look at this man.” I look at him; he has moved along to another conversation, another bench—cannot stop moving. “Will you teach him anything? Sit here, eat these almonds, and relax.” Quite right. In a minute, the young man is gone.

Perhaps, the lesson makes little sense for an anthropologist who wishes to, and must repeatedly, establish rapport. Or, perhaps, these lessons of social mastery are more meaningful than rapport. Nevertheless, I am living them, and too wrapped or enrapt to make ethnographic use of them. Meanwhile, the focus of my research, shifting by the end of my pre-dissertation stint to Muslim practices of *jinn* possession and exorcism in Fez, rarely enters our conversation. Mohammed encourages research: “Find a single thread and begin pulling. Eventually everything will show.” But he dismisses the project with a sentence: “Jinns are real; they are mentioned in the Qur’an. But the jinn and humankind are different species of being and do not overlap or enter one into the other’s domains.”

By the end of my stay, Mohammed’s fierceness, his exacting way, still unnerves me. He says we are brothers; I am closer to him, he says, than even his own brother by birth. But I am occasionally suspicious; a lapse of trust occurs around several blankets I buy from Mohammed as gifts. I recall a price mentioned some weeks ago, but now he asks for more. Taking Mohammed’s advice to be direct in my speech—as he says, *bi saraha, raha*, “with sincerity, there is ease”—I question him. He shows me two sizes of blankets, the smaller of which is sold for the quoted price; I have chosen two of the larger. I thank him for hearing me out. He tells me in English, “Good accounts make good friends.”

Mohammed is a businessman, and good with customers, but I am more taken with his friendship and his friends, to whom he is continually generous, kind, dedicated. We are leaving Allal, Mohammed’s friend who is paralyzed from the waist down, who lives on the second floor of a decaying and subdivided medina house. Allal’s chest and arms are enormous from pulling himself up the stairs to his room, with a bed, a gas burner, and a television. The bathroom, a hole in a floor, is one floor up. Mohammed and some of his working-class Fassi friends meet there. The tone is pious, but more jovial than the bazaar. Crowded shoulder to shoulder in Allal’s room, the men sit and watch soccer, laugh over kif; some play cards and drink black coffee, packets of Nescafé Mohammed and I pick up for Allal at a small shop on his street corner.

Leaving with Mohammed at midnight, I navigate pitch dark and loose stairs. Mohammed shines his keychain flashlight on the stairs behind him to light my way. He reminds me to turn fully sideways to slip through the broken front door. *Don't rip your jacket*, he says from below. The streetlights of the medina are broken, the stone street is an extension of the stairs too narrow to walk side by side. The street opens at the corner shop, now closed. Mohammed points toward another door up the street.

A few weeks ago I stopped over there to see a poor family. They invited me in to sit down for dinner, but apologized that they had no bread. They have no money—not even for bread. I said I would come back in a moment with bread and walked to this corner store. They were sold out. It was very late—no more bread for the day. I know another family over on that street. I knocked, and the son said, come in, come in. I said, “I cannot. But do you have bread?” Yes, the son said. “Give me, please, two loaves,” I said. I took the bread to the poor family. If one person has, it can be shared with another who doesn't. Even half a loaf is better than no bread. Last Friday, a friend said to me. “Mohammed, you should not be begging from people.”

Mohammed paused, in the street under one good light. “Ibrahim, we do not do such things for applause. I thought they respected me. But, in fact, I respect myself.”⁴

Mohammed has little money himself, but he helps out many people: his ailing parents, his father with Parkinson's, his nearly blind mother; his younger brother; his sister's children. And still (Mohammed shows me the savings book) he puts away some money for his own children's future education. “I am a *good struggler*” Mohammed tells me. And he must be, for Fez, that once towering monument of Moroccan knowledge and power, is a ghetto. When I come from Rabat to Fez, and especially to the medina, I see the difference in people's faces and bodies, worried, creased, hurried, bent. “We are in a hole, in Fez,” Mohammed says. “And we cannot even see out of it.” In the street a young man kisses Mohammed's hand. “Who is that?” I ask. It is a young man whose father is poor, who was doing very poorly in school, and whom Mohammed helped find his way. “How?” Mohammed suggested he sign up for barber school, but it was too expensive. Mohammed spoke to the head of the school to propose a scholarship: “Cut his tuition in half. The boy will pay one quarter, and I will pay

the remaining quarter on a monthly basis.” The headmaster agreed, the boy enrolled, graduated, and now runs his own barbershop in the medina. “He calls me ‘Uncle’ out of respect.”

On top of his carpet sales, Mohammed trains birds. The songbirds at the bazaar and in his home are not a hobby; he owns a small bird shop near Bab al-Guisa, with bird cages and food, medicines, doves, and finches. Mohammed buys fledglings and trains each to be a master singer (*ma`alim*) which he then sells to other bird owners to train their fledglings. He runs the business, stopping in once a day, shopping at the weekly bird market, cleaning cages. But all the money goes to Moukhtar, a soft and scruffy old man who Mohammed has hired to manage the store. “Moukhtar is a terrible businessman. He cannot close a deal. It is a lot of work for me. But he needs money.” Mohammed reminds me that Moukhtar has painfully crippled feet, and that I must bring Moukhtar something from the States the next time I travel home. I ask what, inserts? He sighs, “What he needs is an operation. *Aywa...La ilaha ila Allah.*” No god but God...

Conversion

I am with Mohammed on the terrace of the carpet shop at dusk. The amplified and echoing call to prayer, and the city's swallows, sculptures in motion, writing surahs in wingtips. Mohammed's lush red prayer rug is laid out toward the qiblah. His body is graceful bending and straightening, and then, dropping in perfect vertical to his knees. I hear his words, that sound of longing. Subhana rabbi al-ala... Subhana rabbi...

In August 2001, as I am preparing to leave Morocco to finish coursework, I convert to Islam. It is done haphazardly, confusedly, with a young man in Rabat who has pestered me to convert for months. Certainly, my research has become devoted to Islam, as I work with religious men, *fuqaha*, and young Islamists who perform jinn exorcisms. But I am making decisions faster than I grasp them; I am thinking really of Mohammed. I'm leaving for New York, and this is my going-away gift to him. Something that expresses our solidarity. Visiting Fez before flying home, sitting in the bazaar, I tell Mohammed. He responds quietly, “*La ilaha ila Allah.* Now we are brothers in all ways.” He turns to one of the men, saying “*Ibrahim rawa Muslim.*” That man stands and holds my face in his hands and kisses my cheeks very softly. Mohammed brings me home; Nadia already knows. She is smiling warmly and gives me a white Meccan robe.

I feel uncomfortable, even astonished. What on Earth am I thinking? This going away gift has quickly escaped my intention—it is no longer mine to give, nor merely Mohammed's to receive. Mauss's wisdom is driven home: the gift is always already in circulation; we merely pass it along. But happily I am heading home, where I can shelve the issue. When I tell my mother and sister, however, their apparent fear surprises me. I try to explain that I am not turning into a fanatical Muslim, but figuring out what Islam means to me. Salat, I say, is my meditation. Then, September 11. The cauldron of identity politics is boiling over, and I have no wish to partake. I drop my efforts to learn salat.

Living again in Fez, in 2003, for the real body of my fieldwork on Muslim politics and mass media. My Islam becomes once again pressing, with Mohammed as much as with anyone. Inside I feel have made a mistake, gone too far, and just want the whole thing to go away. Nobody in Fez has forgotten. My host parents ask if I am still praying, and I say no. My host mother chuckles; my host father tells me it's all in the heart. The youngest son in the family is less forgiving. He tells me he gets a particular feeling from Muslims—which he does not get from me. He tells me I am really a Jew, only pretending to be Muslim for research purposes. I ask him what that means. "Shall I slit your throat?" He says. I say nothing, but am unnerved, spooked. I am entirely uncertain of what I am, but I feel fraudulent in the social role of Muslim. Sharing the house is unpleasant. I don't think—I don't know what to think. Will he tell others? Apostasy can be punished by death. A neighbor mentions for no apparent reason that the young man troubles him. "His brother is a good man, but he is not. He has a black heart."

I tell Mohammed that I am struggling. But I struggle with the telling—this is well beyond the pale. My sense of trust is askew, and I am frightened for my friendship with Mohammed. Mohammed asks me, how serious is this crisis? If it is *irja`*, reversion, and thus apostasy, he says, this is very serious and I should tell no one. It is not *irja`*, I say, not at all certain what I mean. He repeats a saying, *Insan ibnu bi'atih*: "A man is the child of his environment." But I can't run home, and my work is here. I have no choice but to forge ahead. Mohammed reminds me to regret nothing.

In the following days, I resolve to toughen up. To learn what Islam is to me, learn salat, and, perhaps in performative fashion, to practice my way to clarity. Mohammed advises me to think of it like yoga. "Practice," he says, "and one day it will be like water." I am with Mohammed as often as

possible, more often at his home, playing with Oussama who looks exactly like Mohammed and calls me *`Ami Brahim*, and his adorable toddler daughter, Oumaima, who resembles her mother. I am not certain what binds us each to the other. Mohammed refers to us as brothers, and is less concerned to teach, more concerned to talk about politics, to speak of life in Fez, about whom to help, whom to visit. We speak of family; I have married and my wife Alexandra visits Fez several times and there is no question that she and I will dine several times with Mohammed and Nadia, that we will visit the bazaar to drink tea and talk. Mohammed knows I am practicing salat. On Fridays, I meet him at the bazaar and we walk together to the Qarawiyyin for the collective prayer. When Mohammed is busy with customers, I do the ablutions in the bazaar kitchen and visit the Qarawiyyin with the throng of men in the Fassi street.

Nevertheless, Mohammed and I rarely speak of Islam. When I do initiate conversation, Mohammed is brief, but as always, edifying. I describe having a wondrous feeling of humility before God, a euphoric submission. Mohammed says that is unnecessary. "Just do your work, and when you finish your work, put it out of your mind, and take care of your family." One evening at Mohammed's home I write up a genealogy of my family religions. There is not much I can fill in. The Judaism of my mother's Polish-American parents, whom I never knew; the childhood seders, dissipating into my mother's current faith in the 12-Step Program. My father's atheism, his Swedish- and Italian-American parents' disdain for clergy, and his grandparents' downright hatred of them. I give it to Mohammed. The next day, he enters the salon where I am dressing, and hands it back to me. "I don't need this to know you, Ibrahim. You are who is standing in front of me now."

A month later, I walk to Mohammed's house, but his wife, speaking to me at the door, explains that his cousin Jamal died of a brain aneurysm. Jamal is a young man, married, with two children. Mohammed considers him more a son. I call Mohammed. He tells me the death might have been averted, but Jamal's family assumed a jinn was to blame, and for several days had called various fuqaha to find a cure. We plan to meet at Allal's sometime after *Salat al-Zuhr*. I wait with Allal for several hours and then several hours more. I smoke kif and gaze around his tiny room, at radios piled up the walls, at his cigarette stand adorned with a poster of Sylvester Stallone, at a small image of Osama Bin Laden taped to a framed photograph of a young Allal. Mohammed arrives, composed but weary, and explains that we will attend the funeral dinner, but he needs to walk

first. In the night air, we hear the call to *Salat al-Maghrib*. The kif is very strong and I am surely too stoned to pray—certainly for the prayer to be valid—but I am not sober enough to think right. We stop at the door of a mosque near Bab al-Guisa. Mohammed asks if I wish to pray, and I enter with him and crouch at the central fountain to perform ablutions.

Something happens. A murmur. I have done something wrong—scooped water with my left hand, perhaps. I look up at Mohammed, who has been dealing with death all day. He grips my shoulder, narrows his eyes, and speaks to me in English. “You have just dirtied the water...And now it is time to pray. So finish now.” I feel pale and panicked. My mind splitting from itself. Mohammed pulls me by the arm over to the line of men to pray. At the first *rakya* we bow deeply. I am feeling calmer now, easing into salat. But there is an odd noise. My watch, loose change, and several cigarettes have spilled out of my breast pocket onto the mosque floor. My mind melts into panic again. Consumed, stoned, I am certain that cigarettes on the mosque floor is shameful. In *sujud*, I try surreptitiously to scrape my cigarettes and watch and change toward my knee. The row of men sit on their heels for *Tashahhud*, but I lurch upward. Mohammed puts a firm hand on my calf and presses me to the floor. Prayer ends and we walk toward the fountain.

Mohammed faces me, astonished, disgusted. “Why do you not know the ablutions?” My face and eyes and body feel taut, terrified.

“I know how to do ablutions. I am *very very stoned*.” Two men approach Mohammed, two gendarmes. “Who is this?” One says.

“He is a new Muslim,” Mohammed replies, “*from Holland*.”

The men look at me at length and finally walk back to their corner. Mohammed, more relaxed now, continues in English: “You must go slowly...And stay cool. A Muslim is always *cool*.” A few moments pass as I try to breath and calm myself. He continues, “You have taken me out of my prayer, so I will now pray again. You may pray with me, if you like to, and remember to go slowly.”

From the mosque, we walk toward the funeral dinner on dark dirty cobblestones under broken lamps in a poor city. At the door, I stop, ashamed. “I am so sorry. Now, after the trouble I’ve caused, I should just go home.” Mohammed patient, always patient: “Ibrahim, God forgives. God forgives. Just remember that people do not forgive. People are a problem, and you have to be careful. Come into the dinner. You will feel better. Don’t talk a lot. Just sit and listen.”

Forgiveness

Ramadan approaches and despite the warmth with Mohammed and the general success of my fieldwork, the dissonance of my social performance in Fez heightens. The mosque episode has shaken me terribly and managing my identity on top of my fieldwork is debilitating. Visiting Rabat I am calmer; a friend in the finance ministry sympathizes with my self-criticism: “How do you think *I* feel; my name is *ʿAbd Allah*—Servant of God.” Back in the pious milieu of Fez, however, I tip into something worse, something despairing; I know what depression is. And as Ramadan approaches I feel it: through the course of weeks, I begin to fall into each of depression’s lower and lower levels, into a black pit, falling with no one to catch me. I leave for Rabat to seek out more neutral, simpler ground. Ramadan comes, and I decide to stay, renting a house in al-Oudaya from a kind elderly woman who hosted me in 2000. I will make the most of Rabat, working at the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, and in the records of *Radiodiffusion-Television Marocaine*. I am mostly incommunicado, but as *Laylat al-Qadr* nears, I call Mohammed. He understands my need to do research in Rabat, but he is astonished that I won’t come back before the Eid. His voice cracks: “You’re not going to spend even *one day of Ramadan* with us?!”

Several weeks after Ramadan, Mohammed and I sit alone in the quiet and empty bazaar. I know that I have to be honest and clear: *bi saraha, raha*. This is no longer 1998 or 2001. This has nothing to do with my etiquette. Whatever training I have had is over and we are just two different people who have somehow maintained a friendship. I choose to be honest, to let it all out. I am ready to lose this friend. I explain that I am working hard to understand my conversion, especially what is happening inside. But I cannot, in good conscience, continue to claim the faith in front of him. I need it off the table between him and me. I am ready to lose this friend.

Mohammed is quiet, then tells me this is between me and God and does not concern him. He then reminds me that I have a good heart, and that God will only give me what is in my heart. His warmth is overwhelming, and I begin cry out the accumulated pressure of the field. Mohammed straightens up, saying something about being a man, and tells me calmly that while I was in Rabat he worried about me, and whether I was all right. It is just Mohammed and me, alone in early darkness in a three story bazaar, and something—honesty, urgency—has been loosed. As he talks, he speaks of himself. “I am working all the time to help every-

one around me—parents, brothers and sisters, children, friends. I am helping everyone all the time.” Mohammed I are holding each others’ shoulders, and his words keep coming and now he is crying. “I am working all the time...I have no one to talk to...And I am smoking this *shit* which is *killing* me.” I see his broken teeth, his worn baldness, his grayness, his weakness: “*I was so mad, I was so scared, Ibrahim. I thought you would never come back.* If I didn’t hear from you I would come to Rabat myself and find you. *But I didn’t know where you were...*” Mohammed and I are both crying now, perhaps from accumulated wounds, both unintentional and inevitable, over years of an intense but tenuous relationship.

We need this space, we need it together, and we slowly recover, my heart feels light, joyous, refreshed. Mohammed chuckles: “Well we were *thrown*.” We walk out the narrow cool entranceway to the bazaar, into the night, past the closed shops of the medina. We link arms. “We are still brothers,” he says, looking at me. “I can lose many things, Ibrahim, but I can’t lose you.”

Friendship, Forgiveness, Return

With each mistake and each forgiveness we are deeper friends, Mohammed and Ibrahim. Mohammed and Emilio. By this name too I have slowly, decisively returned to the practice of Islam, reclaiming the pillars and the tradition as my own, and as a path open to my two children, Bruno and Orlando. As I perform salat, Orlando, my one year-old, toddles across my prayer rug and joyfully pounds on my back. My heart opens and glows; love radiates outward in expanding circles to my family, my neighbors, the nation, the world. Salat feels good; I am burnishing a glass lamp, letting my heart shine. I describe it as light, but Mohammed is right, *it is like water*.

The themes of my friendship with Mohammed echo the Geertzian theme of accidental intimacy: something real arising in the mistake, the unintended act. To feel rapport requires exchange, gift, and counter-gift—and exchange means a possible mistake. Mistakes, by their sheer incalculable, accidental quality are quintessential gifts. And they are recuperated through the return, the act of forgiving. But just as mistakes are not the end of friendship, nor is friendship (contra Rabinow) the end of fieldwork, a magical path to cultural essence beyond which nothing more need be said. Friendship is like fieldwork, a series of accidents in search of return, of forgiveness. But no return is guaranteed. Mohammed

reminds me to “stand at the wall of Paradise, to help each person over the wall”—without hope of reward: “You help them into Paradise. But this does not mean someone will stop and help you over at the end.”

On my desk, I have a photo of Mohammed sitting in Fez with my oldest friend, Adam (we met at age four). As often as possible, I refer students, family, and travelers to him. I sent the dean of a New York medical university and an absurdly wealthy New Orleans developer. After hearing about his astonishing shopping spree in Fez, I called Mohammed.

“I’m glad that I can send you a big spender,” I said.

“Ibrahim,” he replied, “you could send me a dog, and I would be happy.”

Mohammed would forgive such a gift. He is a good forgiver.

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ENDNOTES

¹The theme of cross-cultural communication emerging especially through accident, chance or risk, is developed in Siegel (1986:294-307), to which this essay owes the significant debt of inspiration. Siegel characterizes the Geertz’s fortuitous flight as a matter of “intending something, of being taken for having meant something else, the result being an unanticipated flow of ‘communication’” (1986:296). John Borneman pursues a similar logic in his intimate fieldwork in Aleppo, and likewise draws insight (it seems to me) from Siegel: “Where communication fails is where understanding might begin” (Borneman 2007:62).

²Rabinow’s references to “penetration” (1975:27), “probing” (1975:47), and “thrusts” (1975:48) bear comment. They accompany his general characterization of Moroccan intimacy as tests of domination and submission, weakness, and humiliation. This sort of aggressivity has not been my experience in Morocco, or if being tested, I overlooked it. Reading Rabinow’s reflections one is reminded that fieldwork conflicts arise as much from ethnographers’ social performances as from foreign cultural norms.

³For Crapanzano’s incisive statement regarding the irreducible presence of the ethnographer—and a distinct reading of Geertz’s “Notes on a Balinese Cockfight”—see his “Hermes’ dilemma” (1992:60-69).

⁴“I thought they respected me...” is a quotation from Mohammed’s and other Fassis’ favorite wise fool, Sidi Abderrahman al-Majdoub (d.1568).

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