Prologue: A World of Difference

A child’s among you takin’ notes,
and faith he’ll print it.
—Robert Burns

You would hardly believe how difficult it is to place a figure alone on a canvas and to concentrate all the interest on this single and universal figure and still keep it living and real.
—Edouard Manet

Ordinary people have intellectual lives. They may never have written a book; they may never even have read one. But their lives are rich in ideas, constantly fashioned and revised, elaborated and rearranged. Just as no one speaks exactly the same sentences as anyone else, and rarely the same sentence twice, so, too, the act of daily living comprises an ongoing recreation of the means by which we capture experience and make it our own, a capacity that is of the very essence of our species.

To be an intellectual in this sense is not to be equally knowledgeable or wise in all domains of life. Who among us has not met a person justly recognized for his or her accomplishments in one field but who, when the conversation turns to other matters, appears, in these unfamiliar places, to confirm Carl Sandburg’s quip that “an expert is just a damn fool a long way from home”? But when we are at home we are all masters of certain ideas, whether in their unreflective application, their rearrangement to fit our current needs, or the newly revealed possibilities through which we make our situations conform to our images of them. Thought, it has been said, is extrinsic, not intrinsic—something fashioned not in the “secret grotto of
the mind” but worked over in the enactment of our shared conceptualizations. Like every human endeavor, thought may be performed with brilliant aplomb or mind-numbing regularity, but it is always pursued with and through the concepts we share with others, and thus rejoins, at one extreme, our most private of attributions and, at the other, our most embedded of associations.

To attend to the intellectual lives of ordinary people is also a central tenet of the practice of anthropology. We anthropologists may, as Clifford Geertz noted, see ourselves as the miniaturists of the social sciences, intrusive seekers who attempt, by “painting on Lilliputian canvases with what we take to be delicate strokes, to find in the little what eludes us in the large, to stumble on general truths while sorting through special cases.” Or we may view ourselves as the ultimate arbiters of human sensibility, limping up, like the devil in the Kipling poem, to explain it all over again. Either way, that which is ordinary remains the centerpiece of the anthropologist’s subject matter and professional ethos. Such a focus may carry with it the possibility for boundless self-importance or, properly proportioned, a responsibility to make the extraordinary lives of ordinary people comprehensible in terms both scientific and human.

Rarely is the burden of this responsibility greater than when it involves trying to offset stereotypes or when, as one novelist put it, we are trying to avoid “the most banal of human faults—the failure to imagine the life of another.” Anthropology, as a discipline, has reason to be justly proud of its accomplishments. We have demonstrated, for example, contrary to the common opinion of its day, that race has no bearing on intelligence, societal complexity, or cultural accomplishment; we have shown that, contrary to then-current colonial attitudes, nonliterate peoples have systems of legal theory worthy of the name of jurisprudence or religious schemas entitled to comparison with any established theology. And if, at times, anthropologists have fallen prey to obscurantism or self-congratulation, they never have to go far, if only they remain attentive, to hear people expressing a life of ideas that challenges all our abilities for comprehension and translation. Where settled images have formed about people from another culture, the need to convey the range of intellectual lives is especially compelling. And there are few places where this is more pressing than in our understanding of the cultures of the Middle East.

Nearly one of every four people on the planet today is an adherent of the Muslim faith. The variation is, of course, enormous, but it is precisely that—variation on themes that do possess a high degree of commonality, particularly within linguistic communities such as that comprising the
speakers of Arabic. Regrettably, Western images of the Muslim world are far less varied. Mention the Middle East to most people in the West, and visions of terrorism or gender discrimination, ruthless punishments or Machiavellian politics have a way of leaping to the fore. What is lost in the process is not simply the range of variation but the lives of ordinary men and women, lives of far greater intellectual richness than the reduction to simple stereotypes can ever embrace. It is to the conveyance of this intellectual life that anthropology owes much of its raison d’être; it is in the representation of this life of other minds that each anthropologist finds a large measure of personal and professional purpose.

Like all scholars and writers, anthropologists are beset by metaphors. If it is better to think of the heart as a pump than as a furnace or the eye as a receptor than as a beacon, one can hope that the choice of metaphors is, if not actually revelatory, at least (as Samuel Butler said) “the least misleading thing we have.” And if one were to choose a metaphor as an entry point to thinking about Arab societies quite generally, it might be that of the marketplace. For not only is the economy built around constant hawking and haggling, but so too in many respects is social life. It is in this realm of relationships that men (and to a varying extent, women) must forge networks of dependents in order to secure themselves in a world perceived as dangerous and uncertain. And just as there are regularities in the marketplace, there are standards of appropriate engagement in social life. It is in this environment that each of the people I will describe must be placed. And it is in this environment that any ethnographer must make choices about his or her own relationships with the people concerned and how to represent them in a form the Western reader can find approachable.

How one goes about such a task has many solutions. For me, I will simply say that I regard the anthropologist’s role in this regard as rather like that of one of the characters in a short story by Paul Theroux who describes himself as “an unrepentant eavesdropper” who finds “anonymity a consolation.” The bounds of my “eavesdropping” have, for the most part, been set by the conventions of my trade and personal embarrassment. My quest has been for regularities and ranges of variation, not for idiosyncrasy. Through decades of conversation and decades of note-taking I have doubtless come to embody Lévi-Strauss’s droll comment that “if this is escape I am one of escape’s bureaucrats.” But there is also my own discomfort at intruding beyond the point of individual ease—mine and theirs—that has precluded too great a search for the intimate history of each of the people I will describe here. I have, in this respect, tended to assume, as Emily Dickinson cautioned, that their ideal reader, like hers, might be one who “per-
mits a comfortable intimacy and yet lets the innermost Me remain behind its veil.”

Indeed, through all the years of intense inquiry there have also been moments of simply settling back among these friends, letting the slight linguistic haze through which most anthropologists operate close around me, reveling in the feel of their presence, the cadence and sonorities of their words. There were also, perhaps, times when I, like many anthropologists, have inadvertently mimicked that “free-floating attention” that Freud commended, in which, wandering between that which could be understood from the contextual and that which could only be grasped in the passing moment, I could sense my friends’ meaning more from its intensity than its reason. At such moments I could understand, too, what that wisest of guides to ethnographic observation, Frédéric Chopin, meant when he said, while stranded among the Scottish gentry during a concert tour, that he was spending his time “watching them speak and listening to them drink.”

Indeed, with the exception of a few texts, I never recorded the conversations I overheard or in which I took part. To do so, I believe, risks too much reliance on the recording device rather than attending to the uncertainties that need clarification at that very moment. It can also mean giving up that wondrous sense of losing oneself in the luxury of the conversation itself. This also accounts, in part, for my not using quotation marks around the statements of the people represented here: even long after, I hear their voices with utter clarity—in many instances their exact words—yet the themes they pursued and the flow of our conversations have also become interwoven over the years. Since what they have to say depends in no small part on what I have to say, perhaps it is best not to pretend to an unprovable precision.

But why, one may ask, should they have talked to me in the first place—why not just ignore a stranger who, like some oversized child, had to be taught everything from scratch? There are various possible answers. Hermann Hesse spoke of the “intimate disclosure to the perfect stranger,” that revelation we can more easily make to someone who, being outside the repercussions of our ongoing relations, can be taken into one’s confidence precisely because he or she does not quite count. Did they share their ideas with me because they wanted to test their own account against my response to it? Was it because they were as eager to embellish their own standing through our mutual contact as they were to use my inquiries to proudly display their own ideas? Or could it even be that through what one poet called the “unreflective revelation of the obvious” they could state the self-evident, and by doing so, make it so? Through many years and
many encounters the answers still elude me, even as their words and acts blur the boundaries of our enterprise. Perhaps, in the end, all that can be said is that they talked to me because I listened. They talked to me because we were friends. They talked to me because they wanted to be remembered.

This book is not, then, a set of individual biographies. There are many admirable instances in the anthropological literature of scholars who have attempted a full statement of an informant’s life, whether ostensibly in that person’s own words (Paul Radin’s *The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian*) or in a highly edited presentation thereof (Oscar Lewis’s *The Children of Sanchez*). Those who have studied Morocco seem especially prone to such biographical accounts, no doubt because this is a society in which the force of personality figures so prominently, a society in which capturing the terms of discussion is vital to controlling the outcome of actions. To do full justice to those who figure here it would, then, be indispensable to present a far more complete picture of their words and deeds. But because the goal here is a bit different, it is important to indicate the boundaries of this book.

It is not false modesty to say that I do not have either the detailed knowledge of these people’s lives—their deepest emotions, their most intimate acts—or the requisite literary skills for telling such a story. Moreover, I am not intent on showing their responses to all of the most current political questions that they and their society face. It is the deeper background of such intellectual lives that is often lost in the literature. History—particularly political history—can be written from the top down or the bottom up. One can envision people’s lives as so oriented by what happens at the level of national development as to render all of their endeavors a function of state action or, starting the other way round, see the state as floating above the beliefs and emotions of daily life in a way that renders the two largely disconnected. In this work neither of these orientations is ignored or governing. But if the intersection appears intermittent, it is in part because a view from below may serve as a brake on an overly state-directed view of events, just as a view that ignores the intersection with national events would suggest a false dichotomy in their lives.

My concern, then, is with the ideas these people expressed in my presence. To the extent that I can place these ideas in their national context and in their personal histories, I do so, on the one hand, with the emphases they gave to the relation of Morocco’s larger course and their personal lives and, on the other, with full and unapologetic awareness of the limitations of my own knowledge and respect for their privacy. Thus I hope that, without unduly confusing my assessments with their presentations, each of our
voices will be clear even if, at the point where their ideas and my captivation have been joined, to some degree the separation remains, for me at least, blessedly indistinct.

They are, in every way I know, the most extraordinary of ordinary people. In his own way each is a man of the world, yet their conceptions of that world and how a man operates within it are, notwithstanding many superficial similarities, not the same as those encountered in other cultures and other times. Indeed to Westerners these men may seem remarkably familiar, navigating their relationships in ways that appear quite similar to our own. At other moments, their assumptions about human nature and human qualities, their vision of time or the attribution of intentions and responsibility may appear to be offset just a few degrees from our own, and as the distance grows, the divergence may take one farther away than initially appeared likely. In each feature, then, a careful eye to the unique and the characteristic, the similar and the critically different must always be kept in view.

There is Haj Hamed Britel, the enthralling elderly raconteur who, during his years in Sefrou and in one of the nation’s coastal cities, saw his nation change from a near-medieval monarchy of the late nineteenth century to a modernizing nation of the late twentieth, a man who has been a participant-observer in many of its struggles for continuity in the face of outside provocation. Through his cornucopian knowledge one sees the assumptions about history and humanity that continue to inform the view of events that many Moroccans, Arabs, and fellow Muslims carry with them into the world that affects us all.

There is Yaghnik Driss, by origin from Fez, the engaging, humorous teacher of small children, devoted lover of his faith, husband, father, and object of his pet dogs’ adoration. He embraces Islam with imagination and verve, thus giving the lie to any view of the faith as stagnant, uncreative, or oppressive. In his delightful storytelling, unpretentious moralizing, and eclectic philosophizing, one encounters a man of enormous charm, the perfect guide to the religion of tolerance that Islam incorporates despite domestic extremes and foreign stereotypes.

There is Hussein ou Muhammad Qadir, the savvy and insightful Berber entrepreneur whose pride in his language and culture meld seamlessly with his attachment to the joys of operating in a wider marketplace of goods and people. In him, and in his entire settlement, the flow of information passes with remarkable finesse, and the openness to ideas and experiences is writ deep in his ease of movement and his keen sense of just what political animals humans really are.
And there is Shimon Benizri, the kindly Jewish cloth dealer, meek in the finest sense of the word, devoted to his family and totally at home, first in his rural community and later in town, in a country that has always had a set of relations to his people that escapes easy judgment. In him one sees not only the history of the Jews of Morocco but why it is in no sense a contradiction to refer to him and them as “Arab Jews.”

And there are the women—forceful, articulate, informed, and wise. The wives of each of the men described here will be referred to at times, and I was able to get to know them and their daughters to some extent. Describing the intellectual lives of these women is less easy for me, though, for the simple reason that it was more difficult, initially as a single man, to speak alone and in detail with them, and virtually impossible to follow them through many domains of their lives. Fortunately, others—both scholars and women writers from North Africa and elsewhere—have given us a host of portraits of Moroccan women that need to be read alongside accounts like my own. In doing so one will see that these women have intellectual lives no less sophisticated and involved than those of the men and that they are undoubtedly playing a crucial role in the changes their society is currently undergoing.

After decades of work in North Africa I could, of course, have chosen to present the intellectual lives of many other people I have come to know. There is the liberal academic, so deeply committed to his country’s well-being that he gave up a career in the West to teach, direct, and render in Arabic his own insights as a scientist and patriot; there is the young woman making both a career and a family life as she oversees the distribution of food and medicine to impoverished farmers and herders deep in the Middle Atlas Mountains; there is the veteran of the French forces in Indochina who welcomed me to his circle of friends, all of whom shared with me their understanding of places and times that affected our interrelated lives; there is the illiterate gardener, named for the mother who never revealed his father’s identity, who always spoke with such dignity, and who, on a trip to a saintly shrine, feared entering the sacred precincts because, he said, some of the misdeeds committed in the course of his life rendered him unworthy to be in the saint’s presence; there is the old man who lived in a cave in the nearby hills and talked with naive grace about the way new inventions might disrupt the way people think and relate to one another; there is the dutiful daughter who chafed at wearing a veil but was not afraid to acknowledge why her respect for the generation of elders to whom she was attached would be hurt if, while her husband was away, her immodesty were taken to imply any sense of personal disrespect. I have left out so
many, even though they populate my own thoughts at every turn. But short of yet another recitation of the Five Pillars of Islam or a tedious rendering of the ways in which one regime has followed another, how can we understand the world these people have made and its impact on our own without attending, in all humility, to the ideas of at least a few of those who have so strikingly become entwined with one’s own life and imagination?

The four men who form the centerpiece of this book did not really know one another: Haj Hamed had met Yaghnik briefly; the others met only once or twice when I happened over the years to introduce them. Yet they all interacted regularly with people like each other. More important—and this is a central theme of this book—each of them revels in the differences they collectively represent. This orientation is deeply writ in Moroccan and Muslim culture: “Difference is a blessing,” said the Prophet. “A difference is not a distinction,” he said. “Had God so willed He could have made us all the same,” says the Quran itself. Without in any way romanticizing such variation, all of those discussed here share a culture in which difference is vital, in which the diversity of their inclinations and connections is seen as enlivening their range of social possibilities. How, individually and as a society, they have structured such differences into their culture forms a large part of their intellectual biographies and is indispensable to an understanding of how, for them, difference forms a basis for linkage rather than a fault line of separation.

If these four men do not know one another personally, they share a setting that is not only a physical space but the source of their nurturance. It is the terrain for all that has gone into the relationships they individually negotiate and the guidelines by which they collectively enact their personalities and choices. Sefrou, as their place, is experienced differently and indeed differentially by each, yet all recognize it as vital to who they are. Located fifteen miles south of Fez on the edge of the Middle Atlas Mountains, it has grown from a small city of 3,000 (half of them Jewish) before the turn of the twentieth century, to some 25,000 when I arrived in the mid-1960s, to some 80,000 at present. Even in its early years it had all the characteristics of an urban center. For the Haj, notwithstanding many years living on the coast, it is truly a city, with all the institutions and amenities of cities of far greater scale; to Yaghnik, it is his home town of Fez scaled down but with the qualities and problems that are typical of the nation at large; to Hussein it is the market center for him and his fellow tribesmen, a proprietary attachment embraced in their reference to it (usually with the French term) as “our village”; and to Shimon Benizri it was the economic and communal center for those Jews like himself who were scattered across
the tribal hinterland and who collected in the town at various times of the year and periods in their own lives.

Sefrou has a very long history and has been the object of many travelers’ admiration. Visitors over the centuries have referred to it as an oasis, “a small Jerusalem,” a haven perched on the cusp of mountain and plain. Because it lies between massif and lowland, along a key route from the Sahara to Fez and beyond, it has also been caught up in fights of historic import. Chronicles thus speak of how Yusuf ben Tashfin massacred opponents in the city in 1063; how in 1736 the sultan Muhammad ben Ismail, furious at the protection the Berbers of the region had given his rebellious brother, killed many of the town’s inhabitants and took their heads to Fez; or how, during the course of another Berber revolt in 1811, tribesmen surrounded an army sent against them and pillaged the whole region. But no less common are the glowing terms in which those who came through Sefrou described its peaceful setting.

Indeed, travelers have for a dozen centuries never failed to remark on the beauty of Sefrou and their own regret in departing from it. Al Idrissi, writing in the twelfth century, speaks of Sefrou as “a small and secluded but civilized town, where there are not many markets. Its inhabitants are for the most part agriculturalists, who cultivate a quantity of cereals; there are also a large number of large and small cattle. The waters of the land are sweet and abundant.” Collette visited Sefrou in the 1920s and described it as “Paradise on earth, rather as we picture it, if we picture it as oriental and populous and confined. Sefrou is a patch of fertile, humid earth, alive with the gurgling of water. The pomegranate grove flames, the cherry swells, the fig tree has the odor of milk, the grass yields its juices as we bruise it. . . . The eyes and teeth of the young Jews gleam. . . . A place so amiable makes man amiable.” And Edward Westermarck, a Finnish anthropologist who worked extensively among the Berber tribes of the Sefrou region starting in 1899, wrote in the summer of 1910 (when temperatures of 125 degrees were recorded by the geographer Dr. Félix W. Weisgerber) of his journey up from Fez:

“We took our way along the caravan route [which] passes through tracts of land overgrown with palmetto, spindle-trees, and gorse, and by little villages stationed like outposts here and there. . . . A few hundred yards from where the road leaves the mountains, the little town lies on either side of the river, nestling amongst gardens, where the cherry-tree flourishes better than any other place in Morocco, side by side with oranges, pomegranates, and olives. The situation is delightful, and, thanks to the streams that pour down the
mountains and are brought into the fields, the country is fresh and green even in the heat of summer.” [After a stay of four weeks he wrote of his departure:] “Farewell, you splendid town, I shall never see you again, for you have given me all I wanted of you!”

For each of them, as for so many others, transient contact with the city leaves a vivid impression, an indelible trace of memory; for those whose entire lives are tied up with it, those memories inform present and future acts no less than past encounters. It was Marcel Proust who said, “The one divine thing man does is to remember.” But even if memory plays tricks on us, it does not do so randomly. In studying what these people told me about their city, their tribe, their lives, I could attempt, at every point, to find other sources to confirm what they recall; I could hedge each of their utterances with uncertainty as to their accuracy. I could even excuse myself if I prove to be a poor historian by pleading that I am no historian at all. And I am certainly willing to convert a potential failing into a possible virtue by transforming my lack of knowledge into naive open-mindedness in the way Lytton Strachey noted in the preface to *Eminent Victorians* when he said, “Ignorance is the first requisite of the historian—ignorance, which simplifies and clarifies, which selects and omits, with a placid perfection unattainable by the highest art.”

The truth is that I have often been able to verify the recollections of these men and women from independent sources or found their stories and accounts present in the collective memories or published literature on Morocco and other parts of the Muslim world. But even where independent confirmation has not been possible, it is the nature, the structure, the logic of their thoughts that is most important to this enterprise; attending to how they construct their world and not just whether everyone does it similarly or with equal attention to extraneous “facts” is not the sole basis for finding merit in their accounts.

Anthropology is indeed a science—of the irreducibly personal and the indisputably characteristic, of aspects and foundations, expressions and implications, ineradicable trivialities and evanescent truths, perduring instances of verbal wrestling and transcendent moments of quiet apprehension. It is also handmaiden to the humanities, seeking the patterns in our multifarious capabilities, ferreting out the insights and fictions of our attributes, discerning the commonalities of our culture-bearing species no less than the characteristic peculiarities of our individuality, and reaching beyond the instrumentality of one another’s existence to forge that most unusual of relationships—a lifelong friendship that spans a cultural divide.
It is not an unmediated gap. There have been moments when I have felt as though I ought to apologize to these friends for fear, as one Muslim poet might have me say to them, that “my memory keeps getting in the way of your history.” But it would, in truth, be hypocritical of me to do so, since I take no small pleasure, after so many years, in sensing that our histories and our memories have become enmeshed. All I can offer to these extraordinarily ordinary people who have given me so much is my limited ability as chronicler and my extravagant capacity for admiration and to ask of them—as Muslims and Jews are both commended by their faiths to ask of one another during their most sacred days:

'allahu ma-ghafir lana

皑Outline: غفر لنا

ani m'yakesh mechila

And I seek forgiveness

Through our mutual forgiveness

may we be granted forgiveness in our turn.