

CONFLUENCE
Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

ISSN: 3085-5411
Journal Homepage: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

What We Forget, Tales Remember: An Interview with Tahir Shah on Moroccan Storytelling

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https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss3.11171

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Received: 24-12-2025 Accepted: 25-03-2026 Published: 22-07-2026

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ABSTRACT

This interview presents Tahir Shah's perspective on the intersection of Moroccan storytelling with written tradition, translation, and cultural preservation. For Shah, stories function as essential sustenance for human civilization, not mere entertainment. Central to his view is the belief that translation does not reproduce stories. Rather, it creates new variants that keep them alive as they move across languages and cultures. This interview also draws upon Shah's encounter with Moroccan storyteller Mohammed Mrabet, offering a window into the literary collaboration between Mrabet and American writer Paul Bowles. Through this project, Shah questions conventional assumptions about authorship and ownership, noting that oral stories must remain free to circulate beyond the page. He further contends that understanding Moroccan narratives requires years of immersion in language, place, and cultural context—a depth that written tradition alone cannot fully capture. The interview concludes with Shah's assertion that every person is a potential storyteller, celebrating the power of tales as cultural inheritance.

KEYWORDS

Moroccan Storytelling

Tahir Shah

Orality

Translation

Preservation

This interview was conducted in English.

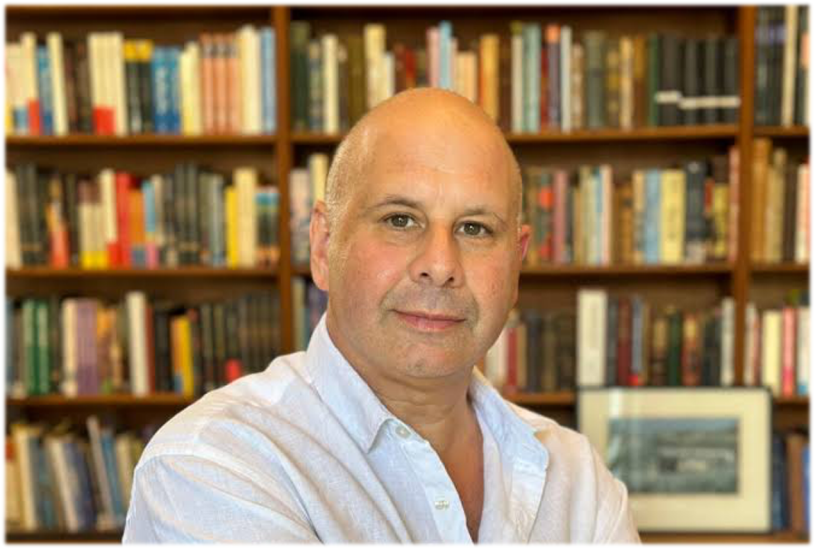
Introduction

At the crossroads of storytelling, cultural memory, and literary transmission stands the remarkable figure of Tahir Shah. Born in London to a prominent Anglo-Afghan family, Shah was profoundly shaped by his father, the renowned thinker and Sufi teacher Idries Shah. Heir to this rich intellectual legacy, Shah has grown into a prolific writer, journalist, and documentary filmmaker. Over three decades, he has produced more than forty works comprising memoirs, travel literature, and fiction. Some examples include accounts of real-life adventures in Morocco, travel narratives of the legendary King Solomon's mines, as well as fiction tracing Eastern mythology and magical realism. Across this extensive collection, Shah has committed himself to revealing what lies beneath the apparent surface of a place, most compellingly, perhaps, in Morocco.

Shah's close bond with Morocco began in childhood during family visits that left a lasting impact. This connection deepened over the years, evolving from seasonal travel into permanent residency, when Shah relocated his family to Casablanca in 2003. This experience found expression in his travel memoir *The Caliph's House: A Year in Casablanca* (2006), which follows the family's acquisition of a ruined palatial mansion in a Casablanca shantytown and their struggle against corrupt bureaucracy and malevolent house spirits. This adventure

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continues in the sequel *In Arabian Nights: A Caravan of Moroccan Dreams* (2008), which chronicles Shah's journey across Morocco's deserts and *medinas*[1] in pursuit of traditional folktales. For Shah, life in Morocco evokes "the make-believe world of *A Thousand and One Nights*" (*In Arabian Nights* 9). Beyond mere nostalgia, this description suggests that the landscape itself is woven into the fabric of oral tradition. This demonstrates that tales preserve what human memory may cast aside.



It is through these riveting works that I first encountered Shah's writing. In August 2025, I had the privilege of approaching him to request an interview, which was subsequently conducted via email. Remarkably, our exchange revealed a writer whose generosity and openness were themselves a kind of gift. Hence, what this interview may lack in length, it more than compensates for in depth, providing a window into a mind that has spent decades listening to what Moroccan folktales are trying to say.

The Interview

Inass Essrhir: What do you think maintains the uniqueness of Moroccan tales even when they traverse diverse cultures and connect with different storytelling traditions?
Tahir Shah: Morocco is a crossroads geographically, and a crossroads of culture, too. The stories and tales that are woven into the fabric of society in the kingdom are unusual in that they come from all points of the compass, and as such they provide an identity not found in other regions. Morocco is crafted from its stories through a kind of magical alchemy.

IE: In *In Arabian Nights*, you refer to your meeting with Mohammed Mrabet. What drew your attention to him as a storyteller? How was your encounter?
TS: Mrabet is so incredibly special and important because he walks a line between fact and fantasy. It's useful to remember that throughout human history this is how stories were told and passed on: by drawing the listener in through beginning with realities, and then widening it out into a zone that was fantastical—and that's very much the style of Mohammed Mrabet.

IE: When you asked Mrabet about stories, he replied: "in the Rif, stories are the blood that runs through our veins, . . . they are the air we breathe, the food we eat" (*In Arabian Nights* 62). This metaphor makes me think that storytelling, like food and air, functions as an indispensable element of Mrabet's life. It also implies that his narratives draw upon several sociocultural threads. Can we thus say that Mrabet's tales reveal how storytelling is inherently polyphonic and intertextual?
TS: The kind of tales told and retold in Morocco are (in my opinion) a form of sustenance as needed and as vital to humanity as food or water. They challenge the way we think, interpret,

question and, most important of all, the way we perceive the world around us. A society that does not tell stories is void and empty, desiccated like a desert. But, fortunately, it's also a rarity. Indeed, I can't remember ever encountering a place where stories are not told, because they are so requisite to human civilization.

IE: At one point, you told Dr. Mehdi that Mrabet advised you "to close [your] eyes and then wake up" if you want to find the story in your heart (*In Arabian Nights* 167). What did this advice mean to you personally? Do you believe preserving the method of accessing authentic stories is as important as preserving the stories themselves?
TS: The Sufi master Jalaluddin Rumi said famously, "[m]an is asleep, must he die before he wakes up?"[2] I often turn this phrase of Rumi's around in my mind. It's central to understanding our condition, and to grasping the journey facing us all.

IE: As you know, Paul Bowles recorded and translated tales by Moroccan storytellers like Mrabet. How do you perceive the experience of having oral stories recorded, translated, and published?
TS: Stories need to be captured and kept in libraries and in all kinds of ways. But the key thing is that they must be "re-wilded" into society. There is no point at all in keeping stories in a box as it were, left to wither and die. In order to thrive, stories—like anything in the natural world—need to be free. They need to be thrown into the wind.

IE: How would you describe the role of this translation project in relation to the preservation of Moroccan oral storytelling?
TS: One of the most intriguing aspects of folklore is how stories are tethered to a place in which they are told, and tethered to the language in which they are spoken. Stories and language go hand in hand, which is no surprise, of course. Translating a story actually creates not a clone in another tongue, but an entirely fresh variant . . . and that is very much where the magic takes place.

IE: What is your view of the relationship between Bowles and Mrabet within this literary collaboration?
TS: I actually have quite strong opinions on Bowles and Mrabet, and would say that they both needed one another. But I would say that Bowles needed Mrabet more than Mrabet needed Bowles.

IE: In *In Arabian Nights*, I noticed that you dedicate an entire glossary to explaining Moroccan vocabulary and expressions in the text. To what extent does this aspect impact the reader's understanding? I'm asking because the stories that Bowles translated, such as *Love with a Few Hairs* (1967), contain Moroccan Arabic words without italics or explanation, even when English translations do exist. What do you think this aspect suggests?
TS: Attempting to shine light on aspects of culture that are so innate to a place like Morocco is never easy . . . and it's something which is bound to only be comprehended by those outside the society in an elemental or basic way. To understand Morocco, and the tales told here, you have to spend decades immersing yourself in the subtleties of society, and the mindset . . . and the more time you spend here, the more you realize how little you actually comprehend. When you get to that point, I would say you are on the path to making real progress.

IE: The published stories from Bowles's collaboration with Moroccan storytellers are also marked by the omission of quotation marks in dialogues, which blurs the line between direct and reported speech. What might this say about transitioning from oral to written form?
TS: Written storytelling is such a new and unimportant version of what has always been oral—and in my opinion, (and I admit this as a writer), the written word is terribly weak when compared to oral storytelling. When spoken, stories are fluid, dynamic, evolving . . . and they are not set in stone. I find it totally unimportant whether there is certain dialogue architecture or spelling. Stories are free, and should in the first instance be spoken, so that they are passed from a mouth to an ear, rather than absorbed by the eyes.

IE: This collaboration raises questions about authorship itself. When published stories emerge from the dynamic connection between oral storyteller and translator, rather than individual creative expression, how do you understand the concept of the author? Does collaborative cross-cultural transmission challenge traditional notions of singular literary ownership?
TS: Stories belong to all people, in all places and at all times. They cannot be owned. They cannot be copyrighted. This is an Occidental construct and one that bores me—the fact that people want to own . . . just as our ancestors on the savannah of Africa would have not comprehended the ownership of the grassland beneath one's feet. I wish people would stop trying to lay claim to ownership, and start trying to learn from what they hold in their hands instead.

IE: In your latest work *Amazigh Folk Tales* (2025), you collected tales from oral sources. How was the experience of undertaking this endeavor?
TS: There's nothing more important to me than collecting stories from oral sources because it depends on so much—on the person telling the tale, on their mood, on their ability to tell a tale, on how well they slept the night before, on their dreams and their stresses as well. Oral telling is profound. It is immediate. It is a connection with the most ancient threads of humanity that bind us to the lifeblood of our ancestors. Meanwhile, writing is an incredibly young and challenged construct, that offers no more than about ten percent of a story's true bandwidth.

IE: You have drawn so much from the Amazigh oral tradition, a culture that emphasizes modesty, selflessness, and moral clarity based on tales like "The Journey to the Singing Tree." When editing this collection, how did you balance the task of making its living essence accessible to international audiences while preserving their cultural core?
TS: In editing that small book, I tried to show how the most powerful tales don't need to be on an epic scale. They don't need flying carpets and vast treasures, or genies and magic. Rather, they can be crafted from an expression of simplicity, which reflects something far deeper.

IE: After a genuinely immersive journey exploring folk storytelling in Morocco, can oral storytelling be legitimately called "oral literature," or does literature only apply to written texts?
TS: The West loves to give names to things and to waste immense amounts of time discussing something—like whether literature has to be written—when they could actually be drawing wisdom from the material they are holding. It is like someone marooned on a desert island finding a coconut in the sand and spending all their time considering whether it is a nut or a seed . . . doing so will pass the time, but it won't draw sustenance from the coconut that could save the person's life.

IE: What would you say to young Moroccans, or young storytellers anywhere, about the value of keeping their oral traditions alive?
TS: I would say: be proud of what you have in your grasp. Spend time cherishing it, loving it, learning from it, and passing it on from one generation to the next. Celebrate the stories in your families, and in your homes, and remember that they are a reflection of the people who came before you . . . a valued part of culture like none other. But, most importantly, they are much more than a mere entertainment. They are a lifeblood.

IE: If you could choose, would you rather see Moroccan storytelling remain a secret for Moroccans alone, or does it have a role on the world stage, even if that means going through different processes, such as translation and editing?
TS: Stories change when they are edited and translated. They become something else. It's a case of "Chinese Whispers" . . . and that's the beauty of stories and tales. They are always changing their shape, changing their form. Anyone who knows the work I have published will know my father's favorite story, "The Tale of the Sands," in which a stream needs to change its form in order to cross the desert. Stories do that. They change their form. And that's ultimately the most crucial strength they contain.

IE: In light of what we have discussed, from Bowles conveying Mrabet's voice to your own journey with Moroccan folktales, I am curious: Does the translator of stories, in a sense, become a storyteller, too?
TS: We are all storytellers. If you don't believe me, record everything you say or write for a week—every single word—and then review it later. You will find yourself phrasing material in story or anecdote form more than you realize, because it's the best way to pass on ideas and information.

IE: Thank you very much for your generous time and profound answers.