COMMENTARY

FIELDWORK REMEMBERED: TUNISIA 1965

Introduction

Western anthropologists have frequently examined their fieldwork experiences in cultures other than their own,[1] but little is known of the experience of non-Western anthropologists studying their own culture. One of the problems facing an Arabic-speaking anthropologist carrying out fieldwork in another Arab country is the changing relationships between the two governments. I encountered this as an Egyptian working in Tunisia between 1965 and 1966. The relationship between the two countries had been excellent, but just before I was due to start my work a conflict erupted and diplomatic relations were severed.

The main features of Middle Eastern societies, namely Islam and its cultural values, are common to both Egypt and Tunisia. The family is more important than the individual and parental approval of one's behaviour is essential in the two countries. Thus my father's encouragement and help were not only psychologically beneficial to me but also instrumental in the success of my fieldwork. He personally asked his Tunisian friends to look after me, and this conveyed parental approval of my travelling alone in Tunisia. They intervened on my behalf to overcome the government's suspicions of my travels in the Tunisian Sahel during this difficult time. It is exceptional for a young Muslim woman to travel alone (Saudi Arabia and Yemen do not allow a woman travelling

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[1] E.g., D.G. Jongmans and P.C.W. Gutkind (eds.), *Anthropologists in the Field*, Assen: van Gorcum 1967; E.S. Bowen (pseudonym), *Return to Laughter*, New York: Harper & Row 1954; Peggy Golde (ed.), *Women in the Field*, Chicago: Aldine 1970.

alone to enter the country) and their contacts and recommendations enabled me to be accepted into people's homes. Once I was settled in the village community of Sidi Ameur I was judged and gradually accepted according to people's judgement of my behaviour.

The criteria of this judgement were Middle Eastern, Islamic ones, according to which a young unmarried woman is expected to be a virgin and hence timid and easier to control. This enabled me to be assimilated by Tunisian families. Had I been married and had my husband with me, I would not have been able to live with a family; if I had been unaccompanied by my husband that would have aroused suspicion, because the sexual experience is believed to make women less timid, more susceptible to sexual temptation, and thus a menace to the moral order. The fact that I was an independent Muslim woman was neither easily understood nor readily accepted, as such a background and behaviour would have been in the case of a European woman.

I experienced the intricacies of all the above themes, particularly in the earlier period of my fieldwork. The following is a description of this experience as I lived it. I first had to get the required permission from both Egypt and Tunisia. My family name and my father's advice were a great help. In Tunis, traditional family values and my father's contacts enabled me to be accepted in the midst of Tunisian families, but in my travels in the Sahel the political disputes between Tunis and Cairo were not helpful to me. In Sidi Ameur I was initially able to establish relationships through friendships with children and their families, since maternal values and love of children are valued ideals. My integration into the community was gradual and depended on the judgement of my behaviour by both governmental authorities and the local people.

My choice of the Tunisian Sahel as the subject of my D.Phil. thesis was communicated to al-Sheikh al-Fadil ben Achour, the then Mufti of Tunisia, and al-Sheikh al-Shadheli Belqadi (Professor of Shari'a Law at Zaituna University in Tunis) by my father, the late al-Sheikh Muhammad Abu-Zahra (Professor of Shari'a Law at Cairo University) when they were in Cairo, some time before I travelled to Tunisia. This paper is a homage to my father and his Tunisian friends, particularly al-Sheikh Belqadi.

Reminiscences

It is twenty years since I carried out my fieldwork in Tunisia, but I vividly remember the overwhelming feeling of wonder that at last I was in Tunis and was approaching the final stages of my training as an anthropologist. After some travel in the Sahel, I settled in the village of Sidi Ameur. It is named after its founder, who is believed to be a saint. He is buried in his Zawiya (the lodge used by a religious order to propagate its teachings), which is surrounded by the houses of his descendants and is called the Zawiya quarter. The main road separates it from the Ramada quarter, whose inhabitants are not related to the Zawiya people.

All village ceremonies, namely the weekly *hadra* every Thursday evening (the singing of hymns in praise of the prophet and of Sidi Ameur), the annual fair of Sidi Ameur, and important parts of life cycle ceremonies all take place in the Zawiya building.

I met Salim the first or second evening of my stay in Sidi Ameur. I was living in the Zawiya building. Umm el-S'ad, the resident cleaner of the building, chaperoned me to the men's celebration of the circumcision ceremonies of two brothers. We sat in the corner of the courtyard close to the stage on which the dancers and singers were to perform. I was surrounded by children, and one of them, a child of about three, introduced himself as Salim. We became friends, and he visited me daily and invited me to his house where his mother, Lala Malika, cooked us many appetising meals of couscous and stew. We often went to the third storey of their house, called 'the high house' (*el-'aleyy*) because it is the highest building in the village, and from there we watched the outdoor life of the village. I never considered Salim to be my son, but when people talked to me about him they referred to him as 'Salim, your son'. When I was leaving Sidi Ameur, Lala Malika told me that unfortunately, since I was going abroad, she would not allow me to have Salim as my adopted son, but if I were to live in Sidi Ameur this would be all right.

It was fortunate that I had seen Salim's 'mother', for that fitted their pattern of adoption, whereby single women, whether divorcees, widows or unmarried, or couples without children, are allowed to adopt their relatives' or neighbours' children.[2] Being a woman was an advantage, because men of similar status (except if they are married and their wives initiate the adoption) are not allowed to adopt children.

Since Salim had 'adopted' me, his extended family and home became accessible to me in an informal way. Their extended family (*'arsh*[3]) lived in *el-'aleyy*, opposite the Zawiya building. There were six families of brothers and paternal parallel cousins, and two elderly aunts, who had an apartment in this large house, the various sections of which were divided by corridors and front and back staircases. As I was introduced to everyone, enquiries about kinship and residence patterns were hardly noticed, and the material was gathered in an informal, unobtrusive way. I used to go with Salim to Lala Malika's kitchen on the third floor, where she received the women who helped her or who used to help her in the past. Thus I was able to learn about patron-client relationships without direct enquiry. The balcony of the kitchen overlooked the village and the main road connecting Sidi Ameur with the neighbouring villages. The people present would comment on the government's project for the making of new roads and how this led to the demolition of the houses of some Zawiya people, which was the subject of conflict between various factions in the village. Salim's father was the village headman, which gave me the opportunity to make

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[2] This widespread traditional practice was made legal in 1957. See Nadia Abu-Zahra, *Sidi Ameur: A Traditional Tunisian Village*, London: Ithica Press 1982, pp. 88-9, 94. [3] See ibid., pp. 53-71.

all the enquiries I needed from him, without having to make special arrangements.

In the autumn I moved into the house of Si Lamin, who lived in the Zawiya quarter. His son Munir and cousin Salem were also friendly towards me, and my friendship with these children promoted my relationship with their families. I was also in the midst of some very important Zawiya families, and this increased my participation in village life in a way that would not have been possible for a man. Because of the importance of the social offices of these people, I was in the best position to observe closely the political, administrative and ritual life of the village. Si Lamin was the director of the local branch of the Neo-Destour Party and of the Agricultural Services Co-operative. Opposite his house lived Muqaddim al-Hadra, who led the *hadra* singing, very close by was *el-'aleyy*, and opposite was the house of Si al-Hameshi, who was Sheikh el-Zawiya and administered Zawiya land.

I found it easy to make friends, and their company made my work enjoyable. I never ceased to be grateful that I was getting on with my fieldwork, learning a new Arabic dialect and moving as I wished between the local villages, Sousse (the capital of Sahel Province), Tunis and Hammamet. Wherever I went I was welcomed and offered help.

The Beginning

I passed my B.Litt. examination in the summer of 1964 and remained in Oxford until March 1965. The reason was that my passport did not include Tunisia as one of the countries I could visit. Travelling abroad under Nasser's regime was subject to government approval, and it proved difficult to obtain the necessary permission from the Egyptian authorities in London. I used this time to read the available literature on the Tunisian Sahel.

By March, I realised that I was wasting my time and decided to go to Cairo to get the necessary permission. Relations between Cairo and Tunis were excellent, and the Tunisian President, al-Habib Bourguiba was visiting Egypt, Jordan and the Lebanon. However, by the time I arrived in Cairo, on 22nd March, Bourguiba had given a speech in Jordan on the Arab-Israeli conflict recommending a rapprochement between the two. This angered Nasser,[4] relations between Egypt and Tunisia deteriorated, and demonstrations against Tunisia took place in Cairo and vice versa in Tunis; relations were eventually severed. As a result, the educational authorities in Cairo rejected my fieldwork project in Tunisia. It was suggested that instead I should go either to Iraq or to Algeria. At this time Iraq, under the leadership of Abdul-Salam 'Aref, was contemp-

[4] For more details on this theme, see Cecil Hourani, *An Unfinished Odyssey: Lebanon and Beyond*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson 1984, pp. 84-90.

lating union with Egypt,[5] and Algeria, under the rule of Ben-Bella, had close relations with Egypt. My argument was that I could not choose on the basis of good or bad relations with other Arab countries, which were liable to change (as with Tunisia). Indeed, Abdul-Salam 'Aref was killed in an air crash in April 1966, and Ben Bella was ousted by Boumedienne in Algeria in June 1965.

My father suggested that I go to a particular official in the cultural section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who could recommend the cultural value of my project to the authorities. I succeeded in getting the recommendation on the grounds that cultural relations between Arab countries were of prime importance, no matter what their political relationships, and that my study would enhance such cultural links. On the basis of this recommendation, I got Tunisia added to my passport as one of the countries I could visit. On May 23rd I received my Egyptian exit visa to go to Tunisia. On the same day the Tunisian Consul gave me the visa and wrote me a letter of recommendation confirming that I came from a well-known Cairene family and that my father was a well-known Muslim scholar.

This was an important introduction, because in the Middle East the family is more important than the individual, and in Tunisia a person without a family is by definition a thief if a man, and a prostitute if a woman. In this respect it was lucky that eminent Tunisians came to know about me and my project from my father in Cairo rather than through an introductory letter from him when I was in Tunisia. I suspect that such a letter would not have had the same effect as learning the facts personally from my father in Cairo. I later came to learn that Belqadi did not approve of my travelling alone in the Sahel and would only agree to it because it was my father's wish.

Rewarding Days in Tunis

On 30th May 1965 I flew to Tunis via Benghazi in Libya and went to Belqadi's house. He, together with his 'son' Rashid (Tunisians refer to the help employed to work for the family as 'son' or 'daughter'), met me at the top of the Bab Mnara steps. This was my first introduction to one form of Tunisian patron-client relationship. The house represented the ideal form of Tunisian traditional architecture and I later found that the architecture of village houses is a modest version of it. Its main feature is the separation between the 'home' and the external world. Its large wooden door leads to a small room (*saqifa*) which leads to a large courtyard, the surface of which, except for a mandarin tree planted in its centre, and its extensive walls all being covered with antique tiles. All the windows of the house opened on to the courtyard.

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[5] Peter Mansfield, *The Middle East: A Political and Economic Survey* (5th edition), Oxford: OUP 1980, pp. 331-8.

I was introduced to the family, and this was also an introduction to kinship terminology, the residence pattern and adoption. His wife was Lala al-Sayedah, whom Junayna,her niece and adopted daughter, and Mahbuba, their 'daughter', both addressed as *nana*, 'mother'. Belqadi shared his house with his younger brother Ibrahim. Belqadi, being the eldest, occupied the ground floor, while Ibrahim, together with his wife and two sons, Elias and al-Sadri, lived on the first floor.

Apart from a clerk in the Egyptian Embassy, I was the only Egyptian in Tunisia. The Embassy was closed and all in darkness, and even the clerk himself was wearing dark glasses. Since it was important to prevent any misunderstanding, the only other time I visited the Embassy was just before I left.

In the following couple of days Belqadi introduced me to the rest of his brothers and sisters. I was invited to their homes and shown round Tunis by them. Belqadi's sister-in-law gave me data on bridewealth and gift exchange between the bridal couple up to the birth of the first infant. Belqadi also kindly arranged some tutorials for me with Uthman al-Kaak, a Tunisian historian, on the architecture of the old city of Tunis and the history of the religious orders.

During this week in Tunis I encountered the effects of the breakdown of relations between Cairo and Tunis. Elais criticised the Egyptian President twice, but I had made up my mind not to involve myself in any political debates.

Cecil Hourani kindly introduced me to Monsieur J. Duvignaud and Mr Fradj Istambuli, both renowned sociologists. The former was working with a team of sociologists from the university of Tunis on social change at Chebika,[6] in the south of Tunisia. Istambuli was also conducting research in Ksar-Hellal in the Sahel and was due to go there soon. He kindly agreed to show me round the Sahel. By the end of my first week in Tunisia, I had been introduced to several scholars, all in the Shari'a field of study at Zaituna University, which was the only university in Tunisia until the establishment of the University of Tunis after independence in 1956. Thus many of their students were teachers, imams of mosques or in administration. Their friendship and kindness not only facilitiated my obtaining the various required permissions (as I shall show below), but it also strengthened me personally.

By then I was ready to go to the Sahel. Belqadi kindly gave me an introduction to Mr Bakr, a student of his and a native of Ksar-Hellal. Al-Fadil ben 'Achour gave me an introduction to Si Salem Farchiuo, the director of the girl's *lycée* in Monastir and the Imam of the mosque where President Bourguiba prays when he is in Monastir.

Of those few days in Tunis I wrote the following to Dr John Beattie on 2nd June:

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[6] J. Duvignaud, *Change at Chebika*, transl. from the French by Frances Frenaye, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1970.

> I am staying with one of my father's friends. It is such a good introduction to Tunisian society. So far people have been very kind to me, and I am very happy here. I met Cecil Hourani yesterday. He is very helpful. He is going to introduce me to people in the Sahel area.
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> The Tunisian Arabic is different from the Egyptian dialect. I am picking up, however, a lot of material, and if things go in the same way in the Sahel as here in Tunis I think I will do good fieldwork. I am busy, there are people to meet and talk to, there are also many things to see in Tunis. It is a very pretty city. All houses and buildings are white with blue windows and doors. There are public baths in the streets, and I have been to one of the women's baths.

Travels in the Sahel

I left for the Sahel on June 5th. In Monastir I stayed at the Esplanade Hotel and visited the Sahel villages of Boudeur, Ben Nour and Bou-Hjar. During these travels I met a Western anthropologist who asked me to leave the Sahel. This was a very big problem for me, as I had already registered my thesis at Oxford University on the subject of 'Social Organisation in the Sahel of Tunisia'. I wrote to my supervisor, Professor E. Evans-Pritchard, my former supervisor, Dr John Beattie,and to my father, asking their advice. I continued, however, to travel in the Sahel while awaiting their replies, and I visited the *ribat* (fort) of Monastir and its museum, the market of Ksar-Hellal, Ksebeit el-Mediouni, and Moknine, the birthplace of Ahmed ben Saleh, the organiser of the nationwide co-operative movement. Moknine was therefore a great centre for co-operatives, ranging from olive presses and poultry farms to embroidery and shoe-making. I visited the headquarters of the Neo-Destour Party branch and met the director of the girls' elementary school, who, thinking that I might settle in Moknine, stated that it was a conservative place and that a 'girl's place is in the home'!

During these travels in the Sahel, men told me that it was not accepted that women should go to parties in hotels (which I never did) or unchaperoned to coffee-shops. They also asserted that Muslim women should not complete their education in Europe!

On 26th June Evans-Pritchard wrote to me as follows:

> You must make up your own mind. I have always refused to give advice to a fieldworker, because he knows the local conditions, and I don't. Just go ahead. I am sure you will find that you have made the right choice. Good luck.

Dr Beattie also wrote with the same advice and suggested trying to cooperate with the Western anthropologist. When this was communicated to my father the latter replied saying:

> Since he resented your presence from the start, I don't consider that co-operation between you would be fruitful. Concentrate on your studies and don't change your project because he asked you to do so, particularly since your supervisor did not ask you to change. Two people may write on the same subject but perceive different things. As this anthropologist regards you as such a threat, I am sure you will do very well. Settle down in any Sahel community you choose and don't change except if scholarly considerations necessitate it. You can settle in Moknine, which combines the characteristics of town and village.

It was important for me to have the sanction of my supervisor, former supervisor and father to remain in the Sahel.

I continued to travel in the Sahel. I enquired in the villages about their economy, education, traditional crafts, genealogies, recent history and the changing role of the Zawiyas. Si Salem Farchiou gave me an introduction to one of the notables of Teboulba, who I visited several times, gathering data on the genealogy of some of its groups, its social stratification, economy and recent history. Accompanied by Mr Bakr, I went to Sahline with no introduction to anybody there. We sat in a coffee-house hoping to find somebody to talk to, but we failed to engage anybody in conversation. Mr Bakr then obtained some basic information on population, economy and schools from the waiter. Afterwards we went to Hammam-Sousse, where we visited a friend of Mr Bakr's. He gave us some basic data on the surrounding villages and attacked Nasser for the latter's attacks on the Tunisian President.

The visit to Sahline resulted in some trouble. With the benefit of hindsight I realise that what went wrong arose from the fact that I have had no introduction to anyone in Sahline and had sat with a man in a coffee-shop, which is for men only. In addition, there was the problem of the political tension between Egypt and Tunisia.

I continued to travel in the Sahel and was urged to visit its religious centre, Sidi Ameur, and settle there. I was given an introduction to Si Muhammad ben Wannas. On Wednesday, July 21st, the eve of the anniversary of the Egyptian revolution, I went alone to Sidi Ameur. En route I was stopped at Sahline and interrogated by the local police. I met Si Muhammad ben Wannas in *el-'aleyy* where he lived and I did not attract any attention, because people thought that I was asking him to write me a charm. He kindly invited me to come the following day to attend the weekly Thursday *hadra*. The following day was the anniversary of the Egyptian revolution and Nasser attacked Al-Habib Bourguiba in his speech. Unaware of all this, I took the bus, alone, to Sidi Ameur. I was conspicuous because of my strong Egyptian accent, and having not yet mastered the subtleties of Tunisian vocabulary

I referred to Sidi Ameur as *dashra*, not *blad*, the former meaning an uninhabited place and hence an uncivilized one. Some passengers were angry, and my reappearance was reported to the local police in Sahline. I was unaware of this and went with Ben Wannas to attend the *hadra*. The Sahline police followed me, a member of the secret police came to the Zawiya and took Ben Wannas away with him, and I went back to Monastir.

I communicated to al-Fadil ben 'Achour what had happened in the Zawiya. He contacted the Governor of Sousse, who was a student of his at Zaituna University, gave me a letter of recommendation and asked me to go and see him the following day. I saw the Delegate of Sousse, who asked why I had chosen Sidi Ameur (Zawiyas and religious orders being frowned upon at that time by the government). He also considered that, given the bad relationship between Tunis and Cairo, it was natural that the Sahline police would suspect me. Also, Nasser's speech had, unknown to me, accused President Bourguiba of being a stooge of imperialism and Zionism.[7] I recorded some of my conversation with the Delegate in my diaries:

> Tunisians are so sensitive to anything said against their President, whom they love and consider as the father of the nation (*Abu el-Sha'b*). He read me extracts from Nasser's speech. Some of what he read said that Bourguiba followed the steps of Colonialism. The Delegate exclaimed how could this be said when Bourguiba came from the 'heart of the nation' (*samim el-Sha'b*)? He is not somebody imported from Europe.

The Delegate advised me to go and see the Delegate of Monastir where I was staying, so that he might arrange for me to see the Governor. Having settled and clarified my status and received the sanction of political authority, I had to face the problem of integration into the community of Sidi Ameur, which would depend on their judgement of my behaviour.

Integration into the Community

For the first couple of days I stayed with the Wannas family. Afterwards, a room in the Zawiya was prepared for me, which is where Zawiya visitors and government officials from outside Sidi Ameur stay. It was also considered better because it had been newly renovated, and unlike the rest of the village was free of scorpions. For the first couple of nights I slept either in the Qubba, where Sidi Ameur is buried, or in a room adjacent to it. Of this period I quote the following from my diaries:

> Yesterday after I came back from the circumcision ceremony, I found a great number of cockroaches and beetles in the room. They are called here *khanfus*. I moved to the Qubba,

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[7] *Al-Ahram*, 23 July 1965, p.5.

> but there were *khanfus* there too. After I slept for a while, the bugs started attacking. I went outside and tried to sleep in the open air where Umm al-Sa'd slept, but she refused to allow me to do so. At last she came to sleep inside. Early in the morning she went out, and men came to visit the tomb of Sidi Ameur.
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> A visitor to the Zawiya came to talk to me yesterday. In spite of the fact that I refused his offer to bring jam for my breakfast, yet he went and brought some. I refused it because I do not want to encourage anyone. Today a young unmarried man (from Sidi Ameur) came uninvited to talk to me in my room. I was curt. He said that he would give me a history book for my studies (I told everyone that I was studying the folklore and history of Sidi Ameur). He then accompanied me to watch what was going on in the circumcision ceremony. On the way out, al-Munji, a middle-aged man, asked him our destination and instructed him to bring me back. When we came back, Si Wannas, who was there, remarked that I had stayed late the previous night at the circumcision ceremony. He urged me to concentrate on women's activities, saying that I can do my real job today at the *tahnina* (the dyeing of the hands and feet of the mother of the circumcised), and that there will be lots of customs observed by women, which should be the subject of my study.

The above shows a desire to control my behaviour in order to maintain their code of morality undisturbed. They also defined women's activities as the proper subject of my research.

By this time I had met the Governor of Sousse, who instructed people to treat me kindly. Governmental sanction meant that I was a guest. This enhanced my status, for a woman alone unaccompanied by any agnates does not command respect. When it is confirmed that none of her agnates will join her, she may be asked to sing or dance, both of which are equivalent to prostitution.

On August 30th Bourguiba formally opened the Zawiya, and the Delegates of the Province talked to me in front of the people, which greatly enhanced my status.

A Room of my Own

By now I had acquired government approval, and people saw enough of me to trust me to live in their houses. Thus I moved from the Zawiya to a house on the outskirts whose owners lived and worked in the north of Tunisia; in their absence their mother, Lala Jannat, looked after the house and the chickens she was raising in the garden. It was a newly built house in a modern design in that its windows, unlike those in traditional houses, opened on to the main road and garden (see the description above of Belqadi's house). It was accessible directly from the main entrance, which

led straight to the garden, from where a staircase led on to a balcony, in the middle of which was a door leading to the house. One of the rooms had two windows, one overlooking the balcony, the other the street. I settled in this room.

Salim, other children and teenagers from the Zawiya used to visit me. Their mothers invited me for meals in their homes but never came to visit me, because they do not visit the Ramada quarter.[8] Ramada women did not visit me either, for they feared that somebody might suspect that they were receiving handouts from me.

On top of this isolation, I found little white insects in my books, papers and bed. They caused me skin rashes which were not cured by the olive oil prescribed by the women, who later diagnosed these insects as *be'bash* or chicken lice, which live in chicken feathers if their place is unclean.

One day I was summoned to the Zawiya, where I was told that two policemen in a black car were waiting for me. I was told that I was wanted at police headquarters in Sousse. Calmly, in front of the notables of the village, including Si Lamin, the Director of the local branch of the Party, I asked them to show me their papers and then went with them to Sousse, where it turned out that they were really after a Swiss woman. My behaviour in this incident was considered as a feat of courage in Sidi Ameur, particularly by Si Lamin. This was a positive step towards acquiring the people's respect.

In the autumn it became colder and people tended to stay indoors. One evening, I heard a light knock on the window overlooking the balcony. I persuaded myself that it was the wind, but the knocking became louder and more insistent. Clearly, someone was knocking at the window. On my calling the neighbours from the window overlooking the street, the intruder started his motor cycle and vanished in the direction of the Ramada quarter. In the morning I told the headman of the village what had happened. He contacted the Province headquarters, and Si Lamin, the director of the Party branch, offered me a room in his house.

A Room with a Family

It was a sign of the villagers' trust to accept me in the midst of their families. I taught Faisal, the eldest son, Arabic, and his younger brother, Munir, also became a friend. Lala Zumuruda, Si Lamin's sister, lived next door to him, and we became friends.

During this period, I made a survey of the village households. I adapted the questionnaire John Beattie had applied in Bunyoro[9] to olive-growing and family life in Sidi Ameur. This enabled me to gather data on work, incomes, the ownership of olive trees and household composition.

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[8] N. Abu-Zahra, op. cit., p. 150. [9] John Beattie, *Understanding an African Kingdom: Bunyoro*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1963.

I visited the households in the morning. I observed olive pressing in autumn and winter and visited the olive groves in the spring. I went to the Province headquarters in Sousse to read the records on Sidi Ameur. In order to prevent any misunderstanding, I went to the Party's headquarters in Sousse to enquire directly about the organization of the Party branch in Sidi Ameur and the details of the project for renewing the olive groves.

The evenings,which I would spend in the house of Lala Zumuruda, were the high point of each day. There I discussed my queries with her husband Si Husayn ben Salem. Lala Mamma, an elderly lady, was a regular visitor, who used to compose entertaining rhymes lamenting her fate and ridiculing those who caused her misfortune. I had all the warmth and affection a human being needs.

During the period of fieldwork (November to June) I participated in social life in my own way. I did not follow all the rules of etiquette: I visited everybody in both Zawiya and Ramada, whether invited or not. This is a deviation from the rule which prohibits mutual visits between Ramada and Zawiya women[10] and enjoins that within each quarter no woman visits another unless there has been a prior invitation or unless she is reciprocating a previous visit paid by the host on a similar occasion. Also, I did not pay attention to their disputes with one another and by avoiding taking sides managed to remain friendly with all disputing parties. They also conceded more freedom to me than their women and said that they were 'making for me the value of a man' (*'amlen lek qdar rajil*).

I freely talked with all men older than myself. Those from my own age group I met only within the family context. Occasionally I went to Sousse with them, but also within the family context. I shared with Tunisians the same Islamic background and knew of the tradition of segregation between the sexes. I observed their rules and neither dated men nor had boyfriends. I never smoke or drank alcohol.

I left Sidi Ameur in June 1966. *El-'aleyy* was the last house I visited. I went through the corridors and up and down the staircases, sorry to be saying goodbye to everybody and to a most powerful experience in my life.

Tunisia 1984: Life Goes On

I went back to Tunisia in the summer of 1972. Some of my friends, both in Tunis and in Sidi Ameur, had died. In the latter I lived in Lala Zumuruda's house. In my memory, everything was more or less the same as before. The only difference was,the children had become young teenagers.

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[10] Nadia Abu-Zahra, 'Material Power, Honour, Friendship and the Etiquette of Visiting', *Anthrop. Qu.* XLVII no.1 (1974), pp.120-38.

In 1984 I returned to Tunisia again, and it was as if I was visiting the country for the first time. I revisited the Belqadis but alas al-Shedheli had died. The survivors had rearranged themselves in the house. Si Ibrahim and his wife had moved to the ground floor and Elias, his eldest son, together with his wife and two sons, to the first floor, where his parents used to live. Elias named his younger son al-Shadheli Junayna, who is now married, lives in the north and has one daughter, whom she calls Nadia.

Tunisia has changed too. Tourism had increased, and people were ambivalent about it. Tunisia suffered also from periodic droughts and their problems, and there were riots when food prices were increased in January 1978 and January 1984.

Sidi Ameur, thanks to the villagers' thrift and remittances from its migrants, had prospered, to the point that I did not recognise it. New houses had been built and old ones renovated. I could not find Lala Zumuruda's house and had to ask for directions. When I knocked on her door, the only answer I got was a dog barking. I went to Si Lamin's house, where Dalinda, his eldest daughter, was now married and was carrying one of her babies. Si Husayn took me to his daughter's house. She is now married and lives in one of the apartments of *el-'aleyy*. Ameur, her brother, is now married and has a daughter called Zumuruda. Salim is 23 years old and lives in Tunis, working as a photographer for Tunisian television. Faisal is now a solicitor and Munir was preparing for his final examinations in physics at the University of Monastir, while Salim was doing his military service. Salim showed me all the new developments in the village and accompanied me on visits to all the friends I wanted to see.

I was especially satisfied that my 'children' were grown up and were doing so well, and I was deeply moved by their kindness towards me. I said goodbye to everyone and saw Lala Zumuruda, Ameur and his wife before I went to *el-'aleyy* to have lunch with Salem and his family. Just before I left, Ameur came carrying all the china and vases and ornaments he had in his room to give me as a farewell present, insisting that I should take at least some of them. Salim's elder brothers took me to the railway station in Sousse. Just before the train was to leave, Ameur reappeared, gasping for breath after having run a long distance, to say that he had come to give me some money in case I had need of anything. I assured him that I needed nothing but was so grateful that such kindness could exist towards me.

Salim and his brother contacted me in Tunis. On my last day I had lunch with the Belqadis. They talked with appreciation of my late father's works. Lala Lilia remembered how her brother used to tell them to look after me for the sake of my father. Si Ibrahim suggested that we make a prayer to him. They reminded me that I was welcome in their homes in both Tunis and al-Marsa. In the afternoon I went to Gmart to pay my respects to my father's friend, Dr al-Fadil al Gamali. I left Tunis the following morning.

My life and experiences in Tunis, the Sahel and Sidi Ameur

and my friends in these places are more to me than anthropology and fieldwork - they are my youth and my happiest memories.

NADIA ABU-ZAHRA